

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 22, 2018)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Welcome to the Mess

(Nehemiah, chapter 13)

Study #15

Introduction: Entropy

Science is wonderful. I'm not terribly scientific, but I love the way that science explains lots of things.

For instance, entropy. The law of entropy explains my desk.

My desk is a mess because of entropy, which says, generally, that all systems, left to themselves, tend toward disorder. That's my desk and anything else that is left to itself.

Entropy applies to the world of physics and explains a lot that goes on in the natural world related to the conservation of energy.

Organizations, left to themselves, tend toward disorder. So do relationships. This morning, as we turn to Nehemiah one last time, we'll see that when we don't nurture our life with God, when we don't pay attention to the critical matters of the heart, entropy takes over and the result is a mess.

Review of Nehemiah

This morning marks the 15th and final installment in our study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. And I hope that you've enjoyed Nehemiah - the man and the book - as much as I have.

Beginning in May, we watched Nehemiah lead a group of Jews who were used to losing into a series of stunning successes AND into spiritual revival.

Last week, especially, the people consolidated the gains of that revival by re-populating the city of Jerusalem, holding a worship service to remember, and then putting in place an infrastructure to ensure that the revival fires would keep burning.

Now, we come to chapter 13, which may well make you wish the book had ended at Nehemiah 12:47.

This last chapter is ugly, messy. Entropy rules Nehemiah 13. But I believe that when we're finished, you'll be glad we have seen it, because in the mess, we also see God's beautiful, redemptive hand.

To start with, let's recount the promises we've heard the Jews make to obey and to honor God.

Promises, promises, promises...

They specifically promised that they would not marry people who didn't trust the Lord. To maintain faith-filled homes, they will marry only within the family of faith. (10:30)

They also promised to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. For a very long time, as important as the Sabbath was to Israel, they had not been observing the Sabbath. Now they will. (10:31)

They promised that they would pay the 1/3-shekel tax to support the ministry of the temple (10:32-33) and that they would supply the on-going need for wood for the sacrifices (10:34-34)

They promised that they would pay all of the tithes and offerings required in the Law for the sacrifices and for the support of the priests and the Levites (10:35-39)

And, finally (and this is one we didn't see last Sunday), they promised that they would not allow Ammonites or Moabites to enter the temple. (13:1-3)

[13:1] On that day they read aloud from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people;¹ and there was found written in it that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God [2] because they did not meet the sons of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them. However, our God turned the curse into a blessing.

Prior to this reading (on the day of that wonderful worship service of chapter 12), the people had been ignorant of this Law. They didn't know that, because of the cruel way these people had treated the Jews, Ammonites and Moabites were not to enter the place of worship.

Now they know. And they obediently excluded these people from the national life of Israel.

So, with all these promises made and in place, all is well in Jerusalem. And, with things moving in this extremely positive direction, Governor Nehemiah sensed that now was the time to make a return trip to Persia to see and to serve his king.

[6a] But during all this time I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king.

When King Artaxerxes first gave Nehemiah the green light to travel to Jerusalem, he also asked, "*When are you coming back?*" (2:6). Clearly, Artaxerxes wanted this valuable servant back.

Nehemiah had been gone for twelve years (from year twenty through year thirty-two of the king's reign) and the time for returning had come. We watch him leave Jerusalem on the (roughly) thousand-mile journey to Persia to return to the king, just like he promised.

Nehemiah served for some, undefined period of time in Persia. Then, after some time there, he asked leave from the king. Again, the king said, "*Yes.*" (v. 7)

There is no question that Nehemiah's been gone for some years. The travel alone would have taken months. Finally, he has come back to the people and to the city he loved.

What he found as he rolled into town proved that sadly, promises made can easily be un-made. Nehemiah walked into an unholy, broken-promise mess.

What Nehemiah DID with the Unholy Mess in Jerusalem (13:4-31)

About that Promise to Store Supplies in the Temple...(vv. 4-9)

Eliashib allowed Tobiah to live in the temple. (vv. 4-5)

[4] Now prior to this, Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, being related to Tobiah [5] had prepared a large room for him, where formerly they put the grain offerings, the frankincense, the utensils, and the tithes of grain, wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, the singers and the gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

Tobiah's part in the story

First, let's remember Tobiah. He's shown up before in the story.

