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The Walls Came Tumbling Down **Joshua 6: 8-11; 20**

To this day, any observer who climbs Mount Nebo in Jordan and looks west into the Promised Land sees before them a vast panorama of brown.

To the south one sees an impenetrable white haze, the cloud that hangs perpetually over the Dead Sea. But the eye is inevitably drawn to a lush, green, fertile jewel, well-watered by the Jordan River.

You will say to yourself, “*This* is where I want to live.”

That is why the Biblical city of Jericho was defended and defined by walls, high and sturdy walls.

Anyone who entered Palestine in the Old Testament era had to deal with Jericho’s walls, for they stood like a gateway and a sentinel over the entire region. For the Hebrew people, the walls of Jericho stood like a forbidding dam, blocking the realization of all their dreams.

Joshua had proved himself to be an able lieutenant to Moses, but at the right moment he emerges as a creative thinker in his own right.

He lays siege to Jericho, which is nothing original; but then he introduces the region to psychological warfare: he has his best soldiers lead a grand processional, followed by a priestly contingent blowing horns, followed by a vast array of common people, all walking in disciplined, universal silence around the city walls once – before returning to their camp. This was truly a strange way to attack a wall – but it was creative! -- and it planted a seed of fear in Jericho’s heart.

I suppose the story of Jericho sounds a little strange to our modern ears, yet it shouldn’t, for many of the definitive events of the modern world have been defined by the falling of walls.

I need only to say the numbers “9-11,” and your mind conjures up the searing image of two great towers collapsing in catastrophic tumult. In its own way, 9-11 was a dark act of the destructive imagination that has embroiled the world in a cycle of violence from which we have not yet emerged.

However, a more definitive event than 9-11 for our modern era was 11-9: 11-9-89.

To what do I refer? 11-9-89 was the day of the fall of the wall of Berlin.

The Berlin Wall stood as a definitive symbol of the division between the free world and the totalitarian world.

What brought the Berlin Wall tumbling down?

Some credit Ronald Reagan’s military build-up, some say Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform efforts, some credit the spread of uncontrolled information through the proliferation of computers.

But as Thomas Friedman noted in his book *The World is Flat*, the tipping point in the Berlin Wall’s fall was two acts of the creative imagination in Hungary and East Germany. Someone in Hungary said, “Imagine what would happen if we opened up our borders with Austria.” So they did it.

Thirteen thousand East Germans realized that if they fled to Hungary, they could immediately escape unhindered to Austria and the free world. So they did.

Their departure put immediate pressure on the East German government to ease travel restrictions. Then someone in East Germany said, “Imagine what would happen if thousands of us converged on the Berlin Wall and swarmed upon it!” So they did.

On 11-9-89, ten thousand East Germans converged on the wall -- and the border guards stepped aside and started letting them through.

Part of those ten thousand fell upon the Berlin Wall itself – and the wall came tumbling down. Acts of the creative imagination brought the walls a tumbling down!

Notice that Joshua's battle plans hinged on the universal participation of everyone in his army. *A key part of the battle plan was that when the walls fell, everyone was called to go straight-forward and do their part.* Everyone in the encircling family had a job to do and was expected to do it. *The plan would only work through universal participation.*

Like our capital campaign, Joshua's plan depended upon universal participation! Teamwork! Think back to the day that many historians call the most important day in the 20th century – June 6, 1944, when the forces of liberation faced the daunting challenge of breaching what was known as the Atlantic Wall, constructed by thousands of tons of concrete and steel, protected by hundreds of miles of barbed wire and millions of explosive mines, backed up by cannons and machine guns of every conceivable caliber. This terrible wall was meant to protect Hitler's Third Reich for a thousand years. Yet it took the forces of liberation less than one hour to breach that wall on Utah Beach and most of the other invasion spots; even on formidable Omaha Beach, the Atlantic Wall held up the attackers for only one day. How did they break down the wall? Historian Stephen Ambrose offers a one-word explanation: *team work*. Let me just give you four quick examples.

You've never heard of Marian Rajewski, but for you WW II veterans out there, he may have saved your lives. How? This Polish mathematician anticipated in the early 1930's that Hitler's Germany would spell trouble for the world, and he and friends began to work on cracking the encrypting code that the Germans used for all special messages. He spent several years in this critical endeavor and succeeded. Using Marian Rajewski's work, British and American scientists built Ultra, a machine that could decode every meaningful message of the German high command. Thousands of lives were saved on D-Day because a Polish mathematician's work aided in letting the Allies know exactly what the Germans were doing. An eight-year-old boy was given by his father the precise co-ordinates for where a huge German cannon was placed on their farm overlooking the Atlantic Wall. This little boy hitched a ride to a city some distance away, found a French Resistance fighter, and gave him those precise co-ordinates.

On D-Day, the British Navy, using the boy's information, destroyed that cannon, saving hundreds of lives. Why did the Germans take no notice of him? Because he was blind, and the Germans didn't consider him a threat -- they didn't realize that his blindness had given him a phenomenal memory.

A sixteen year-old girl discovered where the Germans had placed their most feared and destructive tanks. The tanks were all heavily guarded – but the rail cars that transported the tanks were not. She and some friends snuck in, drained all the motor oil from those rail cars and filled them with an abrasive powder given them by the French Resistance, flown in by the British.

On D-Day, all the rail cars seized up; the tanks could not be delivered, saving countless lives. Teamwork! I can't help but add one more example: Theodore Roosevelt Jr., son of the former president. He was 56, a heart-attack victim – and the first general who landed on D-Day, at Utah beach. When he got his bearings he realized that he and his command were a full mile away from where they were supposed to be. They were actually where he and others had wanted to be but had been told by experts they couldn't reach. But here they were. They could try to march the mile to where the plan said start the battle, but they agreed, "We will start the battle right here." So they did.

In the face of his and a thousand other acts of teamwork and initiative, great walls came tumbling down!

Of course, not all walls are physical.

I grew up in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama in the 1950's and 1960's. I saw invisible walls, walls that separated races, walls that demeaned and oppressed, walls that began to be breached when a black woman named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white patron.

Yet that single act of civil disobedience is not what brought the walls down.

What brought the walls down was persistence.

What brought the walls down was when every African-American in Montgomery, Alabama

stopped riding the city buses.

If they had stopped riding for a week or ten days, or even a month, they would have made no difference. But when they persisted in walking and car-pooling day after day, week after week, month after month, for over a year, they brought those invisible walls a tumbling down! I know. I was there to see it! Persistence!

On that fateful seventh day Joshua's people marched, knowing they were going to succeed – why?

Because I have omitted one aspect of their great processional, its most important feature.

The priests carried with them, not just horns, but the Ark of the Covenant, symbolic of the presence of God.

The entire host walked around Jericho with confidence because they trusted that God had already given them victory.

They claimed in their mind the triumphant power of God before they ever took a step.

On that fateful seventh day, each of them took their place, the horns blew, and full of the presence of God, everyone SHOUTED: “FALL!!!” And the walls came tumbling down!

Now, did the shouting bring the walls come down? I don't know.

I have always suspected that maybe the writer left out a detail or two, like maybe a timely earthquake or the onslaught of a strong wind.

But the writer's point was, this was not the Hebrews' victory. It was God's victory. It was God's doing.

But the Hebrews were able to capitalize on this victory because they claimed with confidence the triumphant power of the living God.

My friends, all around the church of today there are walls. There are walls of alienation, built by people who do not connect to religious communities because they feel like they will not be accepted.

Perhaps they are simply different,

or perhaps they have failed in some way, and feel as if they will not be welcome.

Frankly, religious communities bear some responsibility for their alienation.

There are some forms of the Christian faith that endeavor to divide society by building more walls.

The truth is, if you want to build a big church, all you need to do is play on people's prejudice, play to their fear, utilize their ignorance by demonizing others that seem different from them. People will flock to such a church because it makes them feel righteous and powerful to call somebody else unrighteous.

But that kind of faith only builds more walls of alienation. It doesn't tear any walls down.

Such a church sees itself as an ark, a big lifeboat that will save a few people – but everybody else can drown.

That is not the church of Jesus Christ!

