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Generous Disciples Nehemiah/Malachi

So, our magnificent Clerk of Session, Judy Kuehn, recently went on a vacation to Hawaii with her 90-year-old mom, Vivian. There was one thing Vivian really wanted to do. Any guesses? Well, I have a few pictures. Parasailing! Judy's 90 year old mom wanted to parasail off the Kona coast. How awesome is that! Judy looked like she was having a great time, too!

This is what we've been doing for the last five months—soaring high above the Bible, surveying the big themes, the main characters... trying to understand the enormity and unity of God's story. Amazingly, we now come to the end of the Old Testament. This week, you will read Nehemiah, one of my favorite books in the Bible. So this morning's message will serve as a conclusion to the first half of the Story, and a kick off to a brief Lenten series on a topic that is one of the most Christ-like qualities a disciple can possess... or not possess: generosity.

Cyndi and I have some great new neighbors. They bought a rundown house, tore it down, and are building a new home. But early on in the project, thieves broke in and stole \$1000 worth of tools. Guess what our new neighbors did the next week? Built a fence with a locking gate! Even though they were making progress with their new home, it wasn't secure and something had to be done about it.

That is exactly the situation we discover in Nehemiah. Remember, God called 50,000 exiled Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild his temple. It took 20 years, but finally, the work was done, and the worship of Yahweh had resumed. But the people still had a big issue—a security issue.

Onto the stage walks Nehemiah. Like Daniel and Esther and others, Nehemiah was a Jew who rose to prominence in captivity. He was the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes, a position of the highest trust. His job was to taste the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned. While serving in that capacity, Nehemiah receives a visit from his brother Hanani who travels from Jerusalem with terrible news:
^{1,3} "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."

Just like my neighbor's situation! The house of the Lord was built, the city of Jerusalem had retaken its place of importance, but a city without walls and gates

was like a neon sign saying, “Plunderers and pillagers are welcome! Steal whatever you want!”

The rest of Nehemiah is the story of how this courageous man of prayer traveled to Jerusalem, assessed the situation, rallied a group of committed leaders and, against violent opposition, succeeded in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. If you travel with me to Israel, I will take you to a spot where we can look at a section of Nehemiah’s wall today... still standing after 2500 years!

Nehemiah is such a great story; it’s hard to pick one passage to preach from. So I’m going to pick the passage that most preachers hate to preach. In fact, you won’t even find it in “The Story”... Nehemiah chapter 3. At first glance, chapter 3 looks completely boring! Just a long list of names... names of clans who worked together to rebuild the wall. But I think it’s fascinating! Let’s read the first few verses:

¹Eliashib the high priest and his fellow priests went to work and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set its doors in place, building as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and as far as the Tower of Hananel. ²The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zaccur son of Imri built next to them. ³The Fish Gate was rebuilt by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid its beams and put its doors and bolts and bars in place. ⁴Meremoth son of Uriah, the son of Hakkoz, repaired the next section. Next to him Meshullam son of Berekiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs, and next to him Zadok son of Baana also made repairs.

The whole chapter reads this way. Do you see how some might consider this boring? A list of tongue-twisters: Hasenaah, Meshullam, Hashabneiah, Hashabiah, Maaseiah... who cares about a long list of unpronounceable names? But if you look closer, you uncover wonderful hints that tell us something more than just the names of the families at work.

Verse 1: Eliashib the high priest is the first guy mentioned—the spiritual leader of this community led by example; he wasn’t afraid to get his fingers smashed. Verse 8. One section was repaired by Harhaiah, a goldsmith, and the next section by Hananiah, a perfume-maker. When you think of professions that employ burly men who could lift huge rocks into place... goldsmith and the perfume-maker don’t come to mind. But I’ll bet theirs were the most beautiful sections in the wall.

Shallum apparently had a family full of girls, but that didn’t stop them from doing their part: ¹²“Shallum son of Hallohesh... repaired the next section with the help of his daughters.” In verse 14, we are told that Malkijah’s family rebuilt the Dung Gate. The Dung Gate was just what it sounded like—the opening in the wall where they carried out the sewage and the garbage. It was the stinkiest part of the city! If you were picking the gate that you wanted to spend months rebuilding, you’d choose any place but the Dung Gate! But Malkijah said, “Someone’s got to do it!

Give us the Dung Gate!" And Baruch was the classic overachiever. Verse 20: "...Baruch son of Zabbai zealously repaired another section..." He was like Bart Brynstad on a Mexico build; their team was always done first!

In total, 41 different names or groups are mentioned—41 leaders and their clans who put up the money to provide the materials and who put in the sweat to rebuild that wall. So here's my question for you: Why do we have chapter 3? Why did the Holy Spirit preserve this long list of names to be a part of sacred scripture? Because, every person mattered—whether burly or wimpy, skilled or unskilled, male or female... all of them were invited to play a part in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

But there is more to it. How many Jews returned from Babylon? 50,000! It is reasonable to expect that over the years, their numbers had grown. So think about it—more than 50,000 Jews living in and around Jerusalem and how many stepped up to rebuild the walls? 41 leaders and their clans, which means that tens of thousands of God's people did not help rebuild the walls... did not participate. They stood back, watched those who were sacrificing and working, and said, "Good job. You just keep building that wall. Thanks!"