- In chapter 2, Tobiah and his sidekick Sanballat, tried to demoralize the Jews, accusing them of rebelling against the Persian King.
- In chapter 4, Tobiah ridiculed the Jews for their attempts to build the wall.
- In the same chapter, Tobiah became furious when they actually made progress in the wall-building work and he conspired with others to fight against the Jews (v. 8).
- In chapter 6, Tobiah orchestrated an attempt to discredit Nehemiah by having him flee into the temple to save his life. (An attempt that failed because of Nehemiah's courage and integrity.)

Despite all of this, Eliashib - a priest - allowed Tobiah to set up light housekeeping in the temple. And this is wrong on so many levels.

¹ On at least two other occasions in this book we have seen the Jews giving themselves to listening to the words of the Law of Moses. (chapter 9, 12)

The wrongs

First, Tobiah was an Ammonite, a member of the nation the Jews had expressly promised they would not allow in the temple. Tobiah the Ammonite is LIVING in the temple.

Second, Tobiah was “*related*” to Eliashib’s family, presumably by marriage. That is a violation of the promise made by the Jews to not give their sons and daughters to marry people outside of their faith.

Third, Eliashib - the priest! - had set Tobiah up to live in a place in the temple that was reserved for storing the supplies necessary for the nation’s worship. With Tobiah living in that place, there is less room to store those supplies. The on-going ministry of the temple is diminished because of broken promises.

So, while the cat had been away in Persia, the mice had been playing. And now, everybody is in shock.

Nehemiah was shocked at the promise-breaking. Eliashib was shocked that Nehemiah was back. And Tobiah was shocked at what Nehemiah did.

Nehemiah evicted Tobiah (vv. 7b-9)

[8] It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah’s household goods out of the room. [9] Then I gave an order and they cleansed the rooms² and I returned there the utensils of the house of God with the grain offerings and the frankincense.

Nehemiah labeled Tobiah’s living situation “*evil*”, and he just threw him out.³

Now, Nehemiah’s not going to win any awards for subtlety or for diplomacy here. But I find something compelling about this man who doesn’t calculate. He acts.

He’s overwhelmed by a passion for God, sees a wrong and boldly rights it. (There was another Man who did something similar, in the temple, a few centuries later; see John’s gospel, chapter 2...)

And Nehemiah’s not at all finished. There are more wrongs to right because the people have broken lots of their promises.

About that Promise to Support Levites and singers... (vv. 10-14)

The people don’t support the Levites and the singers (v. 10)

[10] I also discovered that the portions of the Levites had not been given them, so that the Levites and the singers who performed the service had gone away, each to his own field.

Remember how they had promised to support the priesthood with the tithe? (10:35-39) They even re-promised at the end of that fabulous time of worship. (chapter 12)

Well, at some point, while Nehemiah was away, they stopped paying their tithes and that required that the Levites and the singers support themselves, causing them to neglect their sacred duties.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found no active priesthood, no active religious ritual, and no active worship system.

Nehemiah enforced support for servants of God (vv. 11-13)

[11] So I reprimanded the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” Then I gathered them together and restored them to their posts. [12] All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.

Notice. He brought the Levites and the singers back to their posts BEFORE the tithes were brought in, even before it was certain that those tithes would be paid. (Talk about a step of faith for the Levites and singers!)

But, with the worship leaders in place, the people did step up to the plate. All Judah brought in the tithes.

² This was not just a single room. Eliashib set Tobiah up in a suite of rooms.

³ So, where were these supplies while Tobiah was living there? We don’t know. But it is possible that Tobiah’s use of these rooms says that the whole ministry of the temple had fallen into disrepair and disregard while Nehemiah was gone.

The solving of this second crisis was followed by a prayer from Nehemiah.

Nehemiah prayed for God's blessing (v. 14)

[14] "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services."

