

October 9, 2022

**The Bible Story Journey: Nehemiah the Governor**

Nehemiah 1-7, 12-13

As we tell the stories of Israel's return from exile, we keep coming across references to the book of Deuteronomy. For our scripture reading today, we dip into some of the laws of that book. We read Deuteronomy 23, verses 3-4 and 19-20:

*<sup>3</sup>No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, <sup>4</sup>because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.*

*<sup>19</sup>You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent. <sup>20</sup>On loans to a foreigner you may charge interest, but on loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess.*

In our telling of the story of Israel's return from exile, we have noted that not all the Jews dragged off to captivity in Babylon chose to go home when they could. Those who stayed became known as the Diaspora, or "Dispersion." These Jews were not necessarily less patriotic than those who returned to rebuild Jerusalem, though. In many cases, it was simply that in the big cities of the Persian Empire, there were more opportunities. Some Jews even rose to prominent positions in the Persian court. One of these was named Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to a king named Artaxerxes.

That may not sound like an important position – Isn't that just a glorified butler? – but it was. In those days of palace intrigues and plotting courtiers, it was crucial that the person bringing the king his wine was absolutely trustworthy. That was Nehemiah. From that position of trust, he was able to monitor the progress of his fellow Jews in Judea, even sending his brother down to see how things were going. When his brother returned, he did not have good news. "It's bad, there, brother. Rules are lax; corruption is rife; and the city looks like trash. How long is it since the first group returned? A century? The outer walls still aren't built."

Nehemiah was deeply disturbed and spent that night in agonized prayer. The next morning, at work, King Artaxerxes looked at him and said, "Nehemiah, are you in love?"

"Sir? No, sir! Why . . . why do you ask?"

"You look awful. Don't you all think Nehemiah looks lovesick? Huh. Well, what is it, then?"

Nehemiah sighed. "I've gotten word from my homeland. My home city is still a heap. It should be rebuilt by now, but it's not even close."

Artaxerxes nodded. "Huh. Well, what do you want to do about it? How can I help?"

Nehemiah blinked, muttered a quick prayer under his breath – *God, don't let me mess this up* – and said, "I'd like you send me to Judea as their governor with instructions to finish rebuilding the city."

“Huh. Well, when do you think you’ll be back?”

And that was how Nehemiah became governor of the province of Judea. First he went to Lebanon, where he delivered a letter to the king’s foresters there, requesting timbers be sent to Jerusalem at once for the project. Then he went to the other governors of the area, Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite, who governed the lands on the east side of the Jordan and presented them with his appointment letters. They weren’t happy. The Ammonites, especially, had been enemies of the Jews since the days of the Moses, and they did not like the idea of a rebuilt Jerusalem, but the man had the emperor’s seal.

Then Nehemiah rode to Jerusalem, unannounced, arriving at night. Slowly he rode around the outskirts of the city, assessing the job that he had taken on. It was bad. The piles of rubble were so thick and high that he couldn’t even ride all the way around the city. He made camp in the fields and waited until morning. When day came he rode into the center of Jerusalem, summoned all the town leaders, and presented his credentials. One offered to show him to the governor’s house, but Nehemiah said, “No time for that. We’re going to rebuild the city walls.”

As we’ll see, Nehemiah had his prickly spots. He could be harsh. But his worst enemy would have had to admit one thing: the man was a brilliant organizer. How do you get a city to give themselves to tearing down stone piles that had been there for generations and repurposing them to a seemingly impossible task? Here’s how Nehemiah went about it. He broke it down into tiny, manageable, and even attractive pieces. First he assigned the people who lived alongside where the walls would be to begin rebuilding the places near their homes. Then he approached existing communities – trade guilds, families, and so on – and challenged them to work together on other small sections. Piece by piece, the wall began to take shape, and the task seemed slightly less impossible. People from nearby villages began to notice. Volunteers arrived from the village of Tekoa, just outside Jerusalem. Nehemiah asked to speak to their village headmen, but they said, “They weren’t interested in helping, so we came without them.”

“I need more people like you,” Nehemiah said. “Here’s a challenging section for you.”

Nehemiah also saw that the work went on evenly: that is, one layer all the way around the city at a time. This is, no doubt, just good construction practice – you don’t build a brick in layers – but it was also psychologically effective. Soon, people could see the outline of the wall, where it would be and, with the eternal fascination of watching a construction project, began to gather around the work groups. Then join in. And everywhere, there was Nehemiah, bending his back to the work alongside the laborers. The men of Tekoa finished their section and hunted down Nehemiah. “Now whatcha got? How about something hard this time?” In short, Nehemiah brought the city together as a single community sharing a task for the common good. Nehemiah chapter 3, describing the process, is not necessarily gripping reading, but it’s worth the effort. It’s a clinic on leadership. Nehemiah writes, “So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height; for the people had a mind to work.”

