

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Everybody, to the Wall! (part 2)

(Nehemiah 3:1-32)

Study #6

Introduction: Hoping for change; changing due to hope...

I don't know about you, but I'm hoping for a cool, wet summer here in San Antonio. It's been a few years - probably a few hundred - since we've had one of those, so, we're certainly due.

I'm also hoping that Kawhi Leonard gets healthy and stays with the Spurs. And I'm hoping that the San Antonio economy stays strong, that the price of gas at the pump goes down, and that good things happen at the upcoming summit with North Korea.

I just used the very biblical word "hope" three times. But I didn't use it in the way the Bible does. My *hopes* about weather, sports, and geo-politics were more like "wishful thinking" than the strong virtue of hope we read about in the Bible.

As Scripture uses the word, *hope* is something that energizes us to take action to bring what we hope for to pass.

A man addicted to something that is ruining his life may hope to stop using. But it's only when he sets his hope on a rich, full life free from his addiction that he'll start taking the courageous steps needed to be free.

Which brings us to the story of Nehemiah.

Review...

Ever since Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, the Jews living in the city likely *hoped* for rebuilt walls and gates.

For one hundred and forty years, those hopes went unfulfilled. Nothing changed until Nehemiah came to town with a vision of being that city on a hill for God. With that vision in place, hope gave birth to work, and the walls started going up.

Last week, we walked through Nehemiah, chapter 3 where the work started. This morning, we are returning to the Construction Chapter to see what else we can glean here that will help us in our own work.

Our work is not to build a wall and to set up gates. Our work is to be and to make disciples. We are commissioned by Jesus to call people we know and love to follow Jesus into life.

Neighbors. Teenagers. Children. People at work, at school, here at church. People stuck in poverty. People who are far from God or who are addicted to porn or opioids or alcohol.

We are to make disciples of people who are trapped by the sex trades or trafficking. People of every ethnicity, every background, every culture.

This is our Great Commission.

There were certain dynamics at work in Jerusalem that got and kept the Jews *on mission*. What we are going to see today will get and keep us on mission, too.

When things finally got cranked up to rebuild the wall, the workers hit the ground running, energized by hope.

Why was that? Well, first listen to Nehemiah's description of the situation in Jerusalem.

For Best Results, Give Real Responsibility

It's All about WE, not ME

[2:17]...“You see the bad situation WE are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. COME, LET US REBUILD the wall of Jerusalem so that WE will no longer be a reproach.”

When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem from Susa, Persia, he returned as the Governor of Palestine. He was put in that very important government post by King Artaxerxes himself.

But Nehemiah never made the project about himself. Building the wall wasn't a “Me” thing; it was a “We” thing and the Jews all knew that they weren't being invited to support some egomaniac's dream.

That's why they responded with such enthusiasm, ***[18b]...“Let us arise and build.”***

Nehemiah told them that the reproach they were suffering was **theirs**, the bad situation was **theirs**, the project was **theirs**, and the benefit that would come from re-building would be **theirs**.

From the very first mention of the project, the people in Jerusalem were given ownership in the venture. He dealt with them, from first to last, top to bottom, with respect.

And how was this genuine personal respect communicated to the people? First, the work was not heavily bureaucratized.

No Red Tape

Chains of command

Many projects with which we get involved are overseen by some sort of chain of command, a hierarchy.

There is a boss. Then, there may be a manager under the boss. Sometimes there are sub-managers under the managers. And then, there are workers.

One example of a very structured, hierarchical organization is the US military.

For the very best of reasons, there is a chain of command in the military. The Department of Defense “org chart” consists of a dizzying array of levels and sub-levels.

There is the same complexity in a company like USAA or H-E-B.

That was not the case with www.buildthewall.com.

As far as I can see, there was not a highly structured hierarchy of managers and overseers. Their org chart was very simple and was virtually FLAT.

There were workers. Period.

My point here is not to make fun of organization. Organization is important. And the work of building the walls around Jerusalem was organized.

