

June 14, 2020
Nehemiah 6:1-11, 13, 15-16



Throughout the spring, the heavy rains we received washed out a piece of our yard. The water would run through our backyard, around the corner of the house, along a retaining wall by the garage, and as it flowed around the end of the retaining wall, it washed a hole into the edge of the yard. I decided, now that we have finally entered into a stretch of dry weather, to fix the hole, which meant the need to build another retaining wall, so I could fill the hole with dirt.

Here is one of the bricks I am using. It's not a large hole, so I only need 18 of these landscaping bricks. Sounds easy, doesn't it? Well, for someone like me, who is not very good at building, it is not. I have spent a lot of time trying to get the bricks level – level from side to side and level from front to back. I also need to cut one of these bricks in half, so I can lay them in a staggered format. I'm a bit worried about trying to cut one in half, as I fear I will shatter it.

All this to say, I find it remarkable that Nehemiah – the Old Testament prophet we've been studying for four weeks – was able to lead a group of workers to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. It wasn't just rebuilding the wall of a city that had been destroyed, although that was a challenge in and of itself. For Nehemiah, the challenges were far greater than simply rebuilding the wall. Nehemiah had, for one, very few resources on hand. Not only was he short of resources, he also faced

serious opposition. Some of the neighbors were not happy about the prospect of Jerusalem being restored to its former status, so they threatened attack. The workers, then, did *their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other* (Nehemiah 4:17). But those were not the only challenges. As we will see in a moment, when I read this morning's Scripture passage, Nehemiah faced further challenges, challenges of intimidation, false accusations, and threats against his life. In spite of those challenges, the wall was rebuilt in 52 days. 52 days! I may still be working on my little brick retaining wall in 52 days!

How do you face a challenge, especially one that was as complicated as was Nehemiah's? One brick at a time. When we encounter a difficult stretch in life, we remind ourselves to move forward *one day at a time*, or even *one step at a time*. Tackling a formidable task is best done one small step at a time, or as in Nehemiah's case, *One Brick At a Time*.

Follow along as I read from Nehemiah 6:1-11, 13, 15-16 –

¹*When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it...*

²*Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me;*

³*so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"*

⁴*Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer.*

⁵*Then, the fifth time, Sanballat sent his aide to me with the same message, and in his hand was an unsealed letter*

⁶*in which was written: "It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king*

⁷ and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.”

⁸ I sent him this reply: “Nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head.”

⁹ They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

¹⁰ One day I went to the house of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, the son of Mehetabel, who was shut in at his home. He said, “Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, and let us close the temple doors, because men are coming to kill you—by night they are coming to kill you.”

¹¹ But I said, “Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!”

¹³ He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

¹⁵ So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.

¹⁶ When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.

An interesting fact about a brick, is this – a brick can make a wall, but that wall can communicate more than one purpose. A wall can communicate a message that is either positive or negative. As a positive message, a wall can serve as a means of security and protection. A wall can, for instance, protect a city from a flood, or provide a home for a family, keeping them safe from the elements. But a wall can also communicate a negative meaning, such as exclusion – *you are not welcome here. You are not wanted. You are not like us.*

Let’s take a look at what Nehemiah encountered in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, and we will see how his encounters carried both positive and negative messages.

1. *Fear.*

Although we generally consider fear to be negative, that is not always so. We want, for example, our young children to have a healthy fear of a hot stove top, or a busy street. Instilling in them a healthy fear provides a measure of protection against what can cause harm.

But fear can be very negative as well. Throughout history, people have found that trafficking in fear can be one of the most effective weapons in the playbook of power, and it is still used that way today. People who are in power, or desire power, play upon the fear of the *other*, that is, those who are different from us. They portray those who are different as a threat to our security or to our way of life.

