

Series: Re-visioning - Pursuing God's Purpose With Fresh Eyes

Sermon: Honour, Sacrifice and Generosity

Passage: Nehemiah 5:1-19

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We've been looking at the book of Nehemiah for the past few weeks in a series called, "Pursuing God's Purpose With Fresh Eyes"

We're praying about what God has next for us as a church in terms of our vision for the future.

A little review here: The Persians had gained control of the Jewish people and their land. Many Jews had been allowed to return to their homeland but the place itself was not in good shape. The wall was broken down and the people were too.

Nehemiah boldly asks the king if he can go back and repair the wall of his people, he gets permission and goes back to rally the people to repair it.

They start rebuilding the wall but they have opposition along the way. People from the surrounding nations try to stop them from starting and finishing the project by trying to discourage them and even threaten them physically.

Nehemiah is able to rally the people together and the work on the wall continues. They all worked together (as Jeremy preached about a couple of week's ago) and then last week, when they faced more opposition from outsiders, Pastor Steve told us that they prayed as a reflex, got on with the work and fought FOR each other.

So the work continues and they are about halfway done. This seemingly impossible vision looks like it's going to happen. It's incredible!

But then they face a threat that could be even more dangerous to their unity than haters from the outside looking in.

Spontaneous Melodrama

Let's look at our passage for today to see the threat and also to see how it's dealt with.

Nehemiah 5:1-19

5:1 Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. **2** Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

4 Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

Sometimes the greatest threat to the community is the community itself. They were building a wall so that they could have peace from their enemies. Meanwhile there seemed to be an even greater threat to their unity from within. In the last chapter they fought FOR each other. Now it seems they are fighting WITH each other.

Let's look at this scene here. We have a community that is in the midst of an exciting project. They are rebuilding the wall together. They have a good leader that is doing the right thing and following God. And yet there is still a challenge and mess. It happens in every community.

Even ours.

Let's start with theirs though :)

There seems to be four sets of people:

People who owned no land but needed food. There was a famine and they couldn't support themselves any more.

People who owned land but had to mortgage it to get food. Their equity was being wiped out quickly because of inflation.

People who were paying taxes to the Persians - the taxes were so high they had to borrow money to pay it. They borrowed money and gave security - either their property or their children.

Wealthy Jews who took advantage of this situation by loaning money, charging interest and taking their land and children as collateral. They were gaining money, land and slaves at the expense of other Jewish people

They come to Nehemiah and they cry out to him.

There was something about Nehemiah that was approachable. The people felt they could come to him and that he was safe. Their cries did not fall on deaf ears.

Look at his response:

6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. 7 I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials.

I want to pause here for a second because I think this is the meat of the passage.

First off, he listened to the poor, the vulnerable and the exploited. There were even people who had resources but were affected by broken systems that left them vulnerable. God has a very special place in his heart for the poor and the vulnerable - he mentions it over and over again. In fact, part of the reason the Jewish people were in exile was partly because of God's judgment on them for the way they treated the poor. Nehemiah stops and listens to those facing injustice.

What about us? Do we have a heart that stops and reflects the injustices that are going on around us in this community? Locally and globally?

Even in general. Do we listen?

He could have said - Yo I'm so sorry but we have this wall that we're building right now and I'm really focused on it. I hear you, but it's going to have to wait until we're finished.

He heard them. They seemed to say - we can't wait. So he listened and stopped.

Consider that they were just recently under attack. They had to literally have people on guard at the wall at all times.

Nehemiah does three things here that are very important for us to understand. Especially in the order that he did it.

He got angry.

1. Get angry

This isn't personal anger. This is what is called righteous indignation - it's when there is an injustice or some unfair treatment. He isn't thinking about what is safe or popular. He is thinking about what is right. And what is happening is not right. Nehemiah is very angry. He is honest with his emotions. He doesn't try to hide it or suppress it. Sometimes we think we can suppress our emotions. But most of the time they leak out. We simply can't hide how we feel. It ends up coming out in passive aggressive or aggressive aggressive ways. It's really dangerous to bottle things up.

It's so important that Nehemiah got angry. This is justice. He was frustrated because people were exploiting God's beloved. We as Christians should get angry about injustice in this world. If

you're like me, I mostly react to things that happen against me. But here we're being challenged to get angry about injustice to the people around us.

