

# “The Nehemiah Project”

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10;  
I Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 3, January 24, 2016, dedicated to the memory of my friend Dennison W. Griffith, to the honor of Elaine Warren, Moderator of First Church and the entire Church Council for 2015 which accomplished amazing “good work” under her leadership and to Rev. Dan Clark and Steve Sterrett and the entire Long-Range Planning Committee for their outstanding efforts in bringing us the 20/20 Vision for First Church and always to the glory of God!

### **“The Nehemiah Project”**

**Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; I Corinthians 12:12-31a;  
Luke 4:14-21**

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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.

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Nehemiah was the Cupbearer for the King of Persia. The “King’s Cupbearer” was responsible for tasting all the foods and drinks prepared for the King to determine if they were poisoned or poorly prepared. Although his life was held in

the balance by the dangers engendered by his job, Nehemiah was influential and secure in his position, and successful and trusted by King Artaxerxes. Raised by exiled Jewish parents in Persia, Nehemiah was a common man among the ruling elite, who was deeply prayerful and who possessed an enlightened and heartfelt compassion for his homeland and the fate of Jerusalem.

Things were going along fine for Nehemiah until the year 445 B.C. when a group of exiles who had escaped captivity in Jerusalem arrived in Susa, the capital city of Persia. They came across deserts, mountains and seas to recruit Nehemiah for job back home. Their clandestine conversation changed his 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. The exiles asked Nehemiah to come home and help rebuild the city walls and gates in what could best be described as a difficult and seemingly impossible task. They believed he was the man for the job.

For Nehemiah to do this meant that he would need to be released by the King from his position as Cupbearer. Quite frankly, "Cupbearer" was a lifetime assignment. No one

retired. They simply expired through one form or another of food poisoning. Simply asking for release was a death defying request.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah listened to his friends (1:3). He sat down and wept (1:4), and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of Heaven (1:4). 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).”

Like this, his prayers continued for four months before he had enough courage to go before King Artaxerxes and ask for mercy and release from his service. Four months.... continuous prayer.

On the day he went to the King to ask his release and return, the King looked at him and started the conversation. He asked why Nehemiah looked so sad. Prayerfully and carefully Nehemiah laid out the situation. He told the King of the destruction of his homeland. And then King Artaxerxes asked what kings generally don't ask their

servants – “**What can I do to help?**” 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! Amazing!

So off went Nehemiah to his city in ruins. When he arrived it was worse than he had heard. Worst of all – beyond broken gates and broken walls – he found broken people. They were in disarray. They were hurting each other and hating each other. They had turned on each other and they were destroying one another as well as leaving the city to continue in shambles.

Through **NO LESS THAN** the power of God, Nehemiah gathered them together – in a great mass meeting – and they began to organize. **They organized to rebuild “the city of David”** - their city in ruins. In only 52 days they rebuilt Jerusalem – all nine gates and all the surrounding walls. They rebuild the interior of the city as well. And they **became unified... more or less.**

We read in Nehemiah 6:15, “So the wall was finished. . .” They said it could not be done! The job was too big and the problems were too great. But God's men and women, joined together for special tasks, can accomplish anything. No leader but Daniel, who as he was being led into captivity 150 years before had ever envisioned a new beginning for the Holy City. Nehemiah delivered it.

What had been called impossible was completed in 52 days. Undaunted by the size of the task or the length of time needed to complete "the impossible," Nehemiah believed. He believed that with God, nothing is impossible. He believed that wrapped in the power of prayer and by keeping the goal simple and specific, the impossible can be achieved with God on our side. Nehemiah's faith was such that he could move mortar and ended up transforming the poor into powerful multitudes. He believed!

**We arrive at today's passage in Nehemiah 8 with Jerusalem rebuilt and the Word of God calling the people to a deeper joy, a deeper faith, a deeper commitment to faith. But this brings another new beginning – they have to figure out how to be together in the newly rebuilt city.**

However, before the goal was complete, the belief of Nehemiah was severely tested by the unbelief of the nobles of Tekoa and most significantly Tobiah and Sanballat. In

the 6th and 13th chapters, Nehemiah met direct opposition from these sources. True in any time and any place, as something positive is moving forward in faith, there is always the potentially destructive opposition which arises during the rebuilding process – from within.

While Nehemiah faced significant external dangers during the rebuilding process, his greatest threats were from his own people. His opposition invited him to remote sites where they sought to bring harm to him. They invited him into the holiest place within the temple (where he was forbidden to go by Hebraic law) in an attempt to discredit his name. They publicly sang his praises while privately sending him hate mail. The truth is – if enough lies are told about a person, some people will conclude that they are true merely because they have been stated so often. This was the approach of Sanballat and Tobia.

Others in the opposition included the nobles of Tekoa. They stood off to the side of the project jeering and criticizing the work of the people. They wouldn't get their hands soiled because they were nobles and were "above" such work. But passive aggression wasn't their only approach. They regularly joined the others by openly challenging Nehemiah's leadership. They lied about Nehemiah to draw people off the project. They organized to

cause confusion and in the end, it was the oppositional forces who had to leave (13:4-9).

In the end, The Nehemiah Project succeeded. The opposition was silenced and eventually brought into the project itself (not everybody – but most of the people). In the end, I have discovered ten keys to success discovered in The Nehemiah Project. We can apply these 10 to our church, in our times and for our long-range plan to be put into effect and succeed.

I find there are ten biblical keys at the core in the Nehemiah Project. If we apply these keys to our plan, we will succeed.