Nehemiah prayed that God would bless him for his faithfulness. This was a specific, and very personal prayer. Remember **ME, MY** God, **MY** loyal deeds, which **I** have done.

Don't think of Nehemiah's prayer as selfish. He believed in a God who rewards those who serve Him, a belief which the author of the book of Hebrews says is central to pleasing God. (Hebrews 11:6)

So, two promises broken. Two wrongs righted. There is more to come.

About that promise to keep the Sabbath... (vv. 15-22)

The people broke the law of the Sabbath (vv. 15-16)

[15] In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as well as wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. [16] Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem.

The people had previously promised to not buy or sell on the Sabbath. In obedience to the Mosaic Law, they promised that they wouldn't work on the sabbath.

But, now, on the sabbath day they are making wine and selling grain and all kinds of other stuff. The sabbath has become a day like every other day.

Needless to say, Nehemiah was not going to stand for this.

Nehemiah enforced the observance of the Sabbath (vv. 17-22a)

[17] Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the Sabbath day? [18] Did not your fathers do the same so that our God brought on us, and on this city, all this trouble? Yet you are adding to the wrath on Israel by profaning the sabbath." [19] And it came about that just as it grew dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and that they should not open them until after the sabbath. Then I stationed some of my servants at the gates so that no load should enter on the sabbath day.

Reminding them of the consequences of sabbath-breaking in former days⁴ ("Your forefather did the same thing - and look at what happened to them!"⁵), he ensured sabbath-keeping by stationing Levites as guards at the gates around the city.

Now, of course, the opposition didn't immediately roll over and play dead. They tried to keep their foot in the door. Nehemiah slammed the door shut on their toes. (v. 20)

Even when they tried spending the night on the ground outside the gate, he told them, "Camp at your own risk!" (v. 21)

After the sins of the Sabbath had been effectively dealt with, Nehemiah again prayed.

Nehemiah prayed for God's blessing (v. 22b)

[22b]... "For this also remember me, O my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness."

⁴ Here, again, reprimands are handed out. But it is against the rulers (= the economic, civic leaders) that the reprimands are directed.

⁵ Ezra 9:13; Jeremiah 17:21

We keep reading and come to yet another crisis caused by the people's promise-breaking.

About That Promise to Marry Within the Faith... (vv. 23-29)

The people gave their children to marry outside the faith (vv. 23-24)

[23] In those days I also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. [24] As for their children, half spoke in the language of Ashdod, and none of them was able to speak the language of Judah, but the language of his own people.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he immersed himself in the life of the city and noticed things.

Among the things he noticed was that Jewish men had taken as wives, women from the city of Ashdod,⁶ and from the tribes of the Ammonites⁷ and Moabites.

The upshot of these marriages was a diluted faith in the marriages' offspring. The children didn't speak the Hebrew language; more to the point, they didn't believe the Hebrew faith.

I want you to watch what Nehemiah did when he discovered that the Jews were marrying outside the faith. But first, a contrast.

About a dozen years before Nehemiah FIRST arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra the scribe had discovered that the Jews were doing this same thing. Here's what Ezra did when he found out.

⁶ These were Philistines, or at least, descendants of the ancient race of the Philistines. By Nehemiah's time, there might not have been any pure-blooded Philistines left, as the culture had been wiped out by the Jews and by other invading forces, most notably Assyria. At the very least, though, these women from Ashdod were not God-fearing Jewish women.

⁷ In their defense, we might argue that they were simply imitating their spiritual leaders. Eliashib, the priest, had allowed intermarriage with the Ammonite, Tobiah's, family. See verses 4ff, above.

[Ezra 9:3] When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.

That is not *exactly* Nehemiah's response...

Nehemiah righted this wrong, too (vv. 25-28)

[25] So I contended with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves."

Evidently, Nehemiah had graduated from his counseling school with an MMA degree. Not long on tenderness - but effective.⁸

After beating them up, Nehemiah caught his breath and spoke to them.

[26] "Did not Solomon king of Israel sin regarding these things? Yet among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin." [27] "Do we then hear about you that you have committed all this great evil by acting unfaithfully against our God by marrying foreign women?"

