

**Servants start building**  
**Old Testament Nehemiah 2:11-20**  
**New Testament 1 Peter 4:10-11**

Some men in a pickup truck drove into a lumberyard. One of the men walked in the office and said, “We need some four-by-twos.”

The clerk said, “You mean two-by-fours, don’t you?”

The man said, “I’ll go check,” and went back to the truck. He returned in a minute and said, “Yeah, I meant two-by-fours.”

“How long do you need them?” The customer paused for a minute and said, “I’d better go check.” After a while, the customer returned to the office and said, “We need them for a long time. We’re gonna build a house.”

We have to give the guy some credit. Even though passion and drive outweighed his construction knowledge, at least he was going to start building.

It seems much of our lives revolve around the idea of building. Think about all the expressions that mention building in some form or fashion. We drink milk to build strong bones, build relationships, build a company, and we build a house. We say we have to build on that, build a reputation, build our Facebook following, and we build customer bases.

Finally, there’s the Bible, the book upon which we build our faith. It is filled with stories about people building— Noah making the ark; Moses, Abraham and others building an altar to God; Cain building a city; David building the temple; and, of course, Jesus building his church upon the rock.

So it should be no surprise that today’s Scripture readings tell us how building can be a way of moving our faith from words to action. We are shown an example of a servant of God who decides that only by putting his faith into action, only by building, will he be successful in what God wants him to do.

Nehemiah was radical in both his decision to rebuild Jerusalem and how he went about it. Much of what Habitat for Humanity does is considered radical—the goal to eliminate poverty housing with a model of that by real world standards should not work. We build homes with volunteer labor, which we sell (in accordance with what our founder felt are Biblical economics) No-profit on a Zero interest mortgage to people that no bank would loan money. Habitat for Humanity is a servant of the church. Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity, coined the phrase the “theology of the hammer,” which teaches the

radical idea that we put away our differences and put into action Jesus's commandment to love one another by pick up a hammer and build homes in which people can live and grow into all God intends.

Nehemiah may have been the first to embrace the theology of the hammer. Once he started rebuilding the walls, he had the "Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials and the rest" work together on the building. Although we don't know for sure, my guess is the "rest" included common folks, the homeless and the outcasts. Virtually everyone came together to work side by side, regardless of their rank or file.

At a Habitat build, you'll see people come in fine clothes (or as fine as construction clothes can be), driving very fine cars. They work side by side with people who drive not-so-fine cars or perhaps have no car at all. When servants of God start building—working together to build a house with someone—it makes no difference whether they are Republican or Democrat; evangelical, Catholic or Protestant; old or young; male or female; rich or poor. A Habitat build allows us to work together with no distinction or judgment about political beliefs, religious views or favorite sports teams. Setting differences aside and working together to put our faith into action is the radical notion of the theology of hammer.

The radical is balanced by common sense that says people who get sleepy at night should have a place to sleep on terms they can afford to pay. Common sense says that all of God's children should have decent housing, so they can grow up to be all that God intended them to be, without having to worry about shelter and safety. Common sense says that people of faith should work together to express God's love in a program that is agreed upon. And common sense says that people should be helped in a way that fosters dignity and self-sufficiency. That's why Habitat requires "sweat equity" from the homeowners and requires them to repay their mortgages.

Last year I ran into the family of the first family of the first house that was completed when I was Director of Huntington County Habitat. We caught up with each other's lives standing there in the parking lot. The daughter was excitedly talking about school and starting volleyball that week. As she spoke my mind start to replay the memories of the day we dedicated their home. I remember a sweet overly excited little girl that one by one took attendees by the finger; her hand was too small to grab an adult's hand. She would tug them to out of the crowd exclaiming "come see I have my own room!" Even at that young age it is important to have a place to call her own, a place to dream and grow.

Homeownership not only provides a safe place to live, but studies show that children of homeowners are more likely to complete high school and more likely to attend college. Family after family tell us about

the improved schoolwork and attitude of their children once they are in their own home. Homeowners are also more likely to be involved in their community as well as active in community events and are more likely to vote. When the servants of God start building a Habitat house, they are building more than a home—they are building a foundation for a family, a cornerstone for a community. Nehemiah wanted the people to know they weren't just building a wall. It was more than bricks and mortar; it was the glory of Israel. They were restoring the city of God. As the book of Nehemiah continues, they do just that, using whatever skills are left among the people of the city and despite the mocking of disbelievers. House by house, door by door, gate by gate, public building by public building, a city in ruins was rebuilt. It is the same with Habitat for humanity. Driveway by driveway, frame by frame, house by house, block by block, with the help of God and eager hands, new hope is built. For the building of Jerusalem was not only about a city to live in; it was a promise that there would be a future of joy and prosperity and peace for the people who lived there. Habitat builds not only buildings but hope for new life. That is what God has been all about from the time of Nehemiah to today.

With a safe, decent and affordable place to live, the little girl with her own room has grown and faces the future with hope. Only God knows for sure what that hope has in store for her. Perhaps she'll write a novel someday, discover a cure for a disease or be member of the Olympic volleyball team—all more possible for her now that her family has a home to call their own. When the servants of God start building, they build hope for all the children of God. I feel certain that the hope she saw the day of the dedication will make her and her family build on their faith and, in the years to come, put their faith into action.

If you believe, it is possible that the building of a simple, decent, affordable home may indeed be the framework necessary to end world hunger or domestic violence or child abuse. When the servants of God start building, anything and everything in the kingdom of God is possible.

And they said to Nehemiah, "Let us start building..." and they committed themselves to the common good. Praise be to God. Amen.