

## THREE MEN AND A ROAD

Good morning:

It's a pleasure and honor to be with you in worship this morning.

I'd like to tell you a few stories. At first glance they might seem unrelated, but if you bear with me, hopefully you will see how they fit together and their importance.

First, we will take a quick look at each of the Scriptures that were read this morning and then we will get to the stories.

Not to get us into perspective let's take another look at our New Testament Lesson where we read about the early church (Acts 4:32-35). It described a beautiful community. Everyone shared what he or she had. People did not hoard what they had, they share with the community. This group of people did not worry about the usual things that concern us. In fact, if we look closely at what they did, their actions would seem senseless at best and possibly quite foolish. Some people sold their possessions and gave the money to the apostles for the benefit of the entire community. Now we might think, yeah, I could hold a garage sale and get rid of some of my stuff. Most of us probably could, because most of us have too much stuff. It reminds me of that old Rubbermaid commercial on tv. The family looks around at all their possessions piled up high and in a huge mess. So they buy a bunch of those Rubbermaid containers and put all their stuff in them. They look around at all the empty space and say, "we need more stuff". For a large portion of America, we have too much stuff.

But in the community of the early church some people would even sell their land and give the money for the community. Nobody had any need. No one was hungry. Everybody had a place to sleep. The ultimate community. The Kingdom of God on earth.

In the Old Testament lesson (Nehemiah 5:1-13), we see how the community was disjointed. People were complaining. They did not have enough food for their families. They were starving. Some of them had been sold into slavery. They were powerless against those who had wealth because their land had been sold so they could eat.

Nehemiah speaks up to the noble and officials and tells them what to do, and what not to do. And the nobles and officials listen and do what was right. And then all the people had enough to eat.

Two Scriptures each displaying the Kingdom of God on earth.

But now to the stories: Three stories about three different men and a story about a road.

The first story is about a character in the Bible. Joseph.

Joseph was one of twelve sons. Now that's a lot of brothers. Joseph's dad, had his favorites. And his favorite son was Joseph. And the dad gave him presents more than the others. Now maybe you remember some of this story. Joseph's dad gave him a beautiful coat, of many colors as the story goes. His brothers got jealous. They sell him to some slave traders and tell their dad that a wild beast had killed him.

But God took care of Joseph and he became the head of a house for an important man in Egypt. But again a bad thing happened to Joseph. The man's wife had her eye on him and tried to get him to bed. But Joseph refuses. He acts honorably. The wife gets mad and lies by telling the guards and her husband that Joseph tried to rape her. Joseph gets thrown into prison.

But God again takes care of Joseph and gives him the interpretations of some dreams. Pharaoh has a dream and doesn't know what it means. His advisors don't know what it means. But one of Pharaoh's servants remembers that Joseph can interpret dreams so Pharaoh sends for Joseph. God gives to Joseph the meaning of the dream. There is going to be seven years of rich harvest, lots of grain and therefore food. Then there will be seven years of famine.

Joseph is released from prison and is placed over all of Egypt, subject only to Pharaoh himself. Prison to head hanzo. Now that's really climbing the ladder of success.

Joseph, as the main man with the power, collects all the grain that is grown all over Egypt. He stores it up and gets ready for the famine. When it hits the people soon run out of grain because they had given so much to Joseph. So Joseph sells some of the grain back to them. They need more grain but now they don't have any more money. So Joseph says, "Give me your land and I will give your more grain". When they run out of that grain they come to Joseph and offer themselves as slaves to get grain so they can eat. Can you imagine what Pharaoh thought? He might have been thinking, "I made a good move in putting Joseph in that position. He had planned well. Everybody has food and now I have more slaves than ever before." Yeah, Joseph was pretty slick. He made people slaves so they could eat.

Not really like the other Scriptures we read. Joseph did not create a community where people were valued. Joseph forgot how God had always taken care of him. He did not have the welfare of the people as a priority. He just made slaves of people and used his position of power to exploit and dehumanize the people.

That's the first story today.

Now for the second. It is a much shorter story. But it has an important point. This story is so short that if you are daydreaming, you will miss it.

"People are more important than paperwork".