The wisest king in all of Israel's history succumbed to the pitfalls of marriage outside the faith, and it made him a spiritual wreck.

Nehemiah assured his contemporaries that if they continued on the road they were traveling, not only would they end up as debased as Solomon had been, but God would judge them just as surely as He had judged Solomon!⁹

⁸ Jesus Himself acted violently on at least a couple of occasions (cleansing the Temple by driving out buyers and sellers) And He was certainly blunt/harsh in His words to religious leaders. See Matthew 23:13-33 where He named those leaders, "hypocrites" (v. 13 and throughout the passage), "blind guides" (v. 16), "whitewashed tombs" (v. 27), and "serpents."

⁹ Perhaps especially painful for Nehemiah would be the realization that the intermarriage practices had infected the priesthood. The branches of the family

THEN, Nehemiah prayed the third prayer in this chapter, a somewhat different kind of prayer than we have seen to this point.

Nehemiah prayed against those who had broken their promises to God. (v. 29)

[29] “Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.”

Nehemiah prayed that God would remember **them** for their faithLESSness. It is certainly prayer, but this time it is “*Remember them - and get ‘em, God!*”

And there is yet one more broken promise.

About Those Promises About the Priests’ Duties (vv. 30-31)

Nehemiah re-established duties for the priests and Levites and for the supply of wood (vv. 30-31a)

[30] Thus I purified them from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, [31] and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times and for the first fruits.”

They had promised to have the priests and the Levites gainfully employed in the work of worship and that the people would ensure sufficient wood for the sacrifices on the altar.

Neither of those promises were kept, so Nehemiah gave assignments and made it so.

If Nehemiah was tempted to throw in the towel, he didn’t give in to that temptation. He’s a model of stick-to-it-ive-ness and perseverance.

trees of Tobiah and Sanballat and Eliashib the priest were hopelessly intertwined. One of the grandsons of the High Priest (like the priest of verse 4, named Eliashib) had married the daughter of Sanballat (a foreigner from the nation of the Horonites), another one of the serious enemies of the Jews throughout this book.

And, at the end of the book, we hear this man, who was all about God, praying to God one more time.

Nehemiah prayed for God’s blessing (v. 31b)

[31b]...Remember me, O my God, for good.”

It’s been inspiring to see Nehemiah’s spirit. But I’ve got to admit to this final chapter being quite the disappointment.

Especially after the highlight of last week, I wish we could have ended things on a nice note of triumphant trust and obedience. Wouldn’t it have been great for Nehemiah to have returned from Persia to find a Jerusalem that was fixed and focused on God?

Yes, it would. But all we have seen today has been FAILURE.

- Failure in allowing Tobiah to live in the Temple.
- Failure in not supporting the priesthood.
- Failure in not keeping the Sabbath.
- Failure in not keeping purity in marriage.

Ever since he had first left Susa, all those long years ago, Nehemiah had envisioned a revitalized and re-populated Jerusalem, living within secure walls, shining as a bright light for God in a dark world.

In this chapter, his every dream was dashed. The revived people of God quickly reverted to rebellion.

And we wonder, what now? Sure, the wrongs have once again been righted, but will it last? What happens when Nehemiah goes back to serve Artaxerxes again?

What does Nehemiah think after having experienced such a display of entropy, such a descent into messiness? And what are people like us to do with a story that ends like this?

I’ve got three thoughts and my first thought is addressed to all you Nehemiahs here today.

What Do We DO with What Nehemiah Did?

Nehemiah, the Hero

Because of this one man, a man who loved God, great things happened for God. A wall was built around Jerusalem. Revival broke out. Here at the end, re-revival.

But, I think it's clear that Nehemiah was only able to persevere in this great work for God because he kept his eyes fixed on God.

He cared more for the applause of heaven than he did for the results of his labors. It was his relationship with God that enabled him to keep on keeping on.

It is true that the presence of one person who fears the Lord can make all the difference in life and in the world. But it's a grave error to make it your aim to make that difference.

