

For the City: Influence

Nehemiah 2:1-9

Last Wednesday night, I watched a TV special on 9-11. It is hard to believe it's been 18 years! But as I watched the interviews with survivors...including some who rode the collapsing building to the ground and lived to tell about it... I re-lived that horrible moment. Planes flying into buildings, a wall of smoke bearing down upon people as they ran for their lives...it all came flooding.

If you visit Ground Zero today, you will find One World Trade Center soaring above you and a powerful 911 Memorial. But imagine this: what if instead you visited the site and found everything as it was 18 years ago? Massive piles of rubble; shards of the Twin Towers standing above you. Untouched. Unrestored. Unthinkable, right?

So imagine **this**: 150 years have passed. Your great, great, great, great grandkids travel to New York....and discover the SAME pile of rubble...the same wreckage and carnage at Ground Zero. Untouched. Unrestored. A bleak and enduring reminder of a far-distant tragedy.

That is the news Nehemiah's brother brought to him in chapter 1. 150 years after the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, it STILL lay in ruins. Walls destroyed, gates burned, God's people demoralized. And yet, it was as if Nehemiah was hearing it for the first time! His heart was broken. He sat down and fasted and wept and prayed for days!

Why? Why did this 150-year-old news suddenly crush him? BECAUSE...Nehemiah noticed it for the first time. He REALLY saw it. He saw the tragic state of his city with new eyes...with God's eyes.

We are in a series called "For the City." We are considering this question: "What does it mean for us, the people of Chapel Hill, to really be FOR our city? To be champions of Gig Harbor or Port Orchard or wherever? What would it mean for even the most pagan of our neighbors to know us as "those church people who really love their city?"

To do this, our starting point must be the same as Nehemiah's. First, we must open our eyes to really NOTICE what is going on around us. We must notice the people...notice our neighbors...notice their circumstances. Last week, I asked you to try this. To open your eyes and see your city in new ways. So...did you? If you tried looking with new eyes at your neighbors, your city...praying for them, maybe... raise your hand.

Nehemiah noticed...and prayed. But that was just the start. We pick up the reading in verse 11 of Chapter 1.

Now I was cupbearer to the king. In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

So...God has opened Nehemiah's eyes. His heart is broken for Jerusalem and he feels called to do something. Great. But what? Jerusalem is 1000 miles distant. There are loads of enemies en route. It will require great resources. And most significantly, **Nehemiah already has a job**. He is cupbearer to the king. He tastes the king's wine and food to prevent him from being poisoned. He is one of his most trusted confidantes. He has been granted immense influence by God...but he knows he must wield it wisely.

Every one of us has influence...more than we might imagine. You may not know it...you may not believe it...but you have a sphere of influence; people who look to you, who listen to you, who are shaped by you. There are four things that Nehemiah can teach us about wielding that influence: Courage, prayer, availability and preparation.

The first requirement of an influencer is courage. You need to be brave to wield your influence at the right time. And I underscore right time. Nehemiah waited four months before he finally spoke to the king. But when he DID speak up, it required courage. When the king noticed he was sad, Nehemiah writes, "I was very much afraid." Why? Because it was a capital offense to be sad in front of the king! Because it might make the king sad. You don't want to make the king sad! You could lose your head over it!

But Nehemiah was so distressed, he couldn't fake it anymore. And when the king asked why he was sad... Nehemiah had a decision. Did he suck it up and put on a phony smile...or did he speak the truth? Courageously, he chose to speak the truth.

One of the women mentors in my life has an expression about what it takes to do scary things: She will tell me, "You got to put on your big boy pants." If God is going to use us to influence our city...if God is going to use us to love and care for our neighbors... you got to put on your big boy pants! In my case, I'm feeling God's call to love my neighbors better. Honestly, when I come home, I want to hunker down and hide. I've had enough of people. You might not believe it...but I have become more of an introvert in my latter years. I LIKE hiding in my study at home.

This might surprise you since I make my living speaking in front of crowds every weekend, but taking initiative with my neighbors makes me uncomfortable...I find it a little scary. Well...I'm putting on my big boy pants. I invited a young couple in our neighborhood to walk down to a Tuesday concert with us. They did. Then we invited them to dinner. They didn't. So, I'm batting 500. But if I am going to make new friends...if I am going to love my city by loving my neighbors...I've got to have guts.

So do you! Could it be that the reason YOU aren't being used by God to bless your neighbors and your city is because you don't have the courage to do the simple things God asks of you? Speak up? Reach out? Invite over? Influence requires courage. So put on your big boy pants....or your big girls pants...and get to it!

Influence also requires prayer. I know, broken record! But it's Nehemiah's fault! You'll be amazed how many times in this book Nehemiah stops and prays. Chapter 1 was MOSTLY Nehemiah's prayer. He spent four months praying, waiting for the right moment to speak up. Well...that moment finally comes. Courageously, he tells the king why he is sad...and amazingly...the king responds: "What are you requesting."