- 1) We listen to beloved friends who speak the truth about the place we love (Nehemiah 1:2-3);
- 2) We Pray continuously for God's Strength and Leadership (1:4-11);
- 3) We Risk Being Honest and Live with the Results (2:1-10).
- 4) We Believe God's Plans are simple, specific, and impossible (Nehemiah 2:17).
- 5) We Trust in the Holy Spirit to lead the visionary leadership of the church (Nehemiah 2:18ff)

- 6) We build a broad-base upon a solid foundation (Nehemiah 3:28-4:9).
- 7) We prepare in advance for potentially disheartening lags in the building process (5:1-19).
- 8) We Celebrate our Victories with Great Joy while living faithfully in God's Word (7:73b-8:18).
- 9) We move forward in faith -- always aware of the potentially destructive opposition which arises in the rebuilding process; and finally;
- 10) We continue to risk for health and growth.

Next Sunday, January 31st, we will worship at 10 a.m., vote on our long-range plan at the Congregational Meeting at 11a.m. and eat great chili at the Fifth Annual Chili Cook-Off at noon. The Long-Range Plan is found at all the exits today. Take one home and consume it.

Our Long-Range Plan calls for all of us to engage. Not one of us can sit back. If we stand to the side or pretend, we are on a Disney Cruise for the next five years. Every one of the listed 1055 members and 352 children of our church needs to step up, step in and step forward as together we Worship, Welcome, Connect, Engage, Build and Communicate. We need to become better listeners and friends, better in our life

of prayer, more honest in our risking to speak “truth with love,” more trusting of the Holy Spirit to lead us and the visionary leaders of our church who we will elect in seven days, more committed to **getting our hands “on the walls:** and our feet dirty with good work as we prepare to fulfill the hopes, dreams and visions of the Long-Range plan. We too will face lags and downtimes in the next five years. We too will be disheartened at times during this building process. We too will hear (or be the voices of) complaints, resistance and opposition. But, we too are called upon to celebrate our **victories with Great Joy as we live faithfully in God’s Word.** We are all called to step forward in faith and Risk for Growth and Health as we worship, welcome, connect, engage, build and communicate.

How are we going to do this? Well, in wrapping up The Nehemiah Project, I take one page from Quantum Theory and one page from the wild west (and I not talking about the Arizona Cardinals or the Denver Broncos. I am talking about stage coach riding). So, Quantum theory and stage coaches.

We will succeed in fulfilling our long-range plan through our relationships – relationships in this congregation which are near and dear to us – and adding to our friendships and relationships in the coming years. This is not a Quantum

Leap! In her groundbreaking book *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe*, Margaret Wheatley studied Quantum Physics, Chaos Theory and Biology to reshape a vision for organizational management. She wrote 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).

In other words – We ALL need each other. We are all here for a variety of reasons, but we are not independent particles of God's Universe (or in this sanctuary or in this congregation). It is our unseen connections which will fundamentally shape the new creation which is becoming First Church.

Beyond Quantum Connectedness, each one of us needs to adopt the mentality of a third class stage coach rider. In his book *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But, I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, James Moore tells the story of the

stagecoach riders of the old west. Did you know there were three classes of stage coach tickets? There were first-class, second-class, and third-class tickets. When the stage coach broke down (which happened often enough), the first class riders could stay aboard while the others got off. No matter if the coach had to be pushed or repaired, they could remain seated. The second-class ticket holders had to get out of the coach, but didn't have to do any work. The third-class riders had to get off and push when the coach broke down.

Rev. Moore says that these three stagecoach classifications fit the ways various people relate to their church as well. Some believe they have a first-class ticket and they sit there thinking they are to be catered to, pampered and waited on. Some believe they are second-class ticket holders. They ride along until there is a problem and then they get off and become detached spectators. They watch while someone else fixes the problem then they get back on and go along for the ride. There are others who live with their third-class tickets. They ride along until there is a problem and then they get off and push, pull, or do what's needed to get the stagecoach moving again. They work creatively and productively to fix the problem. They devote needed energies to the tasks of solving problems. They roll up their sleeves and get the job done. This metaphor begs the defining moment - which one are you? (It does not beg the self-righteous moment! Which

one am I not?) So, which one are you? I am offering everyone a Third class ticket on the stage coach we call First Church!

We need each other more than ever. Together we can worship, welcome, connect, engage, build and communicate in whole new ways at First Church. We have been on the corner of 9th and Broad for almost 85 years. We have been in the heart of this great city for 164 years. Today, I begin my 17th year with you as your Senior Minister. For me to move forward in faith my relationship with you and my friendship with you and with God in Christ has to be renewed every day in wonderful new ways. Staying open to **God's word and the power of the Holy Spirit who calls us** over and over again to be alive and to be witnesses of truth and justice are not just words we are to regurgitate from the Bible. These deep truths are the essence of life – never to be taken for granted in this – the one day that God has given us to be fully alive.

Today we have life. Having life is no small thing. Thanks be to God we have this day to begin again. We are called as members and friends of First Church to live fully into this day which God has given us. As Boynton Merrill, one of my beloved predecessors once wrote about each one of our **callings to follow Jesus Christ in His church, "The church**

of the past is dead and gone; the church of the future is not yet born. We are the church of the Present Day. So, let us **seize this day for Christ's church.**”

Worship. Welcome. Connect. Engage. Build.  
Communicate.

Together with the Nehemiah Project keys for rebuilding, the church, we will invest our time, talents and treasures to make sure the church of the present and the future is as beautiful as the church of the past. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.

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