But, organization and bureaucracy beyond what is necessary will kill mission. Here's why.

The chains that bind

As an organization becomes more complex, there are more and more levels. At different levels, more and more people are farther and farther removed from the work the organization was formed to do.

Case in point: our military.

According to its website, the mission of the US Department of Defense is “*to provide the military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of our country.*”

That's a very clear mission statement. But there are lots of people in the US military who are ten degrees of separation removed from ever engaging the enemy.

So, the military has to help that person who is farthest from the front lines understand how his or her job is related to the mission of *“detering war and protecting the nation’s security.”*

Or think about a hospital.

Methodist Hospital exists *“to provide compassionate, quality health care services to all those in need.”*

But employed by Methodist - and every other hospital - are lots of people who never even see, much less treat, a patient.

The hospital has to ensure that every person in the organization understands how his or her job relates to the healing task.

So, here’s the deal.

- The more complex the organization, the harder the organization has to work to help each worker see how his or her work contributes to the work of the organization.
- The more streamlined the organization, the less energy needs to be directed toward helping workers understand how their work contributes to the work, thus allowing more energy to go to the work.

In Jerusalem, the work was wall building. And in Jerusalem, if you were involved in the project, you were building the wall.

You, “on mission” for the Great Commission

Now, fast-forward to 2018. Jesus hasn’t told us to make a wall. He’s told us to make disciples. That’s the mission.

Among the many ennobling aspects of being a follower of Jesus is that every follower of Jesus is commissioned to make disciples.

There are hundreds of ways to go about carrying out that mission, depending on your station in life, passions, abilities, temperament, and opportunities.

But no Christian is exempt from the Great Commission; nobody is second-tier; every Christian is mission-critical.

Now. For a throat-clearing *“ahem”*.

Parenthetical...

Churches are organizations. I get that. And sometimes, church organization can be complex - like other organizations - so that churches can do the things that organizations do: care for the yard, pay staff, utilities and insurance, keep up the buildings. Things like that.

As an organization, it’s fine for a church like Northwest to give energy to the things that an organization does. Northwest’s org is not overly complex, but it’s not totally flat.

But, our church is not primarily an organization. Our church and every other church is primarily an organism.

And here is Northwest’s organic org chart. Jesus is over the church. He calls the shots. He makes command decisions. He is the head and every Christian is part of the body.

As an organism, the org chart of the church (CHURCH) is essentially flat. There is the Lord Jesus and there are disciples / disciple-makers.

No matter where you might be on anybody’s organization chart, as a Christ-follower, you are a disciple and you are a disciple-maker.

What kept the workforce motivated in Jerusalem was seeing a direct tie-in between what they were doing and the work on the wall.

And what keeps Christians motivated is seeing a direct tie-in between what they are doing and the work of Jesus.

The more streamlined, the better.

There are lots of things I do as a pastor that are related to the organization. I weigh in on budget-decisions. I review the weekly program. But the biggest questions for me at the end of every day is, “What next step am I taking with Jesus? Who am I helping to take next steps with Jesus?”

And the same thing is true for you.

The first thing, then, that captured the imagination and the energy of the workers was that there was precious little red tape involved in the wall-building project. Second, the job assignments each work crew received kept them motivated.

To the Front Lines!

Specialization vs. generalization

“Specialization” is the watchword of our day.

Attorneys may specialize in family law, tort, corporate, bankruptcy, personal injury, health, or immigration law. Physicians may specialize in any of dozens of aspects of medicine.

Involved in the broad field of construction are architects, civil engineers, electricians, plumbers, framers, drywall hangers, and painters. Each one does a specific job on any given project.

So, what level of specialization do we see in the work of wall-building recorded in Nehemiah 3? Not much.

In Jerusalem, each crew was responsible for an entire section of the wall. No part of the wall was left unfinished while workers waited for the expert.¹

This is not how we would have done it. We would have parceled out the work to the people who knew what they were doing with gates or with stones or with mortar.

Quality control?

