

Series: Transforming the World in which God has Placed Us

VBC

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Nehemiah 5

“The Credibility of Community”

Yesterday, I was in Seattle as part of a memorial service for one of the most amazing people I have ever met

- It was approximately 10 years ago that I met a young man named Tommy
 - A refugee with an uncertain future
 - A kid with nothing but the clothes on his back
 - An Angolan who had escaped with his life from a civil war that had long sense forgot what it was fighting for
 - Stowed away in a ship and landed in Rotterdam, and eventually found his way to The Hague
 - And to our church in Wassenaar, The Netherlands (don't ask me how)
- Tommy was searching for belonging, community
 - Parents lost in the war at an early age
 - He was without country, without family, without home
 - But by God's grace, he found all of this in our church
- *And the power of a Christ centered community eventually drew him to Christ*
- I baptized Tommy, and he proceeded to live one of the most transformed lives I have ever witnessed
 - Over time, I watched Tommy thrive in the body of Christ
 - He embraced the fellowship and the fellowship embraced him
 - In our community, he eventually met another refugee, an Iranian who escaped with her life
 - And in one of the greatest miracles, found safe passage to the US
 - And just had a baby girl that I had the privilege to dedicate in June
- And then last Sunday, like nearly every morning, he went for an early run
 - Only to collapse and die of heart failure

I come to church and I realize in a fresh way the POWER of community

- The incredible NECESSITY of community
- The HOLY CALLING of community
- What happens when people come and link arms and embrace one another
- And love the outsider so deeply he/she is restored and becomes a deep part of the inside of all of us

- It's little wonder the adversary will do all he can to keep us from it
 - Either by division or diversion

So it's no mystery, in our Nehemiah story when threats against the wall are not working, the evil one goes for the community

- Up to this point, the focus has been on the wall
- And as we saw last week, it was a hard go
- The task was more than they could handle
- The city God seemed to have forgotten was trying to get on its feet
 - In a world where little was salvageable
 - Everything was a dreary mix of brown and gray
 - A city whose credit rating had long since been lowered from investment grade to junk

But as Nehemiah 5 points out, it was more than a wall reduced to rubble

- Something else was being reduced to rubble: the well being of the people
- There was an outcry, a wail, a summons, that stopped the work of wall building (verse 1)
- There were a series of issues
 - 1) There was a growing scarcity of resources (read verse 2)
 - 2) People were exploited, falling into serious debt (read verses 3-4)
 - Properties were being mortgaged as creditors took land as payment
 - Incomes were not meeting expenses
 - Loan sharks were taking advantage of the situation
 - Creditors were exploiters
 - Merchants were opportunists
 - Subterranean fault lines between haves and have-nots were cracking open

Worse...

- 3) Once there was no land to pay off debts, people began selling their kids (read verse 5)
 - (which I realize some of us on occasion would like to do)
 - In it all, people were reduced to a state of powerlessness
 - Becoming a "footstool" for others
 - Exacerbated by:
 - a. Famine
 - b. Outside taxation to a foreign power
 - c. Attention, energies, investments devoted to reconstructing the wall
 - d. Worst of all, Jews were doing this to Jews, people "of the same flesh" (verse 5)

- And so resentment now began to spill over
 - It would take a leader tenacious for community to step in
 - And he does, his name is Nehemiah
 - Who responded with anger (read verse 6)
 - There was a literal “snorting of nostrils”

And for good reason

A) THEY WERE REJECTING GOD’S WORD (verse 7)

- That is, they were behaving more like pawnbrokers defined by profit rather than brothers marked by covenant
 - And in the process, rejecting God’s rules for community
 - Their practice amounted to a total disregard of a moral obligation to look after one another
 - The practice of getting rich off of someone’s suffering was strictly forbidden in God’s Word
 - “If one amongst you becomes poor, help him and do not take interest of any kind. You must not make profit off of him, for I the Lord brought you out of Egypt.” Leviticus 25:35-37
 - “There should be no poor among you for God will bless you, if only you will follow His commands.” Deuteronomy 15:4

In the process

B) THEY WERE DESTROYING THEIR COMMUNITY (verse 8)

- What does it matter if we are liberated only to place others back in bondage?
 - What good are walls of protection, if we abuse one another?
 - Restore dignity only to lose dignity?
 - Be delivered from gracelessness only to find gracelessness?