Meanwhile, Sanballat and Tobiah were furious. They hadn’t liked it when Nehemiah told them his assignment, but at least they’d had the comfort of knowing that no one could possibly succeed at such a task. When they saw the wall’s progress, they hated Nehemiah still more. They gathered a militia and prepared an attack, but by that time the whole countryside was behind Nehemiah, and so Nehemiah got word of the plan. He chose some men to serve as guards,

established rendezvous points for everyone to retreat to at the sound of a trumpet, issued swords to all the workers, and kept on building. Sanballat and Tobiah disbanded the militias. Next they sent messengers to Nehemiah, inviting him to a special gubernatorial summit meeting at a location outside of Jerusalem. Nehemiah said, “Do they think I’m an idiot, then? Tell them I appreciate their invitation, but I’m very busy right now.” In this way, the wall was completed.

Of course as governor, Nehemiah had more tasks than building. As it happened, there had been several bad years for the farmers, and they’d had to borrow money to stay afloat. Shortly after finishing the wall, a group of these came to him for help. “We had to borrow money, sir, but the interest is so steep that all our work is just going to pay interest, and we can’t get ahead.”

“Just a moment,” Nehemiah said. “Did you say interest?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I see. Please give my brother the names of your creditors, and I’ll speak with them.” When they were gone, Nehemiah sent his brother to summon the lenders while he checked the scroll of the law: *On loans to another Israelite you may not charge interest, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings in the land that you are about to enter and possess.*

The lenders arrived, and Nehemiah got right to the point. “I hear you’ve been charging exorbitant interest to the farmers. That has to stop. God has brought us back to our nation, delivered us from slavery to the Gentiles. But you have made them slaves to debt.”

“Your Excellency, we didn’t force them to borrow from us.”

“And the interest?”

“Well, how else are we to make a profit?”

Nehemiah said, “Have I ever said or done anything to imply to you that I give a rat’s tail whether you can make a profit?”

“Sir, if we cannot charge interest, we shall have to stop offering the help at all.”

“I thought of that, and that’s why my brothers and I are opening a new lending house, supported by the province, that will offer zero-interest loans to people in distress.” Nehemiah smiled. “That’s right. I’m putting you out of business.”

“Your Excellency, perhaps we were hasty,” the men said. “Surely we can make a deal.”

“Indeed we can,” said Nehemiah. “Here’s the deal. You return to your debtors all the interest that you took from them in violation of the Law of Moses, and for my part I won’t have you dragged before the entire congregation, stripped naked, and flogged. That’s my best offer. Is it a deal?”

He had a forceful personality, you could say. Unfortunately, things enforced by personality alone don’t always last. Nehemiah returned to the Persian court after a time, as he had promised, and the old patterns of lax observance of the law and government corruption promptly filled the vacuum of his absence. So, when he came back a few years later for a second term as governor he had to start all over. For example, he found that Jerusalemites were not observing the Sabbath, but were buying and selling in the marketplace on the day of rest. “But

what can we do?” the city officials asked, wringing their hands. “The merchants aren’t Jews and don’t have to obey the Law. They bring their wares from out of town.”

“Are you idiots?” Nehemiah asked. “We built a wall! Shut the gates on Friday night.”

Or, again, like Ezra the Scribe in his own time, Nehemiah found that Jews were intermarrying with non-Jews. Some had even married into the family of his old enemy Tobiah the Ammonite. Nehemiah describes his response to this news in this way: “I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, ‘You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves.’”

As you may have noticed, much of the story of Nehemiah in the Bible is told by Nehemiah himself, which is unusual for scripture. But hearing his own voice gives us a deeper insight into the personality of the man, so that we are able to say, “No, he wasn’t an old softy on the inside, either.” He was just a hard man. Compassion-challenged, I would say. Even his crackdown on predatory lenders doesn’t seem to be out of concern for the oppressed so much as for rigorous enforcement of the law. It was just a good thing that the Law of Moses cares about the poor. But for all that, what a man he was: a man of deep commitment to God, incredible leadership gifts, and unimpeachable integrity. Pick and choose what you learn from him, maybe, but there’s a lot there to learn.

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Final word: The Book of Leviticus says, “You shall be holy, as the Lord your God is holy.” In Luke 6, Jesus says, “You shall be merciful, as your Father is merciful.” It’s apparently possible to be both, since God is, but it’s not always easy. Holiness involves separation from defilement, maintaining difference, building barriers to corruption, self-quarantine; mercy involves reaching across barriers, making connections without regard to difference. We Christians have both tasks, but as a general rule, we tend to lean in one direction or another. Our own denomination – the United Methodist Church – is on the verge of dividing, and you could describe the two sides as being the holiness and the mercy factions. I, and this church historically, have tended toward mercy, inclusion, breaking down barriers. Over the past couple of weeks, in the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah, we have seen two examples of the other perspective, men intent on building walls, both figurative and literal. And yet they are undeniably, utterly devoted to God. Over the next few years, which will be hard for our Church, remember that those on the other side are not the enemy. They are people who have chosen a different, and harsher, path up the same mountain we are climbing. But, you might be asking, was everyone like Ezra and Nehemiah? Were there no voices for compassion and welcome and inclusion in post-Exilic Israel? Next week.