Here, on Jerusalem’s wall, Crew #1 started and completed an entire section of the wall and its gate. Crew #2 started and completed the next section. And so on, all the way through Crew #42.

Why organize the work in this way?

Well, giving responsibility for the work done on one whole section of the wall placed accountability in clearly identifiable hands.

If there were any problems at the Sheep Gate, you went straight to Eliashib, the High Priest. If you had issues with the work on the Horse Gate, talk to the priests. Mortar problems at the Water Gate? Take it up with the temple servants.

Handing responsibility for an entire section of the wall to people who may not have had much experience was risky.

But Nehemiah was convinced that if people “owned” the importance of the work AND were given real responsibility and authority to do the work, they would get the work done and they would get the work done well.

Quality wasn’t assured on Jerusalem’s wall because specialists worked at their specialties. The workers built well because they were given the respect of ownership in a job where their hearts were fully vested.

And let me just say that having served as a pastor here at Northwest for a long time, I’ve seen the same thing over and over and over again.

What was true on the wall is true in serving Jesus

Our Food Pantry succeeds because of a simple ministry model.

¹ There were varieties of jobs needing to be done at each section of the wall, including new construction (v. 2) and rehab (v. 3, laying beams, hanging doors, covering doors with bolts and bars), and work on gates. All the crews did what was necessary at whatever part of the wall they were stationed.

Leaders, packers, and donors work together to provide food to insecure San Antonians with meals. Everybody works and it works.

The English as a Second Language classes got started because a few people had a vision to help those who were struggling with English gain language proficiency. ESL is currently connecting with and serving people from Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, Colombia, Russia, and China in Jesus' Name.²

I've watched Christians with no formal training pull together in a Care Group setting to nurture and challenge and equip wounded people to live for Jesus.

We've seen ministry events pulled off without a hitch by people whose hearts were in it. I've seen energized Christians take time, spend money, organize teams and battle adversity to do front line ministry when their hearts were in whatever project they were doing for the Lord.

In fact, I think God delights to take people with little or no formal training and no special qualifications to do His work. He certainly did that in Jerusalem during the wall-building project.

The Person God Uses

In Nehemiah's day...

Nehemiah was superintendent of a workforce made up of priests and Levites (vv. 1, 17, 22, 28), perfumers and goldsmiths (v. 8, 32), government bureaucrats (vv. 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18), and merchants (v. 32).

Obviously, the perfect crew for heavy construction. Not a carpenter or a stonemason among them.

² There's a man in our Care Group who not too long ago decided that he would start a Bible study with some guys at work. Nobody told him to do it or even suggested that he do it. He just wanted to. These men don't know much about the Bible. My friend is helping them by walking through the Bible's stories. Simple.

Yet this was the crew that showed up for work. They worked and they did a fine job, proving that armed with want-to motivation, God's people can be trusted to carry out the mission with quality.

This theme of God using workers despite a lack of credentials surfaces throughout the Bible. Just look at those God used in ancient times, and marvel.

Throughout the Old Testament

God used Moses - a man with a speech impediment - to lead His people out of Egypt. He then used Joshua, who had lived his whole life in Moses' shadow, to lead Israel into Canaan.

He used deeply flawed judges - like Samson - to deliver His people from enemies. He repeatedly used kings - like David, the adulterer and murderer; Solomon, the polygamist; even Manasseh, the idolater - to rule Israel.³

The New Testament shows the same tendency to utilize people to do important tasks we might not have chosen.

For instance, would you have chosen the apostles Jesus chose?

With Jesus...

Simon Peter was given to speaking before thinking. James and John placed personal interest above loyalty to the cause. Thomas doubted. Matthew (the tax-collector) had a lousy reputation. Everybody knew that Judas Iscariot, the group's treasurer, took money from the common purse.

Yet these were the guys God used (excepting Judas) to turn the world upside down for Christ.

³ By the way, do you know the story of Manasseh? He was the worst king in Judah's history...and then, when he was in distress, in captivity, he cried out to the Lord, repented of his great sin, was restored to the throne, and ruled well for the rest of his life.