It was more

C) THEY WERE REJECTING GOD HIMSELF (verse 9)

- What good is it to have walls if there is not a holy fear that marks every decision we make
 - That stops us and asks “Is this what pleases God?”
- If we are not serious about keeping our covenant, reverencing His holiness, going after His will, chasing after His blessing, reflecting His community, what value is a wall?

In all of this

D) THEY WERE DESTROYING THEIR WITNESS (verse 9)

- Should you not aim to avoid the contempt of others?
- What good is it to remove one contempt, only to incur another?
- What good is it to build a wall, if our practices look exactly like that of the world?
 - For these Jewish landowners were acting like the surrounding nations that exacted usury, took people as pledge and sold people into debt-slavery
 - If we have no compassion for one another, if we fleece one another, how can a pagan world be persuaded of our uniqueness as God's people?
 - Have you forgotten that God intended you to be unique amongst the nations of the world?
 - Such that the watching world is amazed
- Have you forgotten the words of Isaiah 42:6-9
 - "I have made you to be a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind?"
- Nehemiah's words obviously had great power
 - "And God moved in a powerful way. His wall will be built!!" (verses 12-13)

So what does all of this have to do with us?

- Behind these words, I hear God asking us a similar question
- What good is it to realize our vision, build our walls, IF WE DISREGARD THE COMMUNITY WHICH MUST BE WITHIN THESE WALLS?
 - What Israel forgot, and the church can sometimes forget, is that we are first and foremost a community
 - What Scripture refers to as a koinonia that has as its root the idea of COMMON
 - A community with these radical minimum requirements
 1. To minister hospitality, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the orphan (Matthew 25:36)
 2. Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10)
 3. Be fervent in love for one another (I Peter)
 - We're called to love those just like us: unfinished, immature, neurotic, stumbling, boorish
 - If we are indifferent to need, if we claim allegiance to Jesus, but give little effort at community, we are nothing short of liars according to I John
 - To put it another way, we are full of hot air (blunt language, like Nehemiah's)
 - As James 1:27 puts it, "If we don't care for one another, than religion is worthless"

IF WE DON'T HAVE COMMUNITY, WHAT GOOD IS A WALL, A VISION, A NEW BUILDING?

So what is life together?

1) It means TAKING UPON OURSELVES THE RESPONSIBILITY OF COMMUNITY, INTERDEPENDENCE

- Not coming into the community for what we can gain, but what we can give

- A *common liability* for one another that begins with simply saying "hello"
- And moves to bearing one another's burdens which will fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2)
- Which means allowing ourselves to be interrupted by God
- We may pass by those who need us, as the priest on the road to Jerusalem, and disobey God's crooked but straight path

2) It means BRINGING OUR INDWELLING CHRIST TO THE SANCTUARY AND UNLEASHING HIM

- For community as God designed is where lives regularly intersect

- Where something of the resurrected power of Christ is poured out of one into another
- An energy that has the power to heal the deepest wounds of the soul, mend the broken hearted
 - Overcome the damage done by an abusive world
 - Encourage the depressed to move courageously forward
 - Introduce hope into the rejected

- This is community is pouring into each other what God is pouring into us!

- This was how Paul described the body in Ephesians 4:16

- The body held together by every supporting ligament, *growing as each part does its work*

- Our difficulty too often is we don't believe this

- We don't really believe there is nourishment that only saint to saint, community can provide, that transcends therapist to patient

- 3) It means BRINGING OUR PRIVACY, INDEPENDENCE, AND POSSESSIONS ON THE ALTAR, AS OFTEN AS NECESSARY
- Which means acknowledging that everything we have is a gift from Him
 - Becoming a community that recognizes God is the only Owner in the universe, we are simply managers
 - And that we hold loosely what we have, gifts given to us to be used as HE WILLS
 - Knowing that as we do, there is the ever present and strong possibility God will lavish His grace on us
 - Such that where there is generosity, people end up with more, not less
 - Generosity generates favor; this is the way it works in God's kingdom

Illustration

Tommy's service was a powerful witness to the body of Christ

- People from as far away as Moscow (not Idaho) came
- From all walks of life to honor an Angolan refugee
- One to whom we gave our support, so that he might have a new life
- And in the end, we were the ones made wealthy

Conclusion

Nehemiah 5 calls us to answer one question:

- Is the body of Christ the place we come to consume, or the people of God we come to expend our souls for the sake of community?