It's a focus error because God is the One who is in charge of results. Not you. Not me. Not us. We'll make it faithfully through setbacks and opposition and disappointments if we'll keep our eyes on Jesus as we serve.

If nothing else, Nehemiah's prayer life tells us to focus on our great and awesome God, not results. Results are His domain. We get to serve, to be faithful.

Second, in Nehemiah's last chapter, we note God's unfailing love and grace.

Despite Repeated Rebellion, God Doesn't Reject His People

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul wrote, ***[Romans 5:20] God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant.*** (New Living Translation)

At no point in the Jews' rebellion - along the way or here at the end - did God ever say, *"Enough. I've had it. You people are incorrigible. I am no longer your God. I will find another people."*

His people were, and we are incorrigible. But He is unfailingly gracious. Despite repeated rebellion, God didn't reject His people, the Jews, in the days of Nehemiah. And, despite repeated failure and sin among believers in Jesus, today, God doesn't throw in the towel on us.

You who have believed in Jesus have eternal life. If it can be lost, it never was very eternal, was it? You are always will be God's daughter, God's son, though faith in Jesus. God will never stop being your Father. He will never un-adopt you.¹⁰

Finally, Nehemiah 13 confirms the truth of entropy. Left to ourselves, we tend to be disorderly messes.

Where there are People, there will be Messes

Nehemiah 13 is not an anomaly. It is common to read stories in the Bible of sin, committed by the best of people.

Jewish rebellion began when Abraham tried to pawn off his wife, Sarah, as his sister, to stay safe. The Jews' sinful ways continued, with only brief periods of obedience, throughout their history.

King David murdered the husband of the woman he slept with and wise King Solomon offered his children as sacrifices to idols.

And what was true about Israel has been just as true of Jesus' followers.

Simon Peter denied Jesus three times. Barnabas was carried away into hypocrisy in Antioch. John Mark abandoned Barnabas and Saul on the First Missionary Journey. On and on we could go.

A study of church history will give you some glimpses of beauty and grace. No question. But you will learn things that your family in Christ has done that will appall and embarrass you.

And, if there are messes among those of us who believe in the God revealed in the Bible, it's also true that the world beyond the world of faith is a mess. Human history is a disappointing story.

¹⁰ See John 10; also Hebrews 13:5.

I say all of this to make a point, a theological point. Messiness - sin, cruelty, injustice, rebellion - is the human condition.

Of course, knowing Jesus, walking with Jesus produces change. Substantial change. But not perfection. Not in this life.

Every Christian you'll ever meet is a mess and needs to take a next step into faith, love, and obedience.

Which is to say that every church is populated by messes. 100%. Everybody. No exceptions.

In other words, there are some messes who have never tasted Jesus' amazing grace and are far from God. And, there are some messes who are forgiven, possess eternal life, and are children of God. But everybody is a mess.

And a church - our church - should be, must be, a place where messy people are welcomed, embraced, and lovingly walked into their next step with Jesus.

So much divides us, culturally, today. Politics, religion, ethnicity, and more.

Messes are life's great equalizers. Everybody faces messes.

Cancer. A family breakup. A car wreck. An addiction. Sudden financial reversal. A shattered dream. A prodigal son or daughter. Time in jail.

We messes who know and follow Jesus are uniquely equipped to help others who have messed up, who have been wrecked by someone else's messiness, or who have been the standby victim of a random earthquake.

We follow Jesus, the most loving Person who ever lived, who also is the truth, incarnate.

Imagine being that person who holds truth and love in perfect tension when you are walking with your friend through a mess.

You weep with him as he weeps over his mess. You speak truth to him about his mess. Not *either* truth *or* love. Both.

Imagine being that church where we all admit to our messiness and we all get truth and love from each other. Imagine being the church that offers truth and love to everyone who comes our way.

I mean, if not here, where? Where else but in a mess-friendly church that follows Jesus will other messes find a warm embrace and the truth that liberates?

When you see messiness, don't be shocked by it. Pray. Look for ways to help.

And remember that God's redemptive power is often seen in the middle of the mess as He reverses entropy and brings order out of chaos.