Paul, the former persecutor of the church, became apostle to the world. He was thrilled that God used unlikely people (like himself). When writing to the church at Corinth, he reminded them of this.

First century church (see 1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

[1 Cor. 1:26] For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many WISE according to the flesh, not many MIGHTY, not many NOBLE; [27] but God has chosen the FOOLISH things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the WEAK things of the world to shame the things which are strong, [28] and the BASE things of the world and the DESPISED God has chosen, the things that ARE NOT, so that He may nullify the things that are, [29] so that no man may boast before God.

God *saves* undeserving people and then He *uses* unlikely people to do His work to eliminate boasting, except in Him.

We see this theme (God chooses and uses the unlikely) played out today, too.

Today...

When our church first started supporting Dean Chollar as a missionary, he and his family were serving in Belgium. I went to spend a couple of weeks with Dean around 1990. At that time, Dean noticed that he was having trouble seeing.

Over the years, Dean's eye problems became more pronounced. He finally lost all sight at least fifteen years ago. While mostly blind, he founded and still leads Crossway, International, an organization that serves widows and orphans and the poor. Crossway spreads the Gospel and many, many thousands of people have come to faith in Jesus in Nicaragua and Kenya through the ministry of the blind missionary. Who would have thought it?

Paul and Laura Lere attended Northwest early on and then went to Mexico as career missionaries. They now lead a very effective ministry called International Training Partners.

ITP equips Christian workers in many countries, using week-long seminars to teach healthy relational skills, a pressing need for all ministry teams.

Paul and Laura are uniquely qualified to lead this ministry because of a devastating, broken-relationship experience of their own, in Puebla, Mexico. Some thought the Leres were through. No. God used their pain to equip them to serve with great power.

And, while I hate to use myself as an example of anything, I will say that my life fits the pattern of God being willing to use the unlikely.

Raised in an unbelieving, church-going home, I was an atheist before High School and was terrified of public speaking throughout High School because of an early lisp and an inability to say "r".

God has allowed me to serve Him. Jesus welcomed me into His service.

Again. God *saves* undeserving people like us who turn to Jesus in faith. He then *uses* unlikely-but-willing people like us to do His work.

He used the Jews of Nehemiah's generation - perfumers and priests and merchants and goldsmiths - to make a wall. He uses us to make disciples for Jesus.

When He said, ***[Matthew 28:19] "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..."*** He was talking to people just like us.

He decided on a strategy to reach the world that consisted of:

- motivating by "want-to";
- connecting every worker directly to the mission; and
- empowering anyone who is willing to serve.

The final gem I'm going to mention from the Construction Chapter has to do with leadership. I want you to notice the leadership role that Nehemiah filled as work on the wall progressed.

Leadership Must Lead

Leadership by Disappearance

Look through every verse of the chapter and you will notice that you won't notice Nehemiah. The instigator of this whole wall-building project isn't mentioned.⁴ We wonder, "*Where's Nehemiah?!*"

I don't think for a moment that he was off somewhere taking a siesta. I suspect that he was playing the role of head cheerleader, running from place to place and lending aid wherever it was needed.

But he stayed in the shadows while his own greatest dream was coming true.

As will be clear throughout the book, Nehemiah was a tremendously catalyzing influencer. But he was content to allow others to get the spotlight while he worked hard to bring them to their full potential in the work of God.

And here, in the chapter that records the work itself, he is off the radar. He calls no attention to himself. I find that remarkable. The workers are all in the spotlight and the leader is invisible.

What a great example of humility. What a way for Nehemiah to shout, "*It's not about me.*"

In whatever leadership role any of us may ever have, let's learn from this man. We don't draw attention to what we've done. We push others into the spotlight. We retreat.

And one more thing. If Nehemiah led by disappearing, others led by demonstration.

