

For the City: It Takes a Broken Heart

Nehemiah 1

As I shared last week, Cyndi and I took up biking this summer. We are now able to cycle up out of the city to the Cushman trail without coughing up a lung, so THAT'S good. I made a joke last week about how one of the results of our biking has been my new, finely sculpted quads. What I DIDN'T tell you is that when I wrote that line on my computer, it auto-corrected. It replaced "finely" sculpted with "finally" sculpted. As in, "Oh...you're finally going to do something about those droopy masses of flesh? Finally?"

Anyhow, after a wonderful summer, fall has FINALLY come. This morning we kick off a new series called For the City based on the story of Nehemiah. We Christians are often known for the things we are against. But...what if we were BETTER known for what we are FOR? If a random person in your city were asked, "What do you think of those folks at Chapel Hill?" wouldn't it be something if their response was, "Oh...that's the church that loves this city!" We will explore the question, "What does it mean to be FOR our city? Not just living in it. But championing it! Champions of Gig Harbor, of Port Orchard, of Tacoma or wherever else God places you? Nehemiah became a champion for the city of Jerusalem and he has a lot to teach us. Neh. 1 :1-4

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Two weeks ago the congregants of Holy Rosary Church in Tacoma got some shocking news: after an 800 hour study, the decision had been made to demolish that iconic building. Built in 1920, Holy Rosary's 210-foot steeple has towered over Tacoma for a century. It stands 50 feet taller than the Tacoma Dome. But after decades of neglect, the costs to rehabilitate the church exceed \$18 million and the archbishop decided it is just not feasible.

Well, there was outrage. Tacomans of all religious AND irreligious stripes have joined together to fight this decision. Fund-raising has begun in response to this shocking news.

But.... it shouldn't have been so shocking. Last November 25 square feet of ceiling plaster fell into the choir loft. (You think it's tough recruiting tenors here!) For decades the fabric of ththate church has been degrading. The fact that Holy Rosary is in terrible shape ... shouldn't have been news.

And it shouldn't have been news to Nehemiah that Jerusalem was in terrible shape. It had been 150 years since Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon! Solomon's magnificent temple was destroyed. The walls...the symbol of the city's power and identity...were torn down. The gates were burned. This once proud city...the emblem of God's covenant with his chosen people...was a burned-out shell. And after the slaughter, the remaining brightest and best had been shipped off to Babylon to be assimilated. In one stroke, Jerusalem was decimated.

It was one of the darkest days in Jewish history. But Nehemiah wasn't even alive when Jerusalem was destroyed. His great, great, great grandparents weren't alive. This would be like someone rushing up to you at work tomorrow and crying, "Did you know that our nation fought a huge war over slavery back in the mid-1800s?" "Uh...do you mean the Civil War?" "Yeah...that's the one! Isn't it awful?" It was awful. And...this was awful, too. But it was old news. Nehemiah was completely absorbed into this new culture. He had a great job: cupbearer for the king! He enjoyed prestige, influence, luxury. He was still a Jew...but he had new life and the decrepit state of his long-abandoned hometown was the last thing on his mind.

And then...his brother showed up. They had a warm reunion....and Nehemiah asked, "So...how are things back home?" The response? "The handful of Jews who remain are in appalling condition. The walls are still broken. The gate is still burned."

In other words, nothing's changed! Business as usual in Jerusalem. But for some reason, these words break Nehemiah's heart! He is gutted. "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days..." That's a pretty dramatic response to 150-year-old news, don't you think? It doesn't just make him sad. It makes him depressed! He sits down...and weeps...and mourns for days. So what's the deal? How did this old news suddenly grip him in a way that sent him to his knees?

Well...for the first time, Nehemiah NOTICED. He noticed what was going on. It wasn't that he didn't KNOW that things were broken in his ancestral city. It's just that he had never paid any attention to it. He never cared enough to REALLY pay attention. To really notice. But suddenly, he saw it with new eyes. With God's eyes! And for the first time, he had a heart for the city that he had too-long ignored.

Do you have a heart for your city? Does its welfare matter to you? If you are going to be FOR YOUR CITY...if God is going to use you to bless or encourage or heal or shape your city...the first, essential thing is...you've GOT TO NOTICE what is going on around you! Open your eyes to see it...in all its beauty...and in all its brokenness.

If your city is Gig Harbor, ...we are kind of like Holy Rosary Church! From the outside, the edifice looks great! It is a beautiful, idyllic community. Tourists love us...too much, maybe! But if you look closely, you discover cracks. Do you realize that marriages are under attack in this city? And our children are in more pain than you know; there was a rumored "suicide pact" among students in our district. Every week we hear stories in Celebrate Recovery of substance abuse, sexual addiction, rotten self-image. The volunteers in our Titus ministry know well that the apparent prosperity of our city hides

pockets of poverty and homelessness, problems that are on the rise. And politically ...our city is more divided and cynical...and even angry...than I've ever seen it.