So much starts with us being uncomfortable with situations around us that are not right. There's an opportunity in that. An opportunity for growth.

He's very angry. But he doesn't act. The Bible says - in your anger, do not sin (Ephesians 4:26). What would it have looked like if Nehemiah had acted out of his anger? He might have lined them all up and clapped them :)

The people he was angry with were wealthy landowners, government officials. It would be important to keep unity with them. But not just because of their power. It's important because they were his fellow brothers and sisters. They are God's beloved. And he wanted them to see that the people they were taking advantage of were also brothers and sisters. They were also God's beloved.

He gets angry at the mess, the injustice. He takes his anger to the Lord and asks God what to do. He doesn't move away from the mess. He enters into it. And he asks the Lord to come into it too.

What is our response to the injustice of the world, our community, our church? What are the injustices in our world, our community, our church?

What Nehemiah does next is critical. it's consistent with what he's been doing all along.

He prays.

2. Get praying

Vs 7 says I pondered them in my mind

He stops and he prays. I don't know how long he stops but Pastor Steve in his message a few weeks ago talked about how Nehemiah prayed 3 months or so before he asked the King of Persia for permission to rebuild the wall.

He didn't stop for that long but the point is he doesn't act on his own strength.

To stop working on the wall to deal with this issue was dangerous. But Nehemiah was willing to take the risk.

Be still and know that I am God - Psalm 46:10

I wonder how different things would be if people stopped and prayed before they acted?

Nehemiah put his head and his heart together. He thought about the problem and stopped to get direction from the Lord before he acted. One commentary said he mastered his feelings.

God often asks us to put our heart, head and hands together. To take stock of what we are feeling and how the Spirit is stirring us. When we ask God, he often challenges us to do something practical - to use our gifts, resources and voices to move forward.

Over the past few weeks we've talked about how stopping and praying led Cornerstone to where we are today. Whether it was planting the church with the vision to be intercultural, buying land and building a community like center, or now, pausing to ask the Lord - what would you have for us next.

Maybe he prayed this prayer I heard in Lectio 365 last month

God of justice and mercy, as I open my heart to You now, comfort me where I'm unsettled, and unsettle me where I'm comfortable. Challenge me and change me, disturb and rearrange me, not for my own sake but for the sake of those who are hurting and helpless, ostracized and oppressed. Amen.

He's angry. He's honest with his anger at the injustice. He prays. Then he acts. Much like last week's sermon from Pastor Steve we see that Nehemiah is a leader who cares and whose care leads to action.

When he's confronted with this issue he listens. Imagine how the people felt when they came to him and he actually listened?

Someone has said that being listened to is so close to being loved that for many the two are indistinguishable.

Listening is an act of love. Hearing people's stories and being a witness to and for them is an act of justice.

Good leaders and good communities are ones that listen. Nehemiah didn't listen to solve. He listened to hear.

He doesn't respond. He feels. He takes it to God. He listens to those who are suffering. He listens to those who are exploiting. He listens to God.

He cares. He's careful. He's full of care.

But then he doesn't shy away from the messiness, he enters into the middle of it.

He has the courage to confront. It would have been a risk for him to confront the wealthy landowners and officials. But that was a risk he was willing to take. For the sake of unity.

3. Get involved

Let's see how he confronts:

Vs. 7 I told them, "You are charging your own people interest!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

He tackled the issue head on. He called a public meeting, and spoke about the issue directly. The Jewish people already had a system where they weren't supposed to charge each other interest, and they weren't supposed to enslave each other. But they clearly weren't following it.

Things like not charging each other interest is what would distinguish the Israelites from the other nations. Some other nations would charge as much as 50%

They were taking advantage of people's desperation and this made it impossible for them to repay - consuming the family and potential permanent slavery.

The irony is that Nehemiah and his friends were redeeming Jewish people from the Persians who were enslaved, but then Jewish people were enslaving other Jewish people!

Nehemiah appeals to them out of love. The wealthy landowners are seeing the less fortunate people as opportunities to build more wealth. They take taxes and land and even people as collateral.

Nehemiah reminds them that they are family. They are all God's beloved.

When confronted the people kept quiet. They knew they were in the wrong. They didn't try to justify. They listened.

Can I take a little commercial break here?

A couple of things - the first is - people are not the enemy. The enemy is the enemy. When the enemy didn't succeed in attacking from the outside, he tried to attack from the inside.