⁴ There actually is a "Nehemiah" mentioned in this chapter, but it is a different man. [*Nehemiah 3:16*] *After him Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, official of half the district of Beth-zur, made repairs as far as a point opposite the tombs of David, and as far as the artificial pool and the house of the mighty men.*

Leadership by Demonstration

Sweat equity from the priests

It's a bad rap that people like pastors don't like to get their hands dirty, that we really think that cleanliness is next to godliness.

We don't. But, it still isn't likely that the priesthood of Nehemiah's day were experts in construction. That makes what we read at the beginning of the chapter all the more impressive.

[1] Eliashib, the high priest arose with his brothers the priests and built the Sheep Gate.⁵

The priests are the very first workers listed.

When it was time for sacrifice and offering, they would fulfill their role there. Now it's time to lay bricks and spread mortar, so that is that they did.

Sweat equity from the politicians

Then, there was Malchijah (v. 14), the chief official of the district of Beth-haccherem. I love Malchijah.

He was a government official with an impressive title, and his place on the wall was the Refuse Gate (also called the Dung Gate).

That's not exactly a plumb assignment. But Malchijah didn't think that he was somehow "above" repairing the gate through which the people of Jerusalem carried out their waste.

He didn't back away from the work. He led by working, of all places, there.

The Chief Priest, the general priests, the Levites and government officials led by working hard.

⁵ The work of other priests and Levites is recorded at verses 17, 22, and 28. The religious workers were well represented in this work.

Honestly, the work got done because everybody, from the most esteemed leader to the one who was not, worked hard.

Sweat equity today

What was vital for the work in Nehemiah's day is just as vital today when it comes to the Great Commission.

The work of helping people take next steps with Jesus doesn't get done unless we are all finding our place on the wall.

Some of you have places on the wall at home, where you are building in to the next generation or modeling Jesus to your roommates or to your spouse.

Your place on the wall may be at your place of work, where you already spend lots of hours. You're pressing Jesus into the lives of your co-workers.

Lots of you have places on the wall here at church. You are involved with music or missions or women or men or youth or children or babies or small groups or greeting. You're on staff or a ministry coordinator, a deacon or an elder.

Whoever you are and wherever you are on the wall, you are a leader. You are an influencer for the Great Commission. (or, a servant, if you prefer; with Jesus, the terms are almost interchangeable...)

Paul had you in mind when he wrote, **[Romans 12:8]... he who leads, [let him lead] with diligence.** - and that's just taking a page out of Nehemiah's playbook. Wherever you are on the wall, work hard.

Work hard, because you are a follower of Jesus, a person made in the image and likeness of God. And people - people like you - have always been God's method.

People Are God's Methods

I mentioned a minute ago that Nehemiah was absent in the Construction Chapter. A careful reading will reveal that there is also no mention of God. That doesn't at all mean that He's irrelevant to the work. God is at the center of the whole thing.⁶

But there is no record of a miraculous intervention here or thunderings from heaven. His hand in the wall-building project is "light" as He allowed the workers to simply work.

Everything anyone has ever done for God could have been done better and quicker by God Himself.

God could have built a better ark than Noah's, could have judged better than the Judges, could have put together a more beautiful temple than Solomon.

He could have built a better wall than Nehemiah and Company.

But that's not God's way. He was more pleased to see Peter stand up and preach at Pentecost, and to watch Paul travel to Asia Minor with the Gospel, and to let Priscilla and Aquila team up to teach Apollos.

He was delighted that the builders in Jerusalem got their hands dirty. He was thrilled to watch them throw themselves into the work, working out their passion for Him.

And He is overjoyed when you and I "own" the Great Commission. People are still His method.⁷

⁶ In the same way, God's is never mentioned in the book of Esther, either, but He is unmistakably present.

⁷ E.M. Bounds said a century ago, "People look for a better method - God looks for better [people]. We look for well-oiled machinery - God looks for well-greased elbows. We look for someone to whom we can pass the buck - God looks for a man or a woman who says, with Isaiah, **"Here am I, Lord. Send me!"**"