And if your city is Port Orchard, you've seen this written on the walls of your Starbucks: "A people of pluck and determination." Locals will say, proudly, that the downtown "has so much potential." But businesses that have burned are boarded up and abandoned. Even the iconic A&W hangout closed down. Colleen Simpson, one of our elders, is a fire chaplain and was called to five suicides this summer. What makes people so down on life? What prevents a town of potential full of people of determination from being restored? Because people stop noticing.

Cyndi and I had a hideous fiberglass roof over our deck. We noticed it was hideous when we bought the house two years ago. But we have been otherwise occupied and, over the years, it ceased being hideous to me. Until finally last week, I stopped, really looked at it, and said..."That thing is HIDEOUS!" So...I tore it down. And rebuilt it. And now...it's less hideous. I'm not ready to say it's beautiful...but it's much better! All because I stopped...and really noticed it.

To be FOR our city, we really need to SEE it...to notice both the good and the not so good! God needs to open our eyes. What might that look like for you? It might mean paying more attention to your neighbors. Taking an interest in what they are doing. Learning their kids' names. Maybe their dog's name. Noticing they have been gone and asking about their vacation. Reaching out to them when there has been a death or a sickness. Taking note of things that are suddenly different. I realized that our neighbor's yard was overgrown...and this was unusual because she usually takes good care of it. I found out that she was having knee surgery...and couldn't work in the yard. To be FOR our city means lifting up your eyes from your own little world and really seeing what is going on around you.

Our MOPS program starts on September 26th. My Cyndi is leading the mentor-moms program; seasoned moms who invest into the lives of younger women. Mentor moms have a four-word job-description... and the very first word is... NOTICE. Notice what is going on in their lives, notice when they seem tired or sad or happy. Notice if their kids are sick or THEY are sick. NOTICE! Before you say a word, before you give any mothering advice, before you do anything... FIRST....really notice.

Nehemiah ...for the first time...really NOTICED what was going on. And it broke his heart. God desired Jerusalem to be a place of covenant blessing; a place of God's presence, abundance and peace. But it had become a place of ruin; material and human ruin. God's desire for the city has not changed. God longs for our city to be a place where the Spirit of Jesus has access; where Christ can bring peace and abundance and blessing and unity. And ONE of the ways God does that is to open the eyes of his people to REALLY notice what...and WHO... is going on around them. Really notice the precious human beings, created in the image of God, for whom Christ died...but who are not yet experiencing the blessing that comes when Jesus is invited into the city...and into their lives.

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, used to say, "May my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God." When God FINALLY opened his eyes, Nehemiah's heart was broken. And it drove him to prayer. Most of that prayer is devoted to one purpose. See you can spot it. v. 5.

And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be

attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'

Did you spot it? What was the primary focus of Nehemiah's prayer? Confession! Repentance! He asks God to forgive him...and forgive his people... for settling for less than God intended! He confesses his PERSONAL sin of disobedience and apathy...and begs God to make good on his covenant promises to restore his city.

Maybe that's OUR starting point, too! Maybe we need to confess that we have settled for something less than God's best for our city; confess that we like Babylon just fine the way it is. Maybe we need to confess that we've bought into the idea that prosperity equals happiness. Maybe we need to confess our indifference to our neighbors. And IF...like Nehemiah...you've turned a blind eye toward the parts of your city that are in need of spiritual repair...if you cannot remember the last time you prayed God's favor and blessing upon your city...then confess that! This is how we start to be "For the City." To notice ...and to pray for our city.

And eight weeks from now, could I tell you what I hope will be our end game? It's very modest...but it could have great impact. This is not a clandestine evangelism program. It's not about growing Chapel Hill. There will be no tips on clever ways to redirect conversations toward spiritual things. No...this sermon series has a much more modest aim. We simply want you to MAKE more friends! We want you to be for the city by being for the people who make up that city! FOR your neighbors. FOR the people you meet on your morning walks. FOR those kids you see playing in the park. FOR our first responders and our city government.

The simple, unadorned, unapologetic aim of this series is for you to be more intentional about making friends, about being kind, about noticing and helping and celebrating and engaging in the lives of those who can too easily walk right by you unnoticed.

And may I just say this: if no one else needs this sermon series, I do. My whole life is this church. All my relationships are inside this church. I do not have any friends outside this church. When I ask you to invite an unchurched friend to Baptism weekend....inside I feel guilty because I don't HAVE an unchurched friend that jumps to mind. I don't need lessons on evangelism. I need lessons on friendship. A kick in the butt to make new friends. Jesus told me to love my neighbors...but I can't love my neighbors or like my neighbors or be nice to my neighbors...if I don't KNOW my neighbors. So, I have repented...and prayed...and asked God to open my eyes...and my heart!

That is how I can be for MY city. To notice...to speak to....to care about...to help...to pray for...my neighbors. Simple as that! If NOTHING more comes from this 8 weeks than 1200 lovers of Jesus

engaging with one new friend...that will be a victory for the city. That is what I will be working on in these coming weeks. I invite you to join me on that journey.