

Nails

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Sunday, March 21, 2010, John 19:13-18, 1 Thessalonians 5:6-11

It seems that Spring has sprung, and almost everyone is glad to see it happen, even though for some especially farmers and gardeners it means more work. I've been scratching around in my own garden, getting the earlier stuff in: potatoes, lettuce, onions.

Living on a farm, which I did as a child, meant Spring was a time to get ready for another season of plowing, planting, cultivating and hopefully a good harvest. It would start with getting the equipment ready, tuning up the tractor, checking the plow and planters to make sure everything was in working order.

On my grandfather's small farm, which lacked a machine shed, that was all outside work. So on rainy days, which come often in spring, we would find something to do indoors. Often, that meant going down in the basement to straighten nails. You see, my grandfather was a survivor of the depression. He'd raised four children during the dismal decade of the 1930's, and he had only been able to accomplish it by being extremely frugal, and that included never wasting anything, including nails. During most of the year, when nails were bent, they went in coffee cans in the basement, so that on rainy spring days they could be straightened for future use.

Grandpa's basement is where I learned about nails about the difference between regular nails, finishing nails and roofing nails, about round nails and old-fashioned square nails, of which my Grandpa still kept and used a few, and about the fact that nail sizes were described as so many pennies. There are two penny nails, four penny nails, eight penny nails, on up to sixty penny nails. A two penny nail is one inch long and a sixty penny nail is sixty inches long.

What I didn't learn from my grandfather is why nail size was referred to as so many pennies. I had to look that up. Just in case you're curious, here's what I found. There are actually two theories. One is that a penny in reference to nails is actually a corruption of the word pound. So using penny to describe the size of a nail meant that, for example, one thousand four penny nails weighed four pounds, while one thousand six penny nails weighed six pounds. The other theory was that penny meant penny, and originally referred to the price of 100 nails of that size 100 eight penny nails cost 8 cents, while 100 twelve penny nails cost 12 cents. Whatever the origin of the term, we here in the United States are pretty much the only ones to still use it. Even in England, where the expression originated, they've switched to metric measurements of length as a way of describing nails.

When we speak of nails during the season of Lent, we naturally begin to think of the crucifixion of Jesus and the nails that were driven through his flesh into the wood of the cross. We think of the terrible pain of that piercing. The best evidence suggests that when nails were used in crucifixion (they weren't always; many times victims were simply tied to a cross or an upright post), they were driven through the wrist and through the feet or ankles. Though certainly painful, they were not the cause of death that was usually asphyxiation, as the victim slowly lost the strength to draw in enough air to maintain life.

There are plenty of legends about the nails used in the crucifixion of Jesus. One of the legends is that Helena, the mother of the great Roman emperor Constantine, traveled to the Holy Land to retrieve the cross, which she found despite the fact that three hundred years had

passed. Not only did she find the cross, but she supposedly found the nails, which she kept as holy relics.

In the subsequent centuries, the nails were believed to have miraculous powers. For instance, there is a story of someone dipping one of the nails into the sea to calm a raging storm. Another was placed in the helmet of Constantine, so that when he went into battle, he would be protected from his enemies. Another interesting thing that happened to the nails in subsequent centuries is that they seem to have multiplied. At one time or another there have been thirty different nails which have been claimed to be from the cross of Jesus and thus regarded as relics.

The fact is, we don't know how many nails were used in the cross, but no one seriously thinks that there were thirty. The standard assumption is that there were three, maybe four one in each wrist and either one in each foot or a single nail driven through both feet. Look at Christian art, and you'll see both styles depicted.

Now, as a modern person, you might think that the number of nails is no big deal, and today that is true. But once upon a time, in the middle ages, it was quite a big deal. Believing that there were only three, not four, nails used in the crucifixion of Jesus could get you in a lot of trouble. There was even a name for such a belief: triclavianism. Pope Innocent III declared triclavianism a heresy, grounds for expulsion from the church.

I take that as a good example of how we can get carried away into foolishness by attending too closely to the details of the crucifixion. Yes, they used nails and yes, it was painful. But there are more painful ways to die. The point of crucifixion, you see, wasn't to inflict maximum pain. It was to inflict maximum humiliation.

What we must remember is that ancient Rome was an incredibly status-conscious civilization. Everyone, from slaves to nobles, were keenly aware of where they stood on the social ladder, and expected to give deference to those above and receive deference from those below. People valued their standing immensely and would do just about anything to protect or advance it. It was more important than money, and often even more important than life itself.

We see this reflected in the various forms of execution in the Roman empire. Your social standing even determined how you were put to death. Hanging, beheading and poison were all options for those of higher status. Crucifixion was reserved for those who were considered the least of the least, slaves, poor foreigners, etc. or those whom the authorities wished to strip of their status as a warning to others who might consider continuing the work of the one condemned.

Crucifixion, in Jesus' case, was expressly designed to humiliate and strip him of any glory. Crucifixion was public, so that everyone could see how the Roman authorities dealt with those who threatened to upset the great *pax romana*, the Roman peace. Remember that atop the cross was a sign saying, Behold, the king of the Jews. It was a none-to-delicate way of saying, There is only one king the emperor. Don't get any bright ideas about challenging the status quo.

And the nails? They were just part of the total apparatus of the crucifixion, just tools. And since nails in those days were hand-made by a blacksmith, they were valuable and almost certainly removed after the fact to be reused later on. It is highly unlikely that they ended up as relics or came to have miraculous powers.

And yet they may still have something to teach us. Nails are among the most ordinary things on earth. They are made to do a simple job, usually out of sight, and with little fanfare.

They are simple tools, and like most tools, they can be used in several ways, some good and some bad. They can be used to build walls that keep the desperate poor from the resources they need to survive, or they can build shelter for the poor. They can be used to inflict wounds or to repair damage.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the nails which were used to crucify Jesus is that those who drove them through Jesus' flesh into the wood of the cross obviously meant to cause harm. The nails were weapons, whose purpose was to injure and constrain. And they did those things. They fulfilled their part in the larger plan to humiliate Jesus through crucifixion.

And yet God's power was and is so great that even the nails were redeemed. They became part not only of what the Roman soldiers intended, but also part of what Jesus intended. Jesus intended to show his love for and solidarity with all people, from the greatest to the least, and his death on the cross allowed even the lowest of the low to be able to identify with him, to see that he was in fact one of them, with them and for them in every way.

Some of you no doubt remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph was one of 12 sons of Jacob, and the favorite. This did not go over well with his brothers, and it didn't help that Joseph liked to share with his brothers the dreams he had in which they were all bowing down to him. Eventually, enough was enough, and his brothers conspired against him, grabbed him and sold him to slave traders who took him to faraway Egypt.

Joseph began as a slave but rose to prominence in his new country, eventually becoming prime minister, second only to the pharaoh himself. And when a famine struck much of the area, Joseph's brothers were forced to go to Egypt to seek food. Of course, they had no idea Joseph was there or that he had risen to prominence. In fact, when they met him, they didn't recognize him, but he recognized them.

When Joseph finally revealed who he was to his brothers, they were naturally terrified, considering what they had done to him and the great power he had come to have. But Joseph quickly relieved them of their fears, saying: "What you intended for evil, God intended for good."

The same could be said of the nails. The Roman soldiers intended harm, but God had other ideas. God is like that, you know, always turning things to higher purposes, always taking the negative and making it a positive, always creating something new and life-giving out of even the worst situations. Nothing, nothing at all, can resist the grace of God, which is able to overcome even the worst things human beings can do to each other. Nothing and no one is beyond God's power to redeem.

Amen.