This statement was made repeatedly by a pastor, a director of a church camp. Although he had numerous administrative duties, he would utter this statement repeatedly to help others understand (and to remind himself) his priorities regarding his ministry. People would come into his office, people from the local community, young people who had worked during the summers, members of various churches, ministers of congregations, all would seek his counsel and guidance regarding their struggles and joys. He was known far and wide as a pastor who would listen to anyone who came. Obviously this takes a great deal of time to listen to so many people. His paperwork and administrative duties would back up. Items that needed to be crossed off his "to do" list would remain there for days because someone would come into his office or call him on the phone and he would stop whatever he was doing and listen. A great pastor. He would work long into the night trying to catch up on what needed to be done. And he never got caught up. When questioned about his duties, he would always reply, "people are more important than paperwork". He had his priorities straight. He knew the value of people. Some would complain that he did not complete the duties that came with the position of camp director. But he never backed down. He never apologized for his priorities. Because he knew, that "people were more important than paperwork".

The third story is about another pastor, a missionary. What is called a "home missionary", the Executive Director of a Christian Center. This man worked his entire life in the poor section of the city. He distributed food to the poor. Helped immigrants obtain housing, fed the elderly in the neighborhood who would not have had food. He hired students in seminary to run clubs for kids after school and have activities in the summer. He was well known in the neighborhood as "the old pastor". He knew the families, knew the little kids, knew their parents and grandparents. He gave money to people when they needed it. People who were blessed with money would often give it directly to him, oftentimes in cash. Knowing that he would not put it into the general budget but trusted him to distribute it to those who needed it. He setup a "shoe fund", money that was set aside to buy shoes for children. He did not waste time commiserating about what the parents were or were not doing. He just took care of the needs of the people. The old missionary had a great understanding of the poor and the policies which kept them poor.

There was one family that came in and asked for food. The old missionary told the seminary workers to box up two huge boxes food and then drive the family to their home with the food. This seemed very generous to the seminarians, but they did as the old missionary directed. Three days later the family was back again, asking for more food. The seminarians were reluctant to give them anymore. But the old missionary said to do the same thing. Two boxes of food and then drive them home. When the seminarians returned to the Center, they went to the old missionary and asked why. Didn't he realize that the family could not have possibly eaten that much food in three days? Surely, they surmised, the family was either hoarding the food and was using the center to simply stock up, or they sold the food and used the money for other things such as booze or drugs. The old missionary smiled at the young seminarians and explained to them that the family was very proud and had great integrity. Before they would come to the Center, they would have borrowed from their neighbors and when they could borrow

no more and they had no other options, they came to the Center and asked for food. He also went on to explain that when they received the first large boxes of food, they went back to their neighbors and returned all that they had borrowed. The old missionary knew the people. He used what was given to him to create a community where all people were valued and to the best of his ability, where all had food, clothes and shelter.

The old missionary had a saying which explained much of the evil and inequality of the world. He would often say, “the number one sin in the world is greed”. The old missionary believed that greed was the cause of much of the inequality of resources in the world. He would state and restate that phrase in discussions with the student seminarians. Greed, the number one sin in the world.

Now for the last story: about the Road. Kennedy Road to be specific, in South Africa. Did any of you hear anything about this on the news? Kennedy Road is in Durban. On this road live thousands of people in shacks. Shacks. They are known as shack dwellers. The city doesn’t want them there. But they have nowhere else to go. They have been protesting their conditions and demanding their right to proper housing. The city has public housing but the shack dwellers have not been allowed to move into them. Other people have been allowed that right, but the shack dwellers were not. This past week a mob came in with guns, clubs and swords. Three people were murdered, many more were wounded, shacks were looted and hundreds of people ran into the bush to hide. According to some reports the police were near but did nothing to protect the shack dwellers. The harassment and looting continued for 36 hours while the police did nothing to help. This particular action drew the attention and support of poor people’s organizations, educators, scholars and advocacy organizations.

But this type of living is nothing new in the world. There are tent cities in large metropolitan areas, immigrants have been living shacks, homeless live all over the world in tents, shacks, cardboard huts, anywhere they find someplace for shelter. This type of living is dehumanizing. It is not the community that God desires for people. It is certainly not the Kingdom of God on earth. This type of living not only comes from inequitable distribution of assets, more importantly it comes from a view of life where monetary gain is more important than people. Unlike the early church that we read about in Acts, unlike the people of Nehemiah’s time where they changed their way of living to take care of each other. Unlike the pastor who knew that people were more important than paperwork; tolerating this type of living anywhere, is contrary to the will of God. It is our greed which creates a portion of society which has nowhere to live and oftentimes nothing to eat. This is why the old missionary said, “the number one sin in the world is greed”. Because our greed dehumanizes other people and destroys the Kingdom of God on earth.

As we share our resources, as we dispense with our own personal greed, as we place the welfare of others above our own accumulation of wealth, as we share together, we recreate the community of the early church, the Kingdom of God on earth as God desires.