

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 29, 2007, dedicated to Nicholas Quinn Warrick on his baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

“Listening to Friends While Praying to God”

Part I of V in the Series:

The Nehemiah Project: Ten Keys for Rebuilding the Future

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our salvation. Amen.

In the year 445 BC a cupbearer for the King of Persia saved Jerusalem. His name was Nehemiah. As the King’s cupbearer, it was Nehemiah’s trusted responsibility to taste all the foods and drinks prepared for the King to determine if they were poisoned or poorly prepared. Although his physical life daily hung in the balance by the dangers engendered by his job, Nehemiah was influential and secure in his position. He was successful and trusted by King Artaxerxes. Raised by exiled Jewish parents in Persia, Nehemiah was a common man among the ruling elite. He was deeply prayerful. He was a man who possessed an enlightened and heartfelt compassion for his homeland and the fate of Jerusalem.

A group of Jewish exiles, who had escaped captivity in Jerusalem, arrived in Susa, the capital city of Persia. They were on a mission from God. Their conversation changed Nehemiah’s life and the future fate of Jerusalem. They reported that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates of the city had been destroyed

by fire. The inhabitants of the city and the Holy Temple (rebuilt only 70 years before) were vulnerable to attack and ruinous destruction. These men had come to ask Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to help rebuild the city walls and gates in what could best be described as a difficult and seemingly impossible task.

For Nehemiah to do this meant that he would need to be released by the King from his position as Cupbearer, and quite frankly, “Cupbearer” was a lifetime assignment - one that no one left except by death either by poisoning or old age. Even to ask for release was a death-defying request.

Nevertheless scripture tells us that **Nehemiah listened to his new friends** (1:3). **He sat down and wept** (1:4), **and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of Heaven** (1:4). Like all his prayers, this prayer was down to earth and heartfelt. He prayed:

O God, of heaven, who keeps covenant with your people and loves with steadfast love, please listen to my prayers (1:5-6). I confess my sins, the sins of my family, and the sins of Israel, acknowledging the ways all of us have failed to keep our covenant with you. (1:6-7). In your mercy O God, I plead with you to have the King show mercy on me and allow me to return to Jerusalem (1:11).

Once this prayer ended, he continued to pray. He prayed for four solid months before he had enough courage to go before King Artaxerxes and ask for mercy and release from his service. Finally, after four months of continuous prayer, Nehemiah went to the King. Before he could pop his question, Artaxerxes asked, “*Nehemiah, why are you so sad?*”

In prayerful and careful response he told the King of the destruction of his homeland. The king asked what he could do. At this point, Nehemiah risked being honest. He told the king he needed to be

released from his responsibilities. He needed a letter for safe passage to Jerusalem and he needed lumber from the King's forests for the timber needed to rebuild the city walls and gates. Graciously, the King granted all his requests and went beyond merely granting the minimum. He offered an escort for Nehemiah all the way to Jerusalem AND ***the best timber*** he had in his forests!

Thus, we have the first three keys needed to rebuild the future:

- 1) We listen to beloved friends who speak the truth about the place we love (Nehemiah 1:2-3).**
- 2) We confess our brokenness and pray continuously for God's Strength and Leadership (1:4-11).**
- 3) We Risk Being Honest and Live With the Results (2:1-10) (which I will address August 12).**
- 4) We listen to beloved friends who speak the truth about the place that we love (Nehemiah 1:2-3).**

Thirty years ago, while a sophomore at Macalester College in St. Paul, MN, I was struggling mightily with my life. Far from home and on my own for the first time, I was making very poor decisions about my life and the friends I was keeping. One bad decision after another led me to a place of deep, deep despair. I became isolated and felt a shroud of loneliness upon me like I had never felt before. One night I got down on my knees and cried aloud to God. In the stillness of the night, I felt God's peace come upon me - you know - "the peace that passes understanding." I wasn't sure what God would do next.

Well, next came God's messenger in the person of my friend Paul. The next Paul came and took me out for coffee. He made me promise not to talk - just to listen. Then he proceeded to chronicle all the ways I had been an absolute idiot in the weeks and months recently gone by. When he was done, he said, "Tim, you are my friend. I love you and care about you too much to watch you continue to be a jerk." God has a funny way of sending angels of

the Lord into our lives. But that is what Paul was for me. He spoke the truth in love and his honesty changed my life.

When was the last time you listened to a friend who spoke a clear word to you about your behavior? When was the last time God came, in the person of an angel of mercy to speak to you personally about what you needed to do to turn your life around - to make a difference?

Friends are critical to our mental and emotional health. As we have seen with Nehemiah, our world can be rocked and saved by someone who speaks the truth in love to us. Our relationships are everything! It doesn't matter who you are. You need other people! And you need to listen and you need to learn - particularly from those who care most deeply about you!

In our church, we have instituted a listening process called "one-to-ones." Two people come together to listen to one another and learn from each other what their loves, passions, and deepest concerns are. Relationships are formed and relationships matter. From those "one-to-one" conversations, our church has planned its mission, set forth a vision and begun to change the city and the world around us.

In her groundbreaking book, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe*, Margaret Wheatley writes about how Quantum Physics, Chaos Theory and Biology can reshape a vision for organizational management. She writes this of elemental relationships and connectedness:

*In the world in which we live, **relationship** is the key determiner of what is observed and of how particles manifest themselves. Particles come into being and are observed only in relationship to something else. They do not and cannot exist as independent "things" . . . These unseen connections between what were previously thought to be separate entities are the fundamental*

elements of all creation. (M. Wheatley, Berrett-Kohler, San Francisco, CA, 1994, pp 9-10).