In verse 9 Nehemiah says *they were all trying to frighten us*. The opponents of Nehemiah believed they could frighten and intimidate him, but they were wrong. Nehemiah called them out, saying *nothing like what you are saying is happening; you are just making it up out of your head*. What Nehemiah knew was this – people who traffic in fear, and who seek to use fear against others, are themselves afraid. They know that when people are no longer afraid, their source of power will quickly disintegrate. Those of my generation, for instance, could scarcely believe how quickly and suddenly the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall fell. I remember, as a very young student, the drills at school that were designed to prepare us for a nuclear attack. Even at a young age, it seemed absurd to me that a school desk could protect me against a nuclear attack, but I do remember the very palpable sense of fear. Fear was used by the Soviet leaders against those under their rule, but when people did stand up, when they decided they were no longer going to live in fear, everything changed. And how quickly it changed. All of us, as we watched the events unfold on television, could scarcely believe the pace at which such power suddenly crumbled. When the fear passed away, so did the totalitarianism.

2. *Words*

As hard as this brick is, and as damaging as it can be, our words can be more damaging. We all have used the limerick *sticks and stones can*

break my bones, but names (and words) can never hurt me. But that is a great fallacy. Words do hurt. Words do cause pain.

Nehemiah's opponents used words of falsehoods, innuendo, and insinuation against him. They accused him of insurrection, saying that he was going to proclaim himself king and had even secured prophets to proclaim him as the rightful ruler. Verses 6 and 7 tell us of these accusations – *It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: “There is a king in Judah!”*

Here is how falsehoods, insinuation, and innuendo do their work – they are sometimes very open and blunt, but more often they are used in a more insidious fashion, in order to give the person using those words a shield to hide behind. Used in such a way, the words become, as the expression goes, a dog whistle. The one who speaks the harmful and destructive words knows their intended audience will understand what is meant, but the one who speaks the words can deny their actual meaning, claiming to be misunderstood – *Oh no. That's not what I meant. You've misunderstood me. You've taken my words out of context.* But that is not true.

Speaking of words, some of the words most discussed recently, not only in our own society but around the world, are the words *Black Lives Matter*. Last Sunday, a number of us joined in the march through Shelbyville. A number of people from our church joined with hundreds of others in the march. Many of the signs carried were ones that proclaimed *Black Lives Matter*. To some, those words are controversial, but what is controversial about saying *Black Lives Matter*, especially when their lives continue to be devalued and their lives continue to be lost in senseless acts of violence? Some people will counter by saying that *all lives matter*. Of course all lives matter, but it is very important to note that saying the words *Black Lives Matter* does not mean that other lives do not matter. Insisting we say *all lives matter* is what we call a *zero-sum game*, which is the belief that lifting up one person or

one group means another person or another group must be diminished in the process. This is not at all true, however. We are in an historical moment when we must say *Black Lives Matter*, and here is why – when African-Americans have, over the generations, been forced to endure slavery, a Supreme Court decision that said they could not be citizens, discrimination enshrined in the legal system, when lynchings were used against them as an act of terror – including in our own city and our own county – when they were prohibited from voting, when they were told *you cannot go here* and *you cannot go there*, when they could not run for an office, when they could not have certain jobs, and on and on we could go, then it becomes necessary to say those lives matter, because the legacy of those words – and actions – have been so destructive. So yes, *Black Lives Matter*.

3. *Sanctuary*.

In verse 10, it is recommended that Nehemiah, for his own safety, go into the sanctuary and hide. In response, Nehemiah says, *should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!*

It would be understandable had Nehemiah sought safety and security in the sanctuary. The invitation to do so makes a lot of sense, after all. *Stay here, where it's safe. Let things blow over. Don't worry about those people out there. They can manage on their own. You stay here, Nehemiah, where you will be safe.* Sure, the people could manage; but should they have to? They needed Nehemiah. He was their leader, and what would have happened if he had chosen to leave them on their own while he sought his own safety and security?