How many observers were there? We don't know, but we know some of them: ⁵"The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa, but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors."

The nobles of the village of Tekoa refused to get their hands dirty. Maybe they thought hard work beneath them, or maybe they were too stingy to invest in their share of the wall. We don't know, but they are forever memorialized as the snobs who stood back and watched while others did their share of the work. In fact, in verse 27, we read this: "...the men of Tekoa repaired another section..." When they were finished with their assignment, they took on another part of the wall... perhaps to put to shame their deadbeat leaders who refused to participate.

The story of Nehemiah is about a group of people who caught a vision for rebuilding the broken walls of their city, stepped up, sacrificed and—working together, side by side—restored the honor of the city. The book of Nehemiah is also about those who stood back, who chose not to sacrifice, who gladly let others do the work... and who, in some cases, even mocked the ones who were doing God's work.

So what does this say to us today? As I prayed about what the Lord wanted me to teach, here is what I heard: "I want you to talk about generosity. I want you to teach my people what it means to be a generous disciples—who does their part, who gives to me and serves me sacrificially." Candidly, I was not thrilled. There was a time—for the first twenty years of my ministry here—when every November we would have a stewardship campaign. I would preach, and people would be asked to pledge to the work of the Lord here at Chapel Hill. I used to be pretty courageous about it.

But over the years, I got tired of taking hits. “All the church ever talks about is money.” That was a line I heard a lot—usually from people that don’t give anything. But after a while, it wore me down. I got gun shy. I got tired of taking cheap shots from critics and just backed away from talking about money. Honestly, I lost some of my courage.

The problem is, money is an essential topic of discipleship. Did you know that Jesus talked more about money than he did any other topic except for the Kingdom of God? More than heaven or hell or love, he talked about money: 11 of his 39 parables—more than one-quarter—had to do with money. Why? Because Jesus knew then, just as now, that money becomes our Lord. That our possessions—how we spend, how we give, how we hoard—money is one of the last parts of our life to be entrusted to Jesus. Martin Luther once said, “There are three conversions: the conversion of the heart, the conversion of the mind and the conversion of the purse”—and he was convinced that the third conversion was the last and the hardest.

So I want to confess to you that I have not been very faithful in these last years in talking about a topic that the Lord considered vital to Christian discipleship. I got tired of being criticized, honestly. But as I prepared for Lent, it seemed that the Holy Spirit was prompting me to speak to this issue—not as a matter of fund-raising but as a matter of discipleship. And here’s the good news: our walls aren’t broken. The fact is we are in a season of blessing as a congregation. Many of you have responded to the prompting of the Lord and are giving very generously. Our income exceeds our budget, and our budget was aggressive because the Session set aside extra to pay down debt. Our generosity suggests that we are maturing as disciples of Jesus.

It also suggests that you are excited about what God is doing in your church—excited about the growth in Young Families, excited about our vigorous mission department, or excited about the fact that Session has just extended an invitation to Ellis White to become our next Assistant Pastor when he completes his training next fall. There is a sense of momentum and many of you, like the 41 in Nehemiah, have stepped up, shoulder to shoulder, to do your part, large and small—and in some very generous instances, much more than your part. Thank you!

In other words—and I hope I don’t screw things up by saying this—your church doesn’t need more money right now. We are not making an appeal because we are financially strapped. We have been blessed by the generosity of so many of you. And God certainly doesn’t need your money. But here’s the bottom line of biblical stewardship: you need to give! You were created by a generous God to be generous. Giving makes you a better person. Giving makes you a better disciple, because money so easily becomes the false god in our lives. And if you aren’t generous—don’t know how to give—you often become a puckered, stingy, grasping person.

And back to our text, giving is also how we participate in God's work! Think of this: out of 50,000 Jews, we have a list of 41 clans doing the sacrificial work of God. Their names have been memorialized I think because the Holy Spirit wanted to honor those who were willing to do their part, large and small, to accomplish God's purposes—while so many of their neighbors stood back and let them carry the load. Obviously, those who worked had a harder time of it because the rest didn't do their part, but those who stood back were the real losers. They didn't have the joy of sharing in the building of something great for God. It would be like a kid going to Mexico and standing back all week while others built the houses!

So here's the question for the morning. Are you participating in the building of God's kingdom, or are you standing back and letting others do your work and pay your way?

I want to be clear about something: this is family business. If you are visitors we don't expect a dime from you. But if this is your church home—if you are a disciple of Jesus but are stingy, well this is a matter of discipleship... a heart defect: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." That's what Jesus said. It is always a puzzling and hard thing for me to hear that hundreds of our own members give little or nothing to the Lord's work in their own church. Billy Graham once said, "Give me five minutes with a person's checkbook, and I'll tell you where their heart is." What does your checkbook say about your heart, your discipleship, your commitment to what God is building here?

This is a matter of discipleship, so over the next three weeks, I invite you to ponder and pray about whether you are a generous person—and if you are not, to ask the Lord to change your heart. To make your heart more like his. God is at work. He is building his kingdom. There is a place assigned to you right between the perfumer and the goldsmith—a section of that work that has your name on it. Don't you want to be a part of that?

**8-POINT CULTIVATING
GENEROSITY LADDER**