Whether in Quantum Physics or Chaos Reality, we call family and church, your particles need my particles - our entities cannot exist without each other. We are all here for a variety of reasons, but we are not independent particles in God's Universe. It is our unseen connections, which will fundamentally shape the new creation, which is becoming our life on this planet.

In the universe we know as Church, relationships mean even more! Recently I heard a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He tells of his own life dating back more than 50 years. After Sunday night services one week, one wise and faithful woman of his congregation waited until everyone else was gone to speak with her pastor. Now some of you may know this woman. She was the woman who at 80-plus years during the Montgomery Bus Boycott walked miles each day to go to the store. She was kindly offered a ride one day and declined saying with a smile, *"My feets is tired, but my soul is rested."*

This woman said to Dr. King:

"Pastor King, something was missing tonight. You didn't have the fire of the Spirit in you tonight. Are you okay?" Although he denied it several times, she pursued and finally she said to him, *"Pastor, we let you down and we abandon you too often. And I am sorry for that. Even though we may leave you and fail you, always remember, God will not fail you. He will never abandon you."*

My friends, always remember to **listen to friends who speak the truth about you about the people and places you love (Nehemiah 1:2-3).**

Nehemiah's second key is:

2) We confess our brokenness and pray continuously for God's Strength and Leadership (1:4-11).

Whether you are rebuilding one relationship in your life or rebuilding the future of your church, prayer is the key to everything! At the center of all we say and all we do must be in prayer. Continuous prayer. Remember, Nehemiah prayed for four months before leaving his head and following his heart.

You must remember to pray, but you also must remember the nature of the prayers, as well. After weeping and fasting, Nehemiah prayed to the God of Heaven to be attentive to his needs. He prayed to the God who keeps covenant, the God of steadfast love to listen to him in his time of need. He confessed his own sins. He confessed the sins of his family and the sins of Israel unto God. He pleaded to God to show mercy upon him. He pleaded to God to have the King show mercy as well. His prayers were humble in nature. Basic. Almost primal. They were not high and mighty prayers with lofty intentions. He begged God to HELP HIM! He pleaded with God for God's vision, for God's Strength and for God's Leadership.

Now I have to confess - prayer does not come easily to me. My children like to point out to me that I have Adult Attention Deficit Disorder (AADD). When I was a child, teachers would say, "*Timmy is so energetic. He is so enthusiastic.*" This was a code for - "He is hyperactive!" My favorite was: "*Tim is hot-wired for sound.*"

When I was put outside my classroom into the hallway, for making too much noise - I didn't see it as negative. That merely allowed me to practice my 60-yard dash! One day, the principal came up as I was running down the hallway during school. He was obviously horrified to see a fourth grader dashing through the upper grade

hallways. But, it was 1968! The summer Olympics were only months away. When he stopped me, I told him I was getting ready for the Olympics. I didn't get out of his office until after the Olympic trials - just barely missing the team . . . I wish.

Staying still, staying in a state of prayer doesn't come easily to me. How about you?

No matter how hard it is to stay still in prayer, I encourage you to do it. It will be both essential and humbling for your life. Like Nehemiah, you and I must confess our sins and humble ourselves before God if we are to be about the project of rebuilding our lives and our church community.

We must ask:

How have I fallen short of the glory of God in relation to my family? How could I be a better mother or father, a better husband or wife, a better son or daughter? How have I sinned against you, Lord? How have I sinned against other people in thought, in word, or in deed?

There has not been a single day of my adult life that has passed that I have not confessed my sins before God. I have asked God's forgiveness and know in all things that I have been, and daily am, mercifully forgiven and eternally loved by God.

In prayer, God will work on you. Maybe that's why we don't like the quiet time alone with God. Last week, I was praying the "Jesus Prayer" early one morning. Simply saying "Jesus" over and over again, the prayer quiets and cleanses me. As I was praying, the day before this one came flashing through my mind. One moment after another, I saw myself and my behaviors through the lenses of God in prayer. Finally, I opened my eyes and said, "*Jesus, I will remember you today in my thoughts, words and deeds.*"

Throughout the day, God presented me with one opportunity after another to live with “Jesus in me.” God gave me chances to fix what I had broken relationally the day before. So many of us remind God what God already knows. We say, “I am only human . . .” But God is hoping we get past that to say, but I want to live my life as a prayer. I want to live with Jesus in me. I want to be more like Jesus and less like the broken vessel I usually am.

Pray continuously for God’s Strength and God’s Leadership. God will never fail you. God will never leave you alone. Although we may let each other down some days in any number of ways, we should not fear, for God is giving us strength and leadership for this journey.

Wherever and whenever you have resisted God’s leadership and walked away from God’s strength in your life, I ask you, like Nehemiah, to plead for God’s mercy and healing.

Physicist, Erich Jantsch puts it this way in *The Self Organized Universe*:

In life, the issue is not control, but a dynamic connectedness. I want to move into a universe I trust so much that I give up playing God. I want to stop holding things together . . . I want to surrender my care of the universe and become a participating member, with everyone I work with, in an organization that moves gracefully with its environment, trusting in the unfolding dance of order. (Jantsch, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1980, p. 196).

Come, join the unfolding dance!

Next time we step into Jerusalem with Nehemiah under the cover of night as he examines the broken down walls on Jerusalem and weeps to see his city in ruins. With him, we risk being honest and with him, we live with the consequences believing God’s plans are simple, specific, and impossible.

Let us pray. Amen.