Even Jesus had to tell Peter one time - get behind me Satan. But Peter wasn't his enemy. The enemy was his enemy.

Second, spoiler alert. This story works out. So you might say, okay your friendly neighbour hood youth pastor, I hear you. I'm gonna get angry at the right things, I'm gonna pray and I'm gonna confront. And you do. Yay! You're awesome. But what happens if you confront someone and they don't respond well?

Well, you can never control how another person reacts. You are only responsible for yourself.

Biblically, in Matthew 18 it tells us to go and point out the fault between the two of you, from there bring one or two others along, then go to the church. This is for something within the church.

You can't control other people. You can only be responsible for yourself. After you've done all you can, leave it to the Lord.

Back to our program.

9 So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? **10** I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! **11** Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil."

12 "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say."

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. **13** I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!"

At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

This is amazing. Nehemiah appeals to them based on fear of the Lord - glorifying God in all we do and being faithful.

And the offenders say they will be faithful. They will return the land and the interest and the people who were enslaved.

And the whole assembly responds - Amen - so be it. They were brought back to unity and worshipped together.

*Generosity

I was talking to someone about this sermon and how generous it was for the Jewish leaders to give back the land AND the interest from the loans. The person said, "Isn't that just obeying the Jewish law?" They weren't supposed to charge interest - she was saying maybe they set their expectations low but God's expectations are higher.

Nehemiah was definitely a generous guy... supported 150 +, worked on the wall himself... (the last sections talks about this which we don't have time to look at today.

I think the tension is that we think once we give whatever we give to the Lord, we feel like the rest is ours - perhaps that's what these wealthy landowners thought - talk about the difference between an owner and steward

God has laid out a system that if we followed it... example if everyone tithed... for example Jubilee... (vs. generational wealth)

Key Lessons from Nehemiah's Response:

1. Get Angry (Verses 6-7):

Nehemiah's reaction is crucial. He didn't suppress his emotions but directed them constructively. He pondered the situation and then acted.

- Application for Us: Think about how we respond to injustice. Do we feel righteous anger towards unfair treatment around us? Are we honest with our emotions? Nehemiah teaches us to channel our anger into constructive actions that align with God's justice.

2. Get Praying (Verse 7):

After becoming angry, Nehemiah didn't act impulsively. He took time to pray and seek God's guidance. Prayer was integral to his leadership, ensuring his response was guided by God's wisdom. He knew the importance of seeking God's direction before acting.

- Application for Us: In moments of crisis or injustice, do we stop to pray and seek God's guidance? Imagine how different our responses would be if we always prayed before acting. Nehemiah's example shows us the power of combining our head and heart in prayer, asking God for wisdom and direction.

3. Get Involved (Verses 7-13):

Nehemiah courageously confronted the wealthy Jews, urging them to stop exploiting their fellow Jews. He called a public meeting, addressing the issue directly, leading to communal

repentance and renewed unity. Application for Us: Do we have the courage to confront injustice within our community? Are we willing to take risks to ensure fairness and unity? Nehemiah's actions remind us that addressing internal issues head-on, with love and truth, is essential for maintaining unity and integrity in our community.

Practical Applications:

1. Expect Problems in the Church:
 - No community is perfect; we are all a work in progress. Like a hospital, the church is a place for healing and growth, not a country club for the perfect.
2. Confront Problems Courageously:
 - Speak the truth in love. Ignoring problems allows them to grow deeper roots, leading to bitter fruit. Confronting issues head-on helps maintain the health and unity of the community.
3. Maintain Integrity:
 - Like Nehemiah, our actions should reflect generosity and fairness. We should strive to be generous, support one another, and ensure that our behavior aligns with God's principles.

Communion:

Servers come forward

As we prepare for communion, let's reflect on how we can embody what we talked about - righteous anger, prayer before action and caring enough to confront.

And let us remember that although Nehemiah was a great leader and great example, our ultimate example is Jesus.

Jesus addressed our own internal problem - sin...

Jesus confronted sin and us head on - while we were sinners...

God got involved - incarnation

Communion we celebrate the joy that comes from Jesus' victory over sin and death

Open table

Body broken for us

Blood shed for us

Benediction:

May we be motivated by love, guided by prayer and controlled by truth, and all for the glory of God. Amen.