

*Nehemiah 2:1-6, 11, 15, 17-20*  
*used for Pentecost 24-C-2021*  
*"The Walls & BEYOND the Walls"*  
*Rev. Randy Smith*

Nehemiah surely must be **one of the unsung heroes** of our Christian OT. I guess up against the backdrop of a Moses, who parts the Sea, or an Elijah, who stops the rain for 3 years, or a Joshua who stops the sun (scientists now say this was just a solar eclipse), Nehemiah's accomplishment might be seen to pale in comparison. But, in actual fact, it was **big**.

A little historical and geographical orientation is in order. First, we are reading from a story this morning of events which occurred in the second half of the 5th-c. (400s) BC. The story begins in the city of **Susa**, capital of ancient Persia (modern day Iran), during the reign of Artaxerxes I, where we find Nehemiah -- a Jew born in Persia in the period of the **Great Exile**, which began with the destruction of Jerusalem (and the Temple of Solomon) in 587 BC. When Nehemiah hears that the city -- a century later -- is still in ruins, he finds the news **heart-rending**.

He immediately **prays**, reminding God of the Covenant relationship God made with Israel, and asking God for success in what Nehemiah **knows** he **must** now do: he must return to the home of his ancestors, and he must rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His **real purpose**, however, goes far beyond the *architectural* and the *structural*: Nehemiah's *real* purpose is to **rebuild the whole people of Israel** who have now, for too long, been a *scattered* people, **devastated by their past**, and in need of a **viable future**. He wants to give them a **city** into which they may **regather**, and so **reclaim** their **identity** as the Covenant Missionary People of God, and begin again -- *now* with **renewed integrity and strength** -- their Mission in the life of the world, as a *set-apart* people, called to **witness** before others as to *who* God is, and *how* God desires all peoples to live together.

But, first, Nehemiah must gain the permission and support of the king, whom he serves in a high-status position called "**cup-bearer**". This is, by the way, being more than the king's sommelier: it also means you take the first sip of the cup to be sure it has not been poisoned! As a trusted member of the royal household, Nehemiah receives the king's blessing on his mission, and heads west on a roughly 900 mile/3 month journey to Jerusalem, which is where we are in the reading from c. 2 this morning.

On arriving, Nehemiah discovers the situation is **worse than he'd imagined**, not only with the city's walls, but even more with the **variety** of people (including the king's own officials!) who -- over the last century -- had moved into Jerusalem and had come to call the place home, *none* of whom were happy to see that the

king had sent Nehemiah to rebuild, and then to take over the administration of the place. It gets so bad that, when construction does begin, the work has to proceed under armed guard.

The task itself was daunting enough, of course, without these issues. It is impossible to know much *about* the wall Nehemiah led in the rebuilding of, but it has been reliably estimated that it extended 1.7 miles, included 10 gates and 8 towers, and enclosed the original "City of David" and the Temple Mount. Keep in mind: it was a task which **had never even been considered**, even by the faithful Jews still living in and around the city, for well over a hundred years. Nehemiah's **first step**, then, has nothing to do with money or building materials, but rather had to do with **convincing** the people that it was something which could be done **at all**. His winning point appears to have been his testifying to them that he had seen the **hand of God** in it from the beginning.

Maybe that was all it took to **remind** the people of what they had forgotten, namely, that they were not just any people, but that they were God's people, and that they were not in the world simply trying to *survive*, or to *pursue their own* purposes, but *rather* to carry out **the mission** God had called them into being as a people to accomplish. We human beings are simply **at our best** when we have a mission -- a purpose -- to come together around, and *work together* to achieve. Otherwise, we end up, in the final analysis, living only to satisfy ourselves and -- no matter how successful we might be in pursuing that lifestyle, the meaningfulness of that way of life often just evaporates. Cf. "law of diminishing returns".

In any case, when Nehemiah made his case before the people, they said, "Let us start building!" And then Nehemiah -- still narrating the story in the first-person -- says, '**So they committed themselves to the common good**'."

