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For the City: Leading Change

Nehemiah 2:10-20

We are in a sermon series on Nehemiah asking the question, “What does it mean to REALLY be FOR our city?” The starting point...one that we will continue to pound away on...is that we must first NOTICE who and what is going on around us! I’m going to brag on my LifeGroup. Friday when I asked how they were doing at noticing those around them, every man had a story. One shared that he travels with business colleagues that he does not know well and has begun writing down the names of spouses and kids so that he can pray more specifically. Another downloaded the Echo app that I mentioned to remind him to pray daily for his neighbors. So...how many of you did something intentional to notice those around you? You know...we have about 70 T shirts left. It’s a great conversation starter! Why don’t you go back and clean us out after this service?

Of course, this can be tough if, like me, you are a bit of an introvert. I am trying to take more initiative in my neighborhood, reaching out, taking risks, revealing more of myself. But the other day, I went too far.

I finally bought some padded bike shorts. I was surprised how bulky they were, but my butt was so sore, I was up for anything. So, I put them on and peddled up to Soundview. We don’t have a crosswalk so I typically wait until traffic is past. But to my surprise, a guy stopped for me. I was so flustered that I jumped quickly onto my seatand began peddling. Only thing is...I jumped SO quickly that I caught the padding of my pants on the nose of the seat...and pulled my new bike pants half way down. We’re talking Moon River. What could I do? I just kept peddling frantically across the street in all my glory. I’m for self-disclosure, but wow, that’s more transparency than anyone deserves.

Let’s review. Babylon had invaded Jerusalem. This once-proud city had been ravaged: temple destroyed, walls torn down, gate burned. For 150 years, Jerusalem remained in this miserable state. Now Nehemiah, a Jew, is serving as the king’s cupbearer, a position of great influence. Through a surprise visit from his brother, God has broken Nehemiah’s heart for Jerusalem. After much prayer and with great courage, he receives the king’s permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of the city.

Walls were what defined and defended a city. A city without walls...was no city at all. So Nehemiah... the wine-taster... is about to become Nehemiah the wall-builder. And Jerusalem, which has been defenseless and pathetic for 150 years...is about to be changed. Guess what. Change is hard. Change is controversial. Change is painful.

If you are for your city, it might mean helping to mend what is broken in your city: broken dreams, broken institutions, broken relationships, broken marriages, broken people. That sounds like a good thing, right? But any change...even good change...is painful and hard. Turns out that Nehemiah was good at leading change. And today he teaches us four lessons on how to lead change well: Look Carefully, Recruit Strategically, Drip the Vision and Beware the Guardians of the Rubble. Neh 2: 11-16.

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.... 16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

The first thing Nehemiah teaches about leading change is to Look Carefully. This is a repeating theme, I know. Look carefully...notice... but it is essential. If you are going to lead change... your first need to really look at reality as it exists.

As a new assistant pastor in Bakersfield, I was assigned the Deacons. I was so excited to do a good job that I developed a plan for how I was going to overhaul the deacon board. Mind you...I had never attended a single meeting. But I developed my plan and, when I went to the first meeting, I was loaded for bear. I laid out all the changes we were going to make; timelines, assignments, goals. There was a new sheriff in town. Things were going to be different from now on.... How do you think they responded to this? They handed me my head on a platter. And I deserved it. I was so eager...and so stupid...that I hadn't taken the time to LOOK. To see what was already in place. To meet the people who were already doing the work. To earn the right to be heard.

Nehemiah not only looked carefully...he looked discreetly. We are told twice that he inspected the wall at night. And in verse 16 we read, "And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work." It is easy, in your enthusiasm, to prematurely blurt out all you think God is calling you to do. That is something I've had to work on all my life. I'm an idea guy... a problem-solver. And I get excited...and sometimes blab too much...I can be a premature blabber.

Nehemiah knew he was buying trouble if he was seen nosing around the ruins of the city. While he assessed all that needed doing, he didn't want to tip his hand to anyone. For one thing, his early solutions might not be his final solutions; no reason to get people excited about the wrong thing. AND...as we will see... the change he proposed was going to stir up enemies. NO reason to give them more time to plot their opposition.

Whether the restoration God is calling you to do is institutional or relational or spiritual or moral...before you tip your hand...before you announce your grand plans...take a long, careful and discreet look at reality.

Nehemiah also led change by Recruiting Strategically. We already saw how he examined the wall on the sly. But he wasn't alone. Verse 12 says, "Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me." Nehemiah knew he could not lead this change alone. He needed partners. And as he prepared to examine the magnitude of the problem, he invited a few men along with him. In fact, this might explain why he waited three days to do it. Maybe he was sniffing around to find the right men...the men who could help him fulfill God's call. This principle has been reinforced in my life and ministry again and again: surround yourself with the right people and you can do just about anything.

We have a motto on our staff: "Keep your head on a swivel." By that I mean, always be on the lookout for talent. Always. Even if you don't have a job for them at the time, look for talent. You can figure out the job later. I have pastoral friends who ask me how we have such a remarkable young leadership team. My answer is always the same: We look for them, we hire them, we train them, we empower them and we trust them. That is actually the ONLY way you raise up new pastors.

The same is true for our lay leaders here. Just last week I met with an elder about a disturbing situation. He had said on the phone, "Don't do anything before we talk." And when we met, he said, "I think I need to take care of this for you." And he did. One of the things I have learned in my latter years as a chronic problem-solver is the wisdom and power of recruiting a great team...and releasing control.

If you sense God calling you to a work of restoration...why in the world would you do it on your own? Have the wisdom and humility to invite a few carefully chosen others to help you accomplish what God is calling you to do. Now...let's listen in on the conversation with these few good men. V 17.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Here's a third change-leading principle: "Drip the Vision." Here's what I mean. By this time, Nehemiah KNEW what needed doing. The wall needed to be rebuilt. He knew he was the guy to lead the charge. He had the king's permission and protection. He had the necessary resources. But he DIDN'T yet have the support of the people. After 150 years, the rubble was their norm. Rubble was all they knew. Nehemiah had to help the people glimpse a new and better future.

He could have just proclaimed the vision. Instead, he dripped the vision. Notice how careful he is not to come across too bossy. Verse 12: "...I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem." He takes along a few recruits and lets them see things for themselves. And when they are done with the inspection, his words are very subdued: "You see the trouble we are in, how

Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.”

“Come, let US build the wall.” Notice that! It wasn’t, “I’m going to build the wall.” It was, “Let’s build the wall together.” And how did they reply? Yes! “Let us rise up and build.” Nehemiah dripped the vision. He waited until his friends had caught the vision so that THEY could be its champions and cheerleaders.

My tendency to tell people how we’re going to solve a problem can get me into trouble. A year ago, we closed the balcony without even trying to invite the stake-holders to be a part of the decision. We had good reasons...so we did it. And then... I spent six months picking up the pieces and cleaning up the mess. WE still would have had some upset people, I’m sure, but if I had spent more time communicating ... which includes listening...I would have saved myself a lot of grief and a bunch of you a lot of heartache. I should have dripped that vision!

Here’s Nehemiah’s final teaching: Beware the Guardians of the Rubble.

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, “What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”

This isn’t the first time we’ve heard from these guys. Back in verse 10 we read, “...when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.”

Sanballat governed Samaira to the NORTH of Jerusalem. Tobiah was from the EAST of Jerusalem. And Geshem was a leader from the SOUTH of Jerusalem. Was it in their interest to have Jerusalem’s wall rebuilt and its power and prestige restored? No! They had NO interest in strengthening Jerusalem. No interest in seeking the welfