

**“The Joy of God Is Our Strength”**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

23 January 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

*“and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”*

- Nehemiah 8:10c

**Prayer**

**Living God, Giver of the sacred texts that nurture our faith,**

**Bless this time of intentional listening and reflection –**

**May the words of my mouth**

**And the meditation of our hearts**

**Be pleasing to you, O God, our rock and our salvation. Amen.**

New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote a recent opinion essay in which he spoke with deep concern about an anti-social and self-destructive behavioral trend in American society.<sup>1</sup> Brooks confessed that he doesn't have answers to justify the long-term loss of solidarity or explain the rise of estrangement and hostility in the nation, but he mentioned various data reports compiled over several years to make his point that Americans are becoming less caring and more aggressive toward one another.

In 2020, David Brooks pointed out, traffic deaths rose 7%, the biggest increase in 13 years, even though the number of miles people drove fell by 13%. This steep increase in motor vehicle accidents and fatalities reveals an outbreak of reckless driving throughout the country. The FAA has documented a dramatic surge in dangerous and violent behavior at airports and on airplanes. Nurses and other healthcare workers, who were celebrated as national heroes at the beginning of the pandemic, have endured a rising epidemic of verbal and physical abuse from patients who are angry or, for political and ideological reasons, refuse to be vaccinated. Teachers across the country have been harassed by parents who demand that they do their jobs no matter the cost to their own health and well-being. In his opinion essay, Brooks also highlighted the exponential growth of firearm sales. In January of 2021, Americans bought more than two million guns, an 80% jump in sales and the third-highest monthly total on record. Most of the country has seen more shootings and killings and an upsurge in hate crimes, especially against Blacks, Asians and Jews.

Brooks noted that this fraying of our social fabric is taking place in a climate already heavy with polarization and intolerance. Americans are spending more time in ideological and religious siloes. We are orienting our lives around highly divergent social and political narratives at the same time the pandemic has already put a bigger distance between people.

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John Gluck, who was diagnosed with multiple myeloma a few years ago, poured out his heart in a piece he wrote for the Washington Post where he implores boosted Americans who are now saying that it is time to learn to live with COVID not to forget the other 10 million fellow Americans who are immunocompromised. Gluck is double vaccinated and boosted but his immune system has not produced enough COVID antibodies. He understands why healthy and boosted people are eager and ready to get rid of all pandemic restrictions and place on those with immunodeficiency the onus of figuring out how to protect themselves, but Gluck sees a twofold issue in this emerging calculus – it makes the most defenseless among us feel even more vulnerable and, while most healthy and boosted Americans are done with COVID, COVID is not done with us yet. There are still as many as 2,000 Americans dying of COVID on many days and safety protocols can still save millions of lives. Gluck laments that even in his proudly liberal and progressive enclave in New York City, his neighbors are shedding their face masks and breathing down his neck at a time when they should be upgrading their masks to the most effective against Omicron. As a cancer patient, John Gluck fears that COVID fatigue, politics, and economic forces will make healthy and vaccinated Americans more insensitive and less patient toward anyone in our society with a weakened immune system. He ends his article with a heart-wrenching plea for human solidarity. Gluck wrote, ***“My son is now 13 and will start high school this fall. I’d like to see him graduate... To get to that day, I’d welcome your help.”***<sup>2</sup>

In his opinion essay, David Brooks perceives this national shift toward hostility, indifference and self-destruction as a sign of a spiritual and moral problem of a society that, in his own words, ***“is dissolving from the bottom up as much as from the top down.”*** Then he sums up this overall trend of violent and antisocial behavior in one single and unsettling sentence, ***“The situation is dire.”***<sup>3</sup>

Somewhere between the onset of the pandemic and the time when we got the first shots of the vaccines in our arms, it appeared for a moment that we had finally learned again two lessons that most of us had forgotten – firstly, that life is precious and fragile, that it is a one-time-only irreplaceable gift, and that to waste your life and not love it, not to hold your life and other people’s lives as a sacred gift never-to-be-repeated again and not to protect the lives of those around you is just wrong. We also remembered the incontestable truth that all life is interrelated. Martin Luther King Jr. talked about our interconnectedness eloquently in his commencement address at Oberlin College in 1965. “[All] ***mankind is tied together,***” Rev. King said, ***“we are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”***<sup>4</sup> The coronavirus pandemic reminded us that what happens in China can and often does have a very direct impact on the whole world. A variant detected in South Africa affects our lives here in Acton. Our choice to place individual freedoms above the common good does have direct consequences on the number of immunocompromised parents who may live to see their children graduate from High School. And any attempt to live as if we were not caught in the inescapable network of mutuality, as if all life, people, and nations were not interdependent, is a tragic mistake that undermines our trust in each other and holds

us back from nurturing the strong bonds of civility, kindness, and solidarity we need to live in life-sustaining societies and to flourish together as humans. The alarming decline in our collective appreciation for the interrelatedness of our society and the rising epidemic of disconnectedness from one another at this crucial stage of the pandemic make it all the more pressing for people of faith like you and me to reflect on the lessons about life the COVID pandemic has taught us and resist the temptation to give into hopelessness and indifference as we face the challenges of being human and Christian amidst the dire circumstances of our days.

Throughout its 2,000 years of history, the Church has sought to instill into human hearts a genuine commitment to the common good. When the Apostle Paul became aware of the warring theological factions, the abusive social practices carried out under the guise of individual freedom, and the sinful behavior that were pulling the Corinthian church apart, he shamelessly borrowed the metaphor of “the body” from Greco-Roman political discourse and imbued it with a whole new Christian meaning. The Corinthians would have been familiar with the imperial use of the body metaphor to emphasize social conformity and solidify rigid political hierarchy, but Paul imagined the Christian community as the body of Christ on earth where people of faith would replace conformity with unity and would give up the sociopolitical stratification of the Empire to embrace our God-given interdependence. Paul insisted that for the body to be healthy, no one can think only of their own gifts, activities, services, wishes, desires, comfort or satisfaction. Everyone has to be invested in the vision of the common good and work together, loving and caring even for the weak and the less visible members of the body. In the verses following the passage Rick Barnes read this morning,<sup>5</sup> Paul offers a vivid picture of what it means to be part of the body and strive for the common good of all, ***“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”***<sup>6</sup>

In one of his many memorable sermons, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. described God as having a tough mind and a tender heart. Dr. King said, ***“I am thankful that we worship a God who is both tough minded and tenderhearted. If God were only tough minded, he would be a cold, passionless despot sitting in some far-off Heaven ‘contemplating all...’ if God were only tenderhearted, he would be too soft and sentimental to function when things go wrong... [But God] is tough minded enough to transcend the world; he is tenderhearted enough to live in it... At times we need to know that the Lord is a God of justice... But there are also times when we need to know that God possesses love and mercy. When we are staggered by the chilly winds of adversity and battered by the raging storms of disappointment... we need to know that there is Someone who loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us another chance.”***<sup>7</sup>

To be the Church in the third year of the pandemic and at a time when we all feel increasingly disconnected from one another makes it harder to think of Paul’s image of the body and not be a bit cynical about this talk of unity and interrelatedness. After being physically distant for so long and having to endure another stretch of virtual

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services-only since Christmas Eve, we are all tired of these unwelcome disruptions to our lives. We are all a bit less patient, a bit more frustrated, a bit more entrenched in our opinions, a bit more resistant to COVID restrictions, and a bit less likely to empathize with those who still feel vulnerable in our society or to value the vision of community where we take with deep seriousness our commitment to life. The good news is that God is tenderhearted enough to understand our longing to live more freely and more fully once again. God cares about all of us. God cares about those of us who are healthy and boosted and ready to live with the virus and those who have weakened immune systems and are asking not to be pushed to the margins of society and about those who are gambling with their lives by not getting the shots. God cares about us all. Our God is a God of compassion who can relate in a very intimate manner to our emotional exhaustion and spiritual dryness. God knows how difficult the last two years have been to all of us and how this extended time of stress and isolation has changed, and not necessarily in a good manner, the way we relate to one another. And this tough minded and tenderhearted God also hopes that God's love and mercy can empower us, the church in Acton center, to find within us and among us the strength and the courage to have a tough mind and a tender heart ourselves. We need to practice tenderheartedness to stand in solidarity with parents of children under 5 that cannot be vaccinated yet as well as with those who are immunocompromised. We need to be tough minded to say out loud that our church will never walk away from our commitment to the most vulnerable people in our society, that we will not give up on the vision of the common good or abandon our God-given mission to re-connect people with God and one another. We have to be tough minded and tenderhearted enough to care deeply for each other in our dire situation and make the most of every new chance God gives us to remind the world that our present and our future and our salvation are all tied together.

The story of Nehemiah, while it unfolded most probably in the late sixth century before the Christian Era, is one of the greatest examples we have in the Bible of a man of faith who did not hesitate to have a tough mind, never once compromised his commitment to being tenderhearted and made the best of the chance he had to bring God's people together and give them a vision of a more hopeful future.

The story begins in the Persian royal court where Nehemiah was as a high-ranking official in charge of serving wine to the king. Still living in exile after the Babylonians conquered his nation and forced the brightest and the best of the Jewish people to relocate to the city of Babylon, Nehemiah nurtured a deep love for Jerusalem in his heart and a profound longing to return to the land of promise. When he heard a firsthand report from those who came back from the homeland about the life of despair, poverty and near-starvation of the people who stayed in Palestine and about the total devastation of Jerusalem – the broken city walls, the burned down city gates, the Temple reduced to rubble, Nehemiah cried for days on end. He fasted and prayed that God might soften the king's heart and make the king of Persia receptive to his request to go back and rebuild the city of his ancestors. When he arrived in Jerusalem as the governor appointed by the king, Nehemiah put on his tough-minded hat and, despite the destruction all around, he gathered the weary survivors who had been left behind and

were still paralyzed by their grief and trauma, and opened their hearts and minds to a new possibility with an invitation to act. ***“Come,”*** Nehemiah challenged them, ***“let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”***<sup>8</sup>

Things got worse before Nehemiah could convince the people to believe in his vision of the common good. The community was divided. The few who had managed to do better than others were taking advantage of the less privileged many. Hardship was everywhere. Neighbors were at odds with neighbors. There were complaints about the costs of the whole reconstruction project. Local officials mocked Nehemiah’s efforts. The workers started to get tired and discouraged. Threats of violence made it virtually impossible for Nehemiah to enjoy a good night of sleep. Despite all the hard work, the long days, the sleepless nights, the noticeable cracks in the life of the community, and the obstacles on his way, Nehemiah practiced faithful tenderheartedness and encouraged the people not to give into fear or tiredness and not to divest themselves from the vision of the common good. ***“Do not be afraid,”*** Nehemiah repeated time and again, ***“Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your kin.”***<sup>9</sup>

After 52 days, when the work on the walls was completed and new gates were put in place, Nehemiah called a grand assembly on the east side of the city in front of the Water Gate. The priest Ezra stood on a platform built for that day when Jewish people living in Jerusalem and the first wave of returnees from the Babylonian exile would come together as one community and a united society. Ezra read the Torah, the Law of Moses, and everyone heard the sacred stories that had forged their nation, given them a national identity, and bound them together in a covenant of mutual love and faith. From early morning until midday, the united community listened to the stories of Abraham and Sarah, of Joseph and his brothers, of the Egyptian captivity and the exodus, of the Ten Commandments, of Joshua and the arrival in the Promised Land and of God’s instructions for creating a national community grounded in justice, love, kindness and faith.

The People wept and we can easily relate to their tears. They wept because after living with a sense of loss and disconnection for so long, God’s tough mindedness had prevailed over the powers of this world and they were once again living in their own homeland. They wept because they had been harboring feelings of guilt, failure, defeat and abandonment in their hearts but now they could feel God’s love and mercy and forgiveness once again. They wept because God’s tender heart had re-joined the community the world had broken apart and separated. They wept because God’s tough mind wrested from their dire situation a second chance to create a nation filled with faith in its future. They wept because they knew that it was their own collective lack of faith in their own history that had caused the destruction of Jerusalem and forced some of them to live in exile.

Nehemiah, however, refused to be stuck in the past. He did not want to turn the first gathering of the new community that had just been re-united into a time of recitation of the long list of their miseries, brokenness, mistakes and failures. He understood well

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how dire their situation was, but Nehemiah hoped God's people would re-connect and re-orient their lives around the joyful possibilities for life in a community of hope and joy. So he instructed everyone to rejoice, eat, drink, and show gratitude for life and for all the people around them even in the midst of uncertainty and in a time of dire circumstances. ***“Do not be grieved,”*** Nehemiah said to the congregation, ***“for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”***

Friends, it would be easy right now to focus on our disconnectedness and on the news that keeps on reminding us of our deep and abiding problems and divisions. It is very easy to be afraid, unhappy, grumpy, angry, and even indifferent to our call to be the Church in this time where a commitment to life, to community and to the common good appears to be dissolving, but we are all members of the same body. We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny. We are all very much aware of our inter-relatedness. We all know that the world is too dangerous right now for us to retreat from a vision of the common good that includes every human being in our society. We also know that our faith in a tough minded and tenderhearted God gives our church an important role to play in bringing people together and connecting them to one another in meaningful and life-saving ways even during the pandemic. Ours is a tough ministry that we can only carry out if we allow ourselves to find our strength in the joy of knowing that God is with us, loves us, cares for us, understands us, and will give us every opportunity to celebrate the gift of life with one another and recognize the true joy of being invested in a vision of society where kindness, compassion, solidarity, unity and interdependence make life worth living.

And I leave you with this morning with the wise words of the Swiss philosopher Henri-Frédéric Amiel, ***“Life is short and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are traveling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind.”***<sup>10</sup>

May the joy of the Lord strengthen our church to do so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> By David Brooks in [American Is Falling Apart at the Seams](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR1WXVscHNSBdm3HGCZF2Zvvp7-AbuGX_8WKf2DGrtlTO_4vXWW0tdst10), publish in the Opinion section of the New York Times, 13 January 2022, Digital edition [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR1WXVscHNSBdm3HGCZF2Zvvp7-AbuGX\_8WKf2DGrtlTO\_4vXWW0tdst10].

<sup>2</sup> By John Gluck in [This is a dangerous time in the pandemic for people like me. Don't forget us](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/01/17/immunocompromised-pandemic-omicron/), published in PostEverything Perspective, The Washington Post, 17 January 2022, Digital edition [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/01/17/immunocompromised-pandemic-omicron/].

<sup>3</sup> By David Brooks in [American Is Falling Apart at the Seams](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR1WXVscHNSBdm3HGCZF2Zvvp7-AbuGX_8WKf2DGrtlTO_4vXWW0tdst10), publish in the Opinion section of the New York Times, 13 January 2022, Digital edition [https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html?referringSource=articleShare&fbclid=IwAR1WXVscHNSBdm3HGCZF2Zvvp7-AbuGX\_8WKf2DGrtlTO\_4vXWW0tdst10].

<sup>4</sup> By Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in [Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution](https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/CommAddress.html), commencement address at Oberlin College, June 1965 [https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/BlackHistoryMonth/MLK/CommAddress.html].

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Corinthians 12:13-26.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:26.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. in A Tough Mind and A Tender Heart, published in “Strength to Love,” pp. 1-9.

<sup>8</sup> Nehemiah 2:17.

<sup>9</sup> Nehemiah 4:14.

<sup>10</sup> Henri-Frédéric Amiel in Amiel’s Journal, p. 180.