

1 Sermon, July 8, 2012

Texts: Proverbs 22:6, Nehemiah 2:1-8

Title: "Stories of Faith: United Methodist Children's Services"

One of the Biblical stories that we don't talk about too much is the story of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah was caught in the middle of global politics, and managed to work things out pretty well for his people.

The story is that about 597 BC, Babylon conquered Judea, and the Babylonian empire began to transport the most talented Judeans to Babylon. The King and his court were all taken away, and many others who were leaders. And after a while, they got used to living in Babylon, but there was always something that longed for Palestine, for their homes in and around Jerusalem.

A great shift happened in 538 BC, when the Persian Empire conquered the Babylonian Empire. It became politically expedient for the Persian king to send Judeans back to Judea, because they would be grateful to him, and likely obedient subjects.

Nehemiah was the leader of the ones that the king sent back to Jerusalem to establish it as a regional capital. Nehemiah himself had a calling: a calling to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, to re-populate the city, and to make Jerusalem a thing to be proud of again.

Nehemiah, through what must have been skillful leadership, took the unorganized Judeans in the area and organized them into teams who rebuilt the walls. There were opposing groups in the area, ones who had done well under the Babylonians, who did not want the walls rebuilt. So the Judeans rebuilt the walls with constant lookouts, and with swords at their sides.

Nehemiah had a deep desire to serve God. And Nehemiah had a hope for a place to call home. He used his resources – financial, political and moral to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah took risks, and won through.

It reminds me of what has happened at United Methodist Children's Services in Milwaukee. At UM Children's services, they have been rebuilding people's lives while they're rebuilding the neighborhood. And they're using all the resources they can – financial, political and moral.

Let me tell you what happened at UM Children's Services one day earlier this year:

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The Share Mobile Market truck pulled into the parking lot behind the apartment building at N. 39th St. and W. Lisbon Ave., and volunteers rushed to unload boxes of oranges, pears and cabbages and coolers filled with chicken and fish.

Within minutes, a big, empty room at the United Methodist Children's Services apartment building had been transformed into a market, part of the health and wellness plan to provide low-priced, quality food to residents in the Washington Park area, which is considered a "food desert."

Around the corner on N. 39th St., new town houses were nearing completion. And an old boarded-up house and concrete building next door will be demolished to make way for an orchard. A new company called "Community Pie" will make use of the orchard and neighborhood fruit trees to produce and sell locally grown pies.

Across the street is a very well-used food pantry and clothing bank. Downstairs you can hear laughter and children's voices from the state-licensed child care program with room for 60 children.

Nearby, workers in hard hats completed another day of construction on 24 apartments at N. 38th St. and W. Lisbon Ave. that UMCS is building. On the first floor, area resident Keith Holt plans to start Milwaukee Bicycle Works, an effort to bring bike and cycling programs to the neighborhood for transportation and health.

These "Washington Park Apartments," are the crown Jewel in the United Methodist Children's Services buildings. They are beautiful, and dedicated to be used by those in the most need. Ten of the units are set aside for women with mental illness who are in the county's behavioral health program and are the head of a household. Rents are paid in part with federal Section 8 rental housing vouchers. The apartments include a fitness center, community rooms and a computer center

In fact, these apartments are an extension of the core ministry of United Methodist Children's Services. For many years, UM Children's Services has taken in families headed by single mothers, supported those mothers, helped them complete their education, trained them for new work and provided counseling for them. Their children have been cared for in the day care program while the mothers get on their feet. Now, the apartments provide a place for those who have completed the Transitional Living Program.

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One woman who has gone through the program is Ameenah Joiner, age 22. On that day earlier this year she checked on her children, Jeremiah and Lamiah, as they played outside the day care center that is part of the Washington Park Apartments.

Ameenah had moved from Chicago to escape from the domestic violence that had created turmoil in her life.

After spending time in a women's shelter, she moved into the transitional living housing program at N. 39th and W. Lisbon Ave. run by United Methodist Children's Services.

There, Joiner completed a set of goals related to personal development, education and employment. There she began to work as the family resource coordinator at the agency, including helping to operate the food pantry, which last year served 50,000.

Joiner has nearly completed her GED and would like to be a police officer. "There's so much violence and abuse and drugs, I'd like to clean up the streets, so that my kids can have a safe environment," she says.

Now Ameenah Joiner and her two young children have moved next door into a new, three-bedroom home at the Washington Park Apartments. Joiner remembers the precise time and date of the big move.

"December 22 at 4 p.m. I got the keys," she said, smiling. "It was awesome. It's something new - a place where I can start fresh, literally. It's amazing."

The 24-unit, \$7 million apartment complex completed in December is the first supportive housing for families in the state paid for largely with public dollars.

Supportive housing offers not only housing, but also other services, such as assistance from social workers and case managers, to help individuals rebuild their lives. In response to the overwhelming need for supportive housing in Milwaukee County, the county and the city have worked with others in the last two years and have developed a total of 250 units of supportive housing. But most of the housing is for single adults, so this apartment building is special.

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Plans call for 14 more units of town homes and a 10-unit apartment of supportive housing nearby.

One of the marvelous things about the location is that it is across the street from Washington Park, a total of 124 acres including a beautiful lagoon and boathouse. Ameenah Joiner enjoys taking her young children to the park.

In recent years, the park has fallen into disrepair, but the Urban Ecology Center has opened a satellite center in the old boathouse, and ice skating has returned to the lagoon. Last year there were three soccer teams playing in the park, and this year there are five.

This gives you a picture of the reach of UM Children's Services, and you can imagine the prayer and staffing and fund raising that goes to support this ministry. UM Children's Services has learned, just like Nehemiah did, to stretch its resources.

Recently, *Taste of Home* magazine through their "Cooks Who Care" program collected donations from staff, readers, advertisers and others to equip all 24 of the new apartment kitchens with EVERYTHING. There are now kitchen items in these units that you probably don't have in your own home.

If you look at all that United Methodist Children's Services does, it seems little short of miraculous. Maybe that's due to the prayers and support of many United Methodists around the state. Maybe that's also due to consistent leadership. UM Children's services has been in existence now for 50 years, and Perry Huyck has been the director for the last 31 years. Perry is a soft-spoken and humble person who exerts a huge influence.

Nehemiah may have been such a person. Today's scripture reading gives us a picture of a man shedding tears for his city. His tears were the beginning point of the King's edict which allowed for the resettlement and rebuilding of Jerusalem. Much work followed those tears. Materials and people were brought from far away. Plans were made and communicated. People were organized and encouraged. Worship services were held. Many people worked together.

That, to me, is a picture of the way God works through human beings, to God's greater glory. Amen.