I was **struck** hard by this one line from the story. It is Nehemiah's conclusion about the *nature* of the **fundamental turn** his fellow Jews made in the face of their very difficult challenge. What Nehemiah says here strike me as a very **contemporary diagnosis** of perhaps the central ill our *American* society, or maybe the whole of *world* society, is suffering from, namely the *inability*, and/or the *unwillingness*, to identify what "the common good" **is**, and then -- to some degree or another, in some way or another -- make **individual sacrifices** in order to **achieve** that good which really **is** good for **all**.

Because that **is** what happens in the next chapter of the Book, c. 3. People of **every** kind, from the priests and Levites, to perfumers, to goldsmiths and merchants, all of the people -- **diverse** in backgrounds and skills, **diverse** in wealth and possessions -- made themselves a part of the effort, **found** a way to contribute. They sacrificed their financial resources, their time and labor, and *even* their **security** -- being, as they were, under threat of attack the whole time! The

list of people, and the contributions they made to the rebuilding project is just stunning. If you don't believe me, read Neh. 3 for yourself, but instead of the scores of ancient Hebrew names, substitute the names of St. Matthew people – not forgetting to include yourself somewhere in the list! E.g.,

**NEHEMIAH 3:1** Then the high priests, Randy and Chrisie, set to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate...And next to them, Josh, son of Chris & Maya built...The sons of Cari & Cam Treece built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. 4 Next to them Mark, son of Bill & Gay Swilley, and Andrew & Meredith Coln, son [in-law] and daughter of Mark & Kathy Swilley, made repairs. Next to them Burns, son of Hugh & Sue Edmonds, made repairs. Next to them Mallory & Connelly, children of Eric & Kary Mitchell, made repairs. 5 Next to them the Zweigorons made repairs...

I emphasize this response of the people **back then**, of course, because of the situation the people who are St. Matthew are facing **now**. As you've surely heard by now, we have a problem with **our** walls, too, the walls of our main worship facility which, because of how they were **mis-built** some 55 years ago, have been allowing **water** to continually **intrude** into the structure, and cause various kinds of damage. Not nearly to the extent Nehemiah found the walls of Jerusalem damaged. But in need of being rebuilt nonetheless, and at a cost -- frustratingly enough -- that the project requires the participation of everyone.

I say, "frustratingly enough" to acknowledge that I suspect there is not one of us who would not rather surrender our financial resources toward some project which, e.g., expanded our church facilities (a purpose-built non-traditional worship facility), or which enabled us to found one or more new ministry initiatives (affordable housing, or transitional housing on our church property). But, for me, I've had to come to terms with the fact that our remarkable Sanctuary, and the kind of formal worship it is designed to host, is at the heart of the guiding vision for who St. Matthew has been as a congregation since our beginning.

Which means that -- really, just like in Nehemiah's time -- repairing its walls, in a **physical** sense, is just the **first step** in achieving a *much* deeper, *much more* important **spiritual** goal of rebuilding the Church, at least the very small part of it called St. Matthew, *viz.*, renewing our sense of mission, of our **particular** mission in our community -- not just trying, i.e., to copy what other, seemingly "successful" congregations around us might be doing, but doing what is in our Methodist "DNA" to do, especially in terms of joining together our love of God and love of neighbor, our personal faith with our commitment to social reform (what John Wesley termed "spreading Scriptural holiness across the land"). Rebuilding our walls, i.e., **must** be our way of recovering a **powerful sense** of who we **are** as God's church, a sense powerful *enough* to compel our being

willing to **give** to a genuinely *sacrificial* degree to ensure **our mission** continues, and not *just* continues, but continues stronger than before.

As in Nehemiah's situation, so also in ours: rebuilding the walls cannot be allowed to become *any* sort of **end-in-itself**. Because, finally, it is BEYOND the walls, far beyond the building project which will make them sound for a hundred years, that our mission lies.

What is required in our context, then, is precisely what was required in Nehemiah's situation, namely that **everyone** decide to serve the common good, that **everyone** unite in this effort to revive St. Matthew, and that **everyone**, in making their gifts and pledges to our "BEYOND" Generosity Initiative trust -- really trust - - that their fellow participants in the life and work of St. Matthew will join with them in doing this.

Those who ventured, under Nehemiah's leadership way back when, to restore the walls of Jerusalem -- given the continual threat they faced from the many who were opposed to this effort -- had to "have each other's back". Each one up on the wall had to trust that the ones to their left and to their right were watching out for them.

And so will we.