



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for June 19, 2022
“Lessons in Leadership: Offering Prayer”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Nehemiah 1:5-11

Rebuilding the Wall

On face value, building a wall around the city of Jerusalem would seem to be no big deal. If you see the wall that now stands there you would soon realize just what a big deal it was. To re-construct that wall in a mere fifty-two days was nothing short of miraculous.

While visiting the Holy Land a few years back, Cheryl and I, on a couple occasions, ran along the perimeter of the Old City. It was almost surreal. I couldn't believe we were running along that wall. The wall there is massive. The stones seem to reach to the sky. Even with the benefit of today's heavy equipment, rebuilding the wall around the Old City would have been a big deal.

Rebuilding the wall was certainly a matter for prayer and Nehemiah realized that. Our scripture for today is Nehemiah 1:5-11. It contains the prayer Nehemiah prayed as he sought God's leadership in rebuilding the walls.

Nehemiah 1:5-11

Then I said:

“LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

Three Important Lessons in Leadership

As we talked last week the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem fell to Nehemiah. Like Esther, it was a “*for a time such as this*” sort of thing. Nehemiah saw a need and wanted to do everything in his power to meet it. He burned with a passion not only for rebuilding the wall, but for the people the wall would protect.

Above all things, he wanted to be well-connected to God.

These three:

- Seeing the need
- Acting with passion
- And connecting with God

form the first three building blocks of what it means to be a leader, God’s way.

A Leader in Every Sense of the Word

If you remember from last week, the Southern Kingdom of Judah along with Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. You will also remember that we mentioned that over time the Persians conquered the Babylonians and took a more favorable view toward the Jews. The Jews were even allowed to return to their homeland.

We also noted that Nehemiah, an official in the court of the Persian king, Artaxerxes had heard about the plight of those Jews who had already returned. The walls in Jerusalem lay in ruin, and because of that the city was subject to attack.

Nehemiah would not stand idly by. It was just in him to step up and step out. Nehemiah was a leader in every sense of the word.

Committed to Prayer

The scripture reports that Nehemiah was so burdened by the needs of those in Jerusalem that he committed himself to a season of “*prayer and fasting*.” Nehemiah 1:5-11 is one of the prayers he prayed. The fact that Nehemiah was so committed to prayer reflects the kind of leader he was.

Nehemiah didn’t dare strike out without first seeking the Lord. He wanted to be careful not to get ahead of the Lord, which is something we do all the time. We are famous for getting the cart before the horse.

We get an idea. We do our planning. We even begin to execute that plan. Only then do we think to ask God for his blessings for what we are about to do.

What we **should** do is start with prayer, end with prayer, and stay at our prayers everywhere in between.

Nehemiah did just that. He was the kind of leader whose every desire was to stay connected to God through prayer. The prayer Nehemiah prays in Nehemiah 1:5-11 offers a glimpse into his heart. We also find in that prayer a few more of those *“lessons in leadership”* we’ve been talking about. Let’s then take a close at what Nehemiah prays.

Recognizing the Character of God

First, Nehemiah was quick to recognize the character of God. He recognized God as the *“God of heaven, great and awesome”* in every way. Nehemiah was quick to praise the Lord. He recognized how great God was and, by so doing, emerged with a greater confidence about what God was about to do through him.

Because Nehemiah prayed, the task of approaching Artaxerxes for permission to rebuild the walls in Jerusalem would be less daunting. His focus would be on God’s power and not so much the power of the king.

Because he prayed Nehemiah would be well-assured that God’s strength would see him through. You have heard it said, *“There’s nothing that you and the Lord can’t accomplish.”* That sort of confidence comes for those who commit themselves to God through prayer.

The prayer Nehemiah prayed was marked by a supreme confidence in God’s love and God’s every desire to make good on his promises. Nehemiah was confident about that, which gave him courage for the road ahead.