A sanctuary is, by way of definition, a place of safety and security. Declaring *sanctuary* means to proclaim a particular place as a haven for those who are seeking safety and security. But the word *sanctuary* can also carry a dual meaning. A sanctuary can be a place of safety and security from threats, but it can also become a place in which to hide. Used in such a way, a sanctuary becomes a place to hide from the challenges of the world, the problems of the world, and the rapid and

often unsettling changes of the world. We do not come here, to this sanctuary, in order to hide from what is happening in the world. Instead, we come to worship God and to prepare ourselves for going out into the world to fulfill God's calling. Nehemiah wasn't being careless, or reckless, by refusing to enter into the sanctuary. No, Nehemiah knew that his place was out in the world, engaging the world and all of its problems and brokenness, not hiding out in a sanctuary. In our present historical moment, we cannot afford to hide in a sanctuary. The community needs our engagement, even when that engagement is very difficult.

I had a seminary professor, Dr. Gerald Borchert, who offered some of the best advice I have ever received. Dr. Borchert was my professor for several classes, but on one particular day, in my 3rd year Greek class, we gathered for class after lunch. As often happened in seminary, the class veered away from Greek to discussion about various issues in the life of ministry. While I don't remember what prompted the discussion, I vividly remember Dr. Borchert saying, *if you're going to get crucified over an issue or a cause, make sure it is on a cross and not a toothpick. There are too many people getting crucified on toothpicks. And remember, you only get crucified once.* I think that is great advice. There are some hills that are not worth dying on. Some causes and some issues are not so important. But some are, and one of those issues that rises to the level of great importance is the willingness to use a sanctuary in the proper way. A sanctuary is a place of worship and a place to lead people to engage their communities with the love of God. A sanctuary is not a place to hide from the world or escape from its problems. When a church wants to use a sanctuary as a hiding place, resisting that urge is a cause worth fighting. Nehemiah refused to hide away in the sanctuary of the temple and refused to leave his people. Even with the threat of death hanging over him, Nehemiah continued his work. The threats did not keep him from his work; in fact, they made him more committed to his work.

4. Prayer.

In verse 9 Nehemiah says *I prayed, “now strengthen my hands.”* Over the years, my prayers have changed, in terms of my requests. I still make requests of God on behalf of other people. I pray for my family and make requests of God on their behalf. I pray for each of you, and make requests of God on your behalf. For myself, however, my prayers have changed, particularly in what I request of God. Now, my prayers for myself, in terms of requests, have narrowed quite a bit. One of my few requests, for myself, is very similar to that of Nehemiah – *Lord, give me strength.* What I want from God, for myself, is to have the strength to do what I am called to do, and to be who God wants me to be.

Several years ago, when there was some controversy over the offering of *thoughts and prayers* after a tragedy, I grew frustrated with the way in which some people believed that to offer *thoughts and prayers* meant nothing else was going to be done. It was, unfortunately, another example of the either/or kind of thinking that is so prevalent in our society. To offer our *thoughts and prayers* does not at all mean no other action will be taken. In fact, our *thoughts and prayers* are very often what motivates us to take action. For Nehemiah, his prayer for strength was not a request made in isolation from real life, but one that was made to help him move more effectively into the issues and the needs of his day. If your prayers do not move us to action, they are not very good prayers.

Prayer was the source of Nehemiah’s strength. It was prayer that moved Nehemiah to conquer his fears and the fears of the people. It was prayer that enabled Nehemiah to stand against those who made false accusations against him. It was prayer that led Nehemiah to turn away from his own safety and security in order to lead the people to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and to rebuild their lives.

Let us be people of prayer as well. Let us pray for the continued strength to manage in this world that has changed so much in the past three months. Let us pray for the strength we need in this time of social upheaval, the strength that we need to challenge what needs to be challenged and changed. It won’t happen overnight, just as it didn’t happen overnight with Nehemiah and that wall. It was one brick at a

time. I know it had to be difficult and frustrating at times. The bricks were heavy, and the work was hard, but they kept at it. One brick at a time, day after day, and week after week, until they accomplished their work.

We will rebuild life one brick at a time. Life may not be the same, and some things should not be the same, but we will hope and pray, and continue to rebuild life.