You'd think Nehemiah would burst out with pent-up responses. He'd been thinking about this for four months. But I love the next line: "So I prayed to the God of heaven." Before he replies, he prays. Again. He doesn't pray out loud. We don't even know what he prayed. But in this pivotal moment, he stops and offers up another quick prayer. Probably something along the lines of, "Lord, don't let me screw this up!"

Nehemiah teaches us that prayer isn't something reserved for one day in the week... or even one time in the morning. Nehemiah wove prayer in and out of his daily life. Do you? As you prepare to speak to someone God has placed upon your heart, do you shoot up a quick prayer for that person? When you hear a siren going by, do you pray mercy upon that person? When you see a cop drive by, do you pray protection upon that person? When you see the homeless, do you pray blessing upon that person? The Apostle Paul once told the Thessalonians to "Pray without ceasing..." I don't think he meant to pray 24-7. I think he meant that prayer was to be like breath to them; something so natural and frequent that it was a regular part of the rhythm of their lives.

As we will see in coming weeks, Nehemiah prayed without ceasing. We need to learn to do the same; to notice what is going on around us...and to pray. Right then. And by the way, this is not just checking off a spiritual box. We are trying to align our hearts with God's heart. If we are going to be used by God to bless our city, we cannot do it without more of the Holy Spirit of Jesus within us. Your prayer might be, "Holy Spirit, give me your compassion and grace toward my neighbors."

SO...the king says, What do you want? Nehemiah offers a quick prayer...and then he responds to the king. Let's read the rest of the story:

And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Here's a third thing we learn about influence: availability! When the king asked what Nehemiah wanted him to do about his city, his first response was, "Send me! Send me there so I can rebuild it!" Now tell me...what did Nehemiah know about building walls? Bupkus! He's a wine-taster! He could have said, "Sire, send a professional wall-builder to Jerusalem." He probably would have gotten his wish. In fact, the king would have preferred to send someone else rather than his trusted servant.

But Nehemiah spoke those great words of available faith. "Send me!" The words of Isaiah: "Here am I, Lord, send me." The words of Peter in the boat: "Lord, if it is you, bid me come and I will do it."

I think this is a critical principle for the members of this church. We are affluent. We are busy. We are concerned, but we only have so much time. In fact, we would often rather give our money than ourselves. Our tendency is to professionalize ministry. We see a need. Let's hire someone to meet it. And obviously, there are times when it is best to hire a specialist. But when we do this as a way to dodge God's personal call ...to take the field, it becomes dereliction of duty.

One of the most important challenges facing us as a congregation is how we personalize great ideas: ideas about moving beyond these walls...ideas about loving our city...ideas about loving our neighbors. Last week a friend told me that, for the first time, he realized that the worship guide was not just information; it was an invitation for HIM to take his next step in ministry...personally. If we see this as information only and not as an invitation for us to be engaged...we will NEVER move beyond these walls, as much as we might love that slogan.

If you sit here and shake your head "yes" to great ideas...and then look around to see who's going to do them...you are missing out on the joy and privilege and responsibility of doing your part. No one can love your neighbors for you. No one can exert your influence for you. No one has your unique sets of gifts, talents, relationships and opportunities. When God says, "Whom shall I send...", the answer he is ALWAYS looking for is, "Here am I, Lord...send me." (Let's practice saying that, shall we?)

And finally, we discover Nehemiah's preparation. Those four months of prayer included preparation. So when the king asked, Nehemiah had a plan. He asked for letters of safe conduct. He had a materials list for the project. He requested letters of introduction. Even as Nehemiah prayed for God's direction, he was laying plans for when the opportunity presented itself.

If I'm going to love my neighbors, I have to prepare. Because I have so much to learn. I read a book called the "Art of Neighboring." I'm making a chart of the homes and family names in my neighborhood. Cyndi and I are planning a block party. Our next door neighbor has agreed to partner with us. We are laying plans to love our neighbors better. If you are courageous ...and prayerful...and available...and yet clueless about your next steps, you will never be an effective influencer.

Do you remember what I call those doors back there? The Doors of Amnesia. By that I mean, no matter how you might be moved or inspired in worship to do something...to make a change...in this case, to really NOTICE what is going on around you and pray about it...something happens when you hit those doors. Life rolls in over the top of you and your best intentions come to nothing. So, over the coming weeks, I'm going to give you tools to overcome the doors of amnesia.

Here's the tool for the day. It is a phone app called "Echo." It's free to download from your app store. Echo is a prayer reminder. You can set it to remind you every day...or several times a day...to pray! I have set it to remind me every day to pray for my city and my neighbors. AND, frankly, for my heart! That my heart will be more aligned with the heart of God... that I will have more and more of his Holy Spirit to live as a courageous, audacious influence for God.

So...before you hit the Doors of Amnesia...that's my tip! Write it down! Echo. Download it before you leave. We will return to this theme again and again...notice ...and pray. Notice and pray...

You know, at the very end of our text Nehemiah says that "God's good hand was upon me." We need to believe that God wants to bless this city...wants to bless our neighbors....and wants to use us to do that. We need to ask audacious things of our King...just as Nehemiah did....and then see what happens. Will you please join me in doing just that?