

“First Things First”

Nehemiah 9:1-5

Final in Sermon Series on “A Time to Build”

August 9th, 2020

Pastor Andy Kinsey

“Stand up and bless the Lord your God....”

Nehemiah 9:5a

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to put first things first: help us by your Spirit to realize where we can turn away from the wrong and move toward the right, as you give us the grace and power to do so. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen!

Message

There is nothing like a global pandemic, economic fears, political gridlock, social unrest, and personal worry to put the spotlight on what truly matters. At least, I hope so. That it is say: I hope that over the last five months, we have had the opportunity to reflect on what is important. To put it another way: “Let us not let this crisis go to waste!” There are ways we can claim the resources of God’s grace amidst our challenges.

I make this observation after taking part in the Global Leadership Summit this week. To be sure, the Summit was very different this year: it all was virtual, but it contained some very familiar themes on leadership. Indeed, one of the “takeaways” was the following description of what this moment in history looks like. It is an acronym from the United States Military: V.U.C.A., or Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous.

The situation is VUCA! All of us, around the world, are in a time of unrest. There is volatility in the economy, for example; there is uncertainty with respect to the coronavirus and the long-term effects of the virus on us; there is complexity in dealing with schools and businesses reopening, and ambiguity in areas of social well-being. There is also an erosion of trust.

The uncertainty creates fear and anxiety, as no one really knows what might take place next; nevertheless, we need to continue our journey in faith and find ways of adapting in the present and so build a more hopeful future.

As I understand it, as part of my own philosophy in this time: we need to proceed with caution, in terms of health and safety, but we also we need to understand the leading of the Spirit, as we discern what Christ would have us to do.

In short, there is nothing like a pandemic to focus the mind and the heart on “first things,” or on what really matters, on what Christ would have us to do.

The Nehemiah Challenge

Over the last few weeks, we have been working through the book of Nehemiah and sharing how Nehemiah faced a time of rebuilding Jerusalem after the Babylon Exile. We have been learning how he faced opposition from within and from without. It was a daunting task.

However, through Nehemiah, we hopefully have discovered ways of dealing with our challenges, if not overcoming them, through prayer and teamwork and through virtues like patience and perseverance.

Indeed, one of the things I have noticed moving through this book is the importance of prayer: at just about every turn, Nehemiah is praying!

To be sure, as we shared last weekend, Nehemiah had to contend with discouragement, and he had to understand that not everyone was onboard.

After all, Nehemiah was set not only on rebuilding a physical structure, but on creating a common spiritual or ethical foundation (Nehemiah 2:18).¹ He was wanting the people to recognize that the work was not about a person named Nehemiah, but was about a people called Israel.

In our passage this weekend, we see another aspect of rebuilding, which involves the collective prayer of confession and remembrance (Nehemiah 9:1-38). (In fact, in terms of prayers in the Bible, this particular passage is the longest collective prayer in the Bible!)

¹ See the sermon by Pastor Andy Kinsey, “When God Inspects the Foundations” from August 8, 2020 at www.franklingrace.org.

Now, I do not know if you like “long-winded prayers,” but this is actually a very long prayer – a marathon prayer, if you will. In fact, I can remember when I was serving in Vincennes I attended a large church gathering, and the pastor in charge had warned the saints who had come that evening that they were not to give any “marathon prayers,” or prayers that would go on and on and on!

Have you ever heard a marathon prayer? Praying for everyone and everything, not once, but many times – from sister Sarah to brother Bernie. The prayer would continue usually until someone would come down the aisle just to end the prayer! And when that person would come to the altar, we all should shout, “Amen!”

There is a great story about the evangelist D.L. Moody who once asked a fellow-pastor to pray at his famous church in Chicago. The pastor prayed and prayed, whereupon, after ten minutes, Reverend Moody stood up and said, “While our dear brother is finishing his prayer, we will turn to our hymnals and sing our closing song together!”

We are only focusing on the first five verses of chapter 9, but the whole chapter is one long prayer of confession and remembrance. First, it is a call to the whole nation to repent and to turn to God; it is a prayer to call the people to a life of humility and self-examination – confession. Second, it is a call to remember: remember who God is as creator and redeemer; that is, remember what God has done in bringing freedom and liberation from bondage – remembrance.

The whole setting is one of collective remorse, with Nehemiah and Ezra leading the people to acknowledge the corporate nature of the nation’s sin on the one hand and the generational effects of that sin on the other. The whole gathering is about the way the whole nation has missed the mark, and how it can get back on track.

It happens to be a very familiar biblical scene, with sackcloth and fasting, and with ashes on the forehead, with confession of sin, similar to what we share on Ash Wednesday, or on what we read in the prophets like Jeremiah and Joel, or Jonah and Isaiah.² There is a “going back” to basics, and there is a deep recognition that the future needs to be better than the past.

² Jeremiah 6:26; Joel 1:8-13; Jonah 3:6-8; Isaiah 22:12.

This is part of the reason, I think, why the people pulled out the book of the Law, probably the book of Deuteronomy, as it is in Deuteronomy that Israel learns to confess the basics of its faith and remembers its identity and purpose: The Shema –

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.³

It is very similar to what we read in our passage today, where Israel blesses God and devotes its life to God (Nehemiah 9:5): remembering all that God has done for the people – in calling Abraham and Sarah, in leading Moses and Miriam, in making covenant at Sinai, and in settling in the Land, and then in rebelling against God and forgetting God’s ways.⁴

All of that is in this prayer, and it is a reminder about what “matters” most, or about putting “first things first.” Nehemiah slows down long enough to lead the people in the direction of honoring God and then sharing in the goodness of God with others.

Again, it is confession, and like all confession, it requires humility: which says, “Hey, I am not in control, but I will continue trust God.” A confession, which says, “Hey, I am going to make mistakes, and I have made mistakes” but which relies on God’s forgiving grace and keeps an open heart. A confession, which says, “Hey, I am part of something much bigger here, and I cannot always see the whole, so I know I need patience to understand.”

A confession is not an attempt to beat ourselves up with guilt and shame. No, a confession is God’s invitation to us to recognize how we all depend on God in the first place and to remember that if we forget what matters most we need to realign ourselves with God, to turn to God.

I believe that it is what Jesus meant when he said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God!”⁵ Seek God first!

Closing Invitation

³ Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

⁴ We see these themes throughout Nehemiah 9 and into Nehemiah 10.

⁵ Matthew 6:33.

Let me ask you a question: Over the last five months, have you discovered in a new way what matters most? Have your priorities changed?

During the Global Leadership Summit, we learned how in a crisis we come to see what is most important and what great leadership is really all about: with trust, honesty, humility, hope, love, compassion, the very character of Christ!

And I am wondering how, in a season when there seems to be so much anger and hostility, uncertainty and volatility, we need to keep coming back to what matters most, or of putting first things first: of loving God and neighbor, of bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, of forgiving others, of walking as Jesus walked.⁶

Because I really do believe, we are living in a time of rebuilding: we are living in a moment in history where we need to rebuild trust, amongst different institutions and groups and among nations. We are living in a day when the foundations of our society, as Paul Tillich once shared, have been shaken and where there is suffering on a large scale, as we witnessed in Beirut this week (as one example).

We live in that kind of day, where the time to rebuild has come.

(Pastor Andy's sermon ends here and then Pastor Jenothy has a video response. Go to www.franklingrace.org for the response and sermon.)

⁶ Matthew 23:34-40; Galatians 5:23-24; Colossians 3:12-17. To walk as Jesus walked was a favorite axiom of John Wesley and the early Methodists.