The church faces walls of individualism. A spirit of selfishness is permeating our society.

We are infected with galloping me-ism. What's good for me, what's good for my child,

what's good for my family, that's all that matters – there is no sense of belonging to the general community.

People say, “I don't need to go to church. I'm a spiritual person.”

That's like saying, “I don't need to eat, I'm a hungry person.”

My friends, we are all spiritual people! To be human is to be spiritual, just like to be human is to be hungry.

To be human is to be spiritual, because we are made of the Spirit of God.

The question is, “What do we feed our spirit? How do we nurture and cultivate our spirit?”

You cannot cultivate your spirit in isolation. You must cultivate and nurture your spirit within the context of community. So many people do not see that.

These walls of individualism are often coupled with walls of materialism, built by people who have reduced their life to the question, “How much can I put away in my account and how many toys can I buy?”

Individualism and materialism often combine to build yet another wall, that of despair, apathy.

People have tasted from every dish that life has to offer and are not satisfied – *they will never be satisfied*, for what they are feeding their soul cannot nurture their deepest hunger.

That is why, tall and sturdy though these walls around us might seem, cracks begin to appear within them. Somebody's soul feels the need for communion with a spiritual community, with people of faith, feels the need for guidance from a spiritual mentor.

Two people fall in love and suddenly they realize they need nurture in making their relationship last. Suddenly into a marriage comes one child or two children, or three, and suddenly, people realize they need a network of support in helping them raise their children; they need the aid of collective wisdom. Eventually, behind the walls people feel the need for contact with the transcendent.

They feel the need for God. Behind these walls these urges are there.

The question for the church is, "Can we address these hungers? Can we bring the walls a-tumbling down?"

When I started pastoring here fifteen years ago our surrounding neighborhoods felt like a wall to me.

Virtually none of our members came from our surrounding neighborhood,

and those who did were eighty years-old. (Not that there's anything wrong with that!)

We had no young families coming to our church from right around us, no children from our neighborhood.

Through creative imagination, teamwork, persistence, and by claiming the triumphant power of God, we have managed to put cracks in the walls around us,

as more and more of our new members and visitors come from residences all around us.

Not long ago, a young member who lives close by called, so excited, saying, "My neighbors came to our Easter Egg Hunt and our Easter service, and they have promised they are going to become active at St. John's."

She said, "I asked my neighbor, what made the difference, what was the tipping point?" She answered,

'For the last several years at holiday times, you have put something on my doorstep. Maybe it was a pumpkin or a flier, or a little car or an Easter egg. But ya'll kept giving us an individualized invitation to your church.

We finally decided 'These people really mean it.'" And we do.

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God he uses the image of a banquet, a party, a wedding feast,

and I've come to see what he means, for a church community often reminds me of a middle school dance where the kids walk around asking: "Are you going to the dance? Are you going to the dance?"

It takes the right people saying, "Yeah, I'm going, why don't you come with me?" for the party to take off.

We are not yet where we want to be, but we are not far from the tipping point where so many people in our community will be worshipping with us that no one who lives around us will live ignorant of the fact

that at the corner of Fifth and Hawthorne there is a party going on, a banquet table of grace –

yet no matter how many people come here, still there is room! Still there is room!

I close by reminding you of this: the church's ultimate goal is never the church.

The church's ultimate goal is not simply gathering and training a great host of people with a servant's heart.

We are gathering and training servants for the purpose of sending them back into the world.

Building a large and viable community of faith is just a means -- a means and not an end!

The church is never meant to be an ark that saves a few and ignores the rest.

The church is meant to be a landing craft that conveys the power of deliverance into needy communities,

whether these needy communities are on Seigle Avenue, in Arkansas or New Orleans, or maybe Ecuador or Kiev – all places where our people have served recently -- or it might be on Fifth Street in Elizabeth.

The church is not meant to be an ark;

the church is meant to be a landing craft that delivers the power of Good News

wherever it is needed around the world.

Creative imagination, teamwork, persistence, and claiming the positive, triumphant power of God:

these virtues brought down walls at Jericho, at Normandy, in Berlin, and in Montgomery.

They can bring them down right here.

The walls can come tumbling down!

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