He prayed to the *“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments.”*

That reads a lot like what Paul writes in Romans 8:28, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.”*

Last week during Vacation Bible School we talked a lot about such things, particularly in talking about the life of Joseph. No matter what was thrown at him, Joseph always seemed to land on his feet. During Bible School we talked about God being in control and how he is always working on our behalf.

In the end, we quoted that great passage from Genesis 50:20, *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.”*

To be confident in God’s love and ability to act on our behalf can strengthen us to no end.

Recognizing the Need for Forgiveness

Nehemiah not only recognized God’s character but recognized the need for forgiveness.

We should not be surprised that this great leader was quick to seek forgiveness, not only for his sins, but for the sins of the people. For years the prophets had warned Judah that unless they changed their ways doom would follow. For the most part, the people didn't listen.

They were so full of themselves. They were blinded by their selfishness. There were at "ease in Zion," literally and figuratively. All along the prophets had called them to repentance. The people though in their stubbornness saw no reason to change. The Prophet Jeremiah called them "a stiff-necked" people. There was no way they were going to turn.

Following the exile though their hearts were much more malleable. They had seen the error of their ways and were more open to making the changes they needed to make. In a word, they were humbled. They realized they needed forgiveness and sought the only one who could ultimately give it.

How interesting that a discussion about leadership leads us to talking about such things as humility, confession, and forgiveness. When we think of leaders, we usually don't think about them being contrite, much less ready to confess their shortcomings. Nehemiah, though, offers the example of a leader who lays his pride aside. For him, getting the heart right is of utmost importance.

A true leader recognizes that you don't have to have it all together to be a leader. You just need to be aware of your shortcomings and be open to doing something about them. Seeking forgiveness is a good first step.

King David had to come to terms with that in regard to his own life and leadership. Only by experiencing the love and forgiveness of God was David able to go on and be the sort of leader God wanted him to be all along.

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." (Psalm 51:1-2)

Let's face it, we all walk on "feet of clay," including those in leadership. How we deal with that is what's important. Nehemiah knew that he had better come clean before he ever stepped out.

"Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant," he prayed, and this as he sought forgiveness not only for his sins, but the sins of the people. We would do well to follow Nehemiah's example and seek God's forgiveness as well.

Recognizing the Need for Help

In the end, Nehemiah also recognized his need for God's help.

I have found from personal experience that contrition and humility go hand in hand. The two lead us to recognize our need for God and that we are simply unable to go it alone.

I don't know about you but that really rings true for me. I lean on God every day. I have learned to go to God and do so regularly. It is only in his strength that I am able to persevere.

Nehemiah knew that what he was about to undertake was such a big deal that if he was to accomplish it, it would come only by the help and strength of God.

"Let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and grant him success," he prayed.

There is a lot of talk these days about what success looks like. A lot of people define it by the accumulation of money, others by the power they wield, and still others by the notoriety they gain. For those who follow God, success might very well be defined as that which gives acclaim to God. After all, for the faithful, isn't that our primary aim?

Nehemiah knew that when it came down to it, the success of what he was trying to do depended a lot more on God and a lot less on him, which was the primary reason for him seeking God in the first place.

A true leader, one in the mold of Nehemiah, is never shy about asking for God's help. A leader who asks for God's help is well-aware that if there is any gain it is because God made it come to pass. Seeking God's help is another one of those building blocks of Godly leadership we'd do well to employ.

Got to Start Somewhere

Our passage for today ends rather curiously. Nehemiah states, *"I was cupbearer to the king."*

When it came to him exercising his leadership, Nehemiah started where he was and moved on from there. He was content to make the best of his situation, leveraging it the best he could. He would take one step at a time, while trusting God all along and the prayers he prayed helped him do that.

With each step Nehemiah remained deeply committed to God by:

- Recognizing the character of God
- Understanding the need for forgiveness
- And looking to God for help.

These things are lessons in leadership Nehemiah practice and are lessons we'd do well to practice as well.