

*A Lenten sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent I, February 26, 2012, dedicated to Ardis Holt, and always to the glory of God!*

# **“Nehemiah: Gather Them and Bring Them Home, Lord”**

## ***Nehemiah 1:4-11***

### ***Part II of VIII in sermon series “Great Prayers of the Bible”***

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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 rock and our salvation. Amen.

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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 person among the ruling elite. **He was a deeply prayerful Jew.** He was a man who possessed an enlightened and heartfelt compassion for God, his homeland and the fate of Jerusalem.

One day, 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. They 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 through death by poisoning or old age. Even to ask for release was a death-defying request. Nevertheless, scripture tells us that Nehemiah listened to these brothers in faith (1:3). Then he sat down and wept (1:4). He 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. It was prayer that came from his weeping heart.

He prayed (and this is our first Great Prayer): *"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 great prayer ended, he continued to pray.** He prayed for four solid months before he had enough courage to go before King Artaxerxes, ask for mercy, and release from his service. Finally, after four months of continuous prayer, Nehemiah went to the king. Artaxerxes read Nehemiah's eyes

before he spoke and the king asked the cupbearer, "*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. His honesty brought forth an answer to prayer.** 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!

The first key to great prayer comes in **our listening** to the people around us and to God. We listen to those who speak the truth about the places we love and the people we love (Nehemiah 1:2-3); second, we bow our heads, confess our brokenness and pray continuously for God's strength and leadership (1:4-11).

**We listen to friends who speak the truth about the place and people that we love (Nehemiah 1:2-3).** When was the last time you listened to a friend who spoke a clear word to you about your behavior or actions? 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?

**Truth-telling friends are critical to our mental, emotional, and spiritual 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 matter. It doesn't matter who you are. You need other people! In addition, you need to listen and you need to learn - particularly from those who care most deeply about you! In relationships, we learn from each other what the other's loves, passions, and deepest concerns are.

In her 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, 1994, pp 9-10)*

Whether in quantum physics or the chaos reality we call family, church and work, our **particles** need each other! My particles need your particles, our entities cannot exist without each other. We are all here for a variety of reasons. We are not independent particles in God's universe. It is our unseen connections that shape the new creation. These relationships are fundamental to life on this planet.

**I contend that in the universe we know as church, relationships mean eve more!** I once heard a sermon and commentary by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in which he spoke of his own relationships. After one Sunday night service, one wise and faithful woman of his congregation waited until everyone else was gone to speak with her pastor. 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."*

Always remember to listen to friends who speak the truth in love to you about the people and places you love. (Nehemiah 1:2-3)

**Once we have listened, we turn to prayer. 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 our church or any organization, 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.

This great prayer of Nehemiah had a number of elements. First, Nehemiah speaks directly to God. As such, he cries out to God to listen to him. Second, he confesses his sins and the sins of his people and asked for God's mercy. Third, he reminds God of God's promise to Israel and tells God who the recipients of the promise are. Finally, he asks God for a clear answer and for God's blessing for his success in the mission set before him.

Four elements: Crying out; Confessing sins; Reminding God of Divine promises made; and asking for guidance, protection and help.

**Great prayers are clear and elemental.** While we must remember to pray, we 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.

**Great prayers are simple and humble.** Nehemiah's prayer is certainly this and more. It is almost primal. Great prayers are not high and mighty prayers with lofty intentions. He teaches us to keep it simple, to be thankful, and to confess, to ask for mercy, to ask for help - in other words - to ask for God's vision, strength and leadership.

**Now I must confess to you - prayer does not come easily to me.** It is hard for me to be still and open to the presence of God.

My children (and others who love me and who are honest with me) tell me that I have adult attention deficit disorder (AADD). When I was a child, teachers would say, "*Tim is so energetic. He is so enthusiastic.*" This was a code for - "*He is hyperactive!*" My favorite was, "*Tim is hot-wired for sound*" (it was the 60's when everything was "hot").

When I was put outside my classroom into the hallway, for making too much noise - I did not see it as negative. That merely allowed me an opportunity to practice the 60-yard dash (maybe the 40-foot dash)! One day, the principal came around the corner and caught me racing down the hallway. He was not happy. When he stopped me, he asked "*Mr. Ahrens what are you doing?*" I told him I was getting ready for the 1968 Summer Olympics. I do not think I was released from his office until after the Olympic trials because I missed the team that year (and all subsequent years for that matter).

**Staying still, staying in a state of prayer does not come easily to me.** How about you? No matter how hard it is to stay still in prayer, I encourage you to do it. On the other hand, if you cannot stay still, pray on the run! But pray nonetheless!

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 missed the mark (sinned) against you, Lord? How have I missed the mark with others in thought, in word, or in deed?”*

Are you aware of your sins and shortcomings? Do you carry them like a burden or do you pray about them? Do you turn them over to God for God’s healing touch in your life? When we confess our sins, our “missing the mark,” and ask for God’s forgiveness, God is merciful and loving and graceful to us. God is with us and wants to be our “constant help in times of trouble.”

Something else to consider - Did you ever think that you choose not to pray to God and confess your shortcomings and sins because God will grant your prayers and forgive you? What would happen when your life was better, when healing happens? With such a truth grasping our souls, we would have nothing to complain out in our lives, nothing to point out in others that was wrong. If it was WELL WITH OUR SOULS, then we might have to live well and stop our moaning and groaning. Some of us - maybe all too many of us - define ourselves by our gripes and complaints. What if all was well with your soul?

Well, here is a thought. When all was well with Nehemiah, he dedicated himself, body, mind and soul, to rebuilding his city! Right with God, this man dedicated his life to righting the wrongs of the injustices and destruction all around him. Being right with God leads to righting the social malaise surrounding us. Powerful prayers release the possibilities for powerful witness for changing society in the end! Food for thought this Lenten Sunday!

If you are looking for a place to begin in prayer, I recommend the “Jesus” prayer? I learned this prayer from my teacher and friend, Henri Nouwen, many years ago. Simply

saying “Jesus” repeatedly, the prayer quiets and cleanses the soul. As you focus on him, you will feel better and better. One friend prays this prayer as she runs. Another prays it when she does yoga. It is her cleansing breath. As you pray this prayer, you may see yourself and your behaviors through the lens of God in prayer. Another form of this prayer is, “*Jesus, remember me, today. I will remember you in my thoughts, words and deeds.*”

In this prayer, you will find God presents you with plenty of opportunities to live with “Jesus.” God will give you chances to fix what you have 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 of prayer. Amen.

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