



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for June 12, 2022
“Lessons in Leadership: Seeing the Need”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Nehemiah 1:1-4

Leadership Makes the Difference

The war in the Ukraine has distressed us all. We have been heartened though by the resolve of the people there in meeting the onslaught of the Russian army. Their resolve feeds off the resolve of their president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Zelenskyy has stood strong in the mix of it all. He has proven himself to be a leader among leaders. Some have likened him to Winston Churchill during World War II.

Zelenskyy is an actor and comedian turned president. There is no turning this guy back. His leadership is no laughing matter. He is inspirational to no end. He is living proof that leadership makes the difference.

Lessons in Leadership

This morning and throughout the summer we will be considering a leader just as inspirational. We begin a new sermon series today based on the life and ministry of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a leader in every sense of the word, including taking seriously his relationship with God.

Among other things, Nehemiah spearheaded an important building project. It came to him to re-build the walls that surrounded Jerusalem. Under Nehemiah’s leadership those walls were re-built in an astonishing 52 days. While all construction projects seem to take longer than first thought, this one was the exception.

As we consider the leadership of Nehemiah, we will find certain lessons emerging, lessons in leadership, if you will. These lessons will function like building blocks, much like the stones used to restore the wall around Jerusalem. Each one will build upon the other, offering a comprehensive picture of what it means to lead God’s way.

Today, we consider what it means to see a need and meet it. Our scripture for today is Nehemiah 1:1-4. Let’s read it just now.

Nehemiah 1:1-4

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

A Bit of Historical Background

Nehemiah served as “*Cupbearer to the King*” under the Persian ruler Artaxerxes in the fifth century B.C. That was roughly a hundred years after the nation of Judah and the holy city of Jerusalem were overcome by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The people were not only overcome but exiled to Babylon.

Eventually, the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians in 539 B.C., whereupon Artaxerxes gave his permission for the Hebrews to return home. There were a couple of waves of returnees. One of those was under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445 B. C.

As “*Cupbearer to the King*,” Nehemiah had access to Artaxerxes, and he leveraged that access to benefit of God’s Kingdom. All of us would do well to look for ways to leverage the influence we have to the benefit of God’s Kingdom. Each of us are “*influencers*.” Some don’t realize it. Some don’t care to do anything about it.

Nehemiah had heard that the walls that surrounded Jerusalem had not been re-built. The temple had been re-built, but not the walls. The people were sitting ducks for any who took a notion to attack them. The scripture reports that Nehemiah was approached by his brother and some others who came from Judah to share that those who had survived the exile and were now back in Judah were in great trouble and disgrace.

“The wall of Jerusalem was broken down, and its gates burned with fire.”

Upon hearing this, Nehemiah took it upon himself to make things right. He approached Artaxerxes and asked for permission to return home and get to work.

Seeing the Need

Nehemiah was a leader in every sense of the word. Nehemiah was all about seeing a need and meeting it. He wasn’t content to wait for somebody else to step up. He took it upon himself to meet whatever the challenge head-on.

I remember early in my ministry, while an Associate Pastor at Saint Paul, hearing Dr. Emil McAdams, who was Senior Pastor at the time, saying, “*We are all about seeing a need and meeting it.*” That has stuck with me big time. I can’t tell you how many times I have repeated that, and how often that has guided my ministry.

Let’s face it, there are all sorts of needs around us. We can’t sit idly by and expect someone else to step forward and be counted. Just knowing about a need is not enough. Leadership is a matter of follow through. The needs around us will remain unless we step up and step out. It’s all about exercising leadership.

I am thankful that many of you are indeed stepping up and stepping out. I am proud of the work you are doing at Highpoint Ministries, The Grace and Glory Food Bank, Grace Kids, Hope Health, Prodigal Ministries, The Portland Promise Center, and Lighthouse Ministries.

That’s only a short list of the ways you have seen a need and have tried to meet it.

My friend, Larry Stoess, is a great example of stepping up and stepping out. He has labored in the Portland Neighborhood for the last 25 years. The last ten years or so he has acted upon a vision for a different sort of church in that area.

The place where they meet is a converted warehouse. It features a worship space, a spot for their vibrant recovery ministry, an office for their community development efforts, and a restaurant where people are only asked to pay what they can.

It hasn't always been easy, but Larry has persevered to the point of inspiring us all. I am so proud of his leadership. Larry is a shining example of seeing a need and meeting it.

So then, these two questions:

- What are the needs around you?
- And what are you doing to meet them?

Acting with Passion

The scripture reports that upon hearing the distress of those in Jerusalem, Nehemiah "*sat down and wept.*" His heart broke for the people of Jerusalem. Their plight didn't go in one ear and out the other.

Regrettably, that sort of thing happens all the time when it comes to hearing about the plight of others around us. There is so much need these days, we almost get numb to it. There are times when we all would rather ignore than get involved. When it comes to tending to the needs of others a certain fatigue can set in. We'll even talk ourselves into thinking we have done enough when, in fact, there is always more we can do.

Leaders don't keep the needs of this world at arm's length. Leaders allow themselves to feel the pain of other people and seek to walk alongside them. When was the last time you wept over the circumstance of another person?

Collectively, we have all wept over the senseless killing of nineteen school children and two teachers at the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. Those tears push us to do something. Tears are a gift from God. They help us express what we wouldn't have been able to do otherwise.

Again, Nehemiah writes that he "*sat down and wept,*" which then led him to action. There have been those circumstances for us all where we have felt things so deeply that we could do no other but help. It's interesting to be having this conversation about tears in the mix of a discussion about leadership. Tears can express a full range of emotions, including our passion about something. They can certainly lead us to do something about what brought us to tears in the first place.

How about these two questions:

- What causes your heart to burn?
- And what are you doing about it?

Committing Ourselves to God

It is clear from scripture that Nehemiah not only sensed a need and was passionate about meeting it but was quick to turn to God for **his** leadership.

The scripture reports that Nehemiah “*prayed*” for days seeking the Lord’s counsel before acting.

We don’t dare strike out on our own without first consulting God.

- God’s wisdom will inform us about how to proceed.
- His guidance will set us in the right direction.
- His strength will give us the wherewithal to persevere.

When it comes to leadership, we are so much more effective when we lean on God.

I get the sense that this was the way it was for Nehemiah. He didn’t dare strike out with first consulting God.

You have heard it said, “*Dream dreams that are so big that only you and God can accomplish them.*”

That’s the way it was for Nehemiah. He did nothing without first consulting God. We would do well to follow his lead. The seeming impossible things of this life become possible when we first commit ourselves to God.

- When we resolve to be obedient.
- When we put God’s interests before our own.
- And when we seek to trust him above all, great things will take place.

Being well-committed to God is yet another one of the building blocks of leadership we would do well to make a part of our lives. In fact, being well-committed to God stands front and center, first and foremost.

Lessons in Leadership

Seeing the need, acting with passion, and committing ourselves to God--these are lessons in leadership we need to learn.

Let’s get to it.