

Studying the Word¹

This is the fourth time I've used Nehemiah as the basis of a sermon. The first time was in January of 2013. On that day we were reeling from the deaths of two beloved women. I titled the sermon "Building and Remembering" and began it with these words.

What a week this has been! We had anticipated Janet's death, but for Donajean to die as well; it's too much to bear. On Friday afternoon I couldn't imagine proceeding with the worship and discussion we had planned for today. Until late last night I was struggling with what to say and do during the sermon time. What I have come up with is a sermon in two parts. Maybe it's better described as two meditations using the scriptures I had originally chosen for the morning. We'll begin with Nehemiah 8 and think about what this might say to us as we anticipate making a decision about a building project. Then we'll continue with a time of remembrance for Janet and Donajean, reading verses from 1 Corinthians 12. You'll have opportunity during that time to share some of your memories of these two women. At the conclusion of the service, I invite all of you to remain in the sanctuary so we can make some plans about support and food for Ted and Jim. After that, if you are willing, we'll move into a time of discussion about our possible building project. My intention every Sunday morning is to be open to the moving of God's spirit among us. This seems especially important today.

Little did we know that 11 days later, we would lose another beloved member of our congregation. January and February of 2013 were two of the most difficult months in my pastoral and personal life. It's interesting how well my first sermon from Nehemiah ties in with last week's focus on supporting each other. We certainly needed to be together during that difficult time.

In July 2017, my sermon title was "Let's Do It Together." I reviewed the first seven chapters of Nehemiah, and we built a paper wall around the perimeter of the sanctuary. I asked you to consider the projects we do as a congregation and the cooperation it takes to get them done. I noted some obstacles that had kept us from moving forward. I ended that sermon with these words. Let us continue to listen to God as we cooperate as a congregation in using our various gifts and abilities to be Christ's arms, ears, eyes, hands, and feet in this community.

This sermon was in preparation for the pastor and congregation review that was about to begin. During the review we celebrated how we had worked together in the past, we considered what God was calling us to do now, you extended a call to me to be your pastor for the next five years, and I accepted.

The third time I used words from Nehemiah was only three months ago. Do you recall the occasion? It was the day we celebrated the completion of our renovation project and dedicated this sanctuary to God. I wasn't very creative with the title, simply combining the titles of the two previous sermons, "Building Projects: Let's Do It Together."

And so today, we again read from Nehemiah. After writing the summary of previous sermons, I considered deleting it and starting over. What does this trip down memory lane have to

¹ The sermon is drawn from Week 11 of "Seeking God Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

do with our topic of studying the word? But I found this history interesting, and I think it does connect with today's theme.

The story we find in Nehemiah 8 teaches us some important concepts about reading the Bible. First, the people began their time with worship. Second, they listened together to someone read God's word. As they listened to it, the priests helped explain the scripture so that everyone could understand. And then, they acted on what they heard. They celebrated with a festival, following the instructions described in God's word.

Every Sunday as we worship together, we too listen to God's word. We place a high value on the Bible, but perhaps not in the same way as some other Christians do. The Bible is important to us, but we don't worship it. We worship God. My goal as your preacher is to read the scripture, taking into account the context and genre of what I'm reading and consider how it might connect to our current situation, to our daily lives.

The Bible is one component of God's word, but not the only one. In our covenant as members of this congregation, we commit ourselves to follow God's will for our lives – as revealed in the Scriptures, as understood through the Anabaptist tradition, and as confirmed by the continuing presence of the Spirit among us. Studying the word – as recorded in the Bible, as demonstrated by Jesus, and as revealed by God's presence among us – is an integral part of who we are as Christians. Studying the word together assists us as we seek God together – as we pray, make time, make room, honor our bodies, marvel, say thanks, cry out, confess, celebrate, support each other, welcome all, and serve. (I trust you recognize this list of activities as those we've been using this summer so experience God within, above, and beside us.)

I wonder what priority each of us places on reading and understanding the Bible. The amount of time we spend studying together is limited – an hour, maybe two on Sunday mornings. How do you connect with the living word of God beyond our time together?

I wonder what experiences you've had studying the word, alone or with someone else. I have fond memories of my high school Thursday night Bible study group. As an adult I was part of Bible Study Fellowship for seven years. Even though I didn't always agree with the way the Bible was explained and interpreted, there was something special about 500 women from a wide variety of backgrounds studying the word together. With whom have you studied the word?

I wonder what experiences you've had with hearing the Bible read aloud. While I was in seminary, someone organized a reading of the entire Bible. It takes about 70 hours. I listened to part of it but wasn't one of the readers. During the last weekend I spent with my mother, I read the book of John to her from her own Bible, noting what she had starred, underlined, and written in the margins. This was a very special time for me. I hope she was aware of it even though she couldn't express her reactions. When have you read or listened to the Bible in portions larger than a few verses or a chapter?

I wonder how much time I would spend studying the word if it weren't part of my job. One of the goals I always include in my annual accountability plan required by Western District Conference is to read scripture devotionally, not only in preparation for sermons. The last two years, I've done this by listening to a podcast of someone reading and reflecting on the Bible, read in chronological order. Right now, I'm in the midst of the Old Testament prophets, some of which I'd just as soon ignore. What books of the Bible do you enjoy reading? Which do you like to avoid?

The Bible will always play an important role in this congregation. As we study God's Word together, we'll continue to grow in faith, because the person next to us can shed light on Scripture, thus revealing God beside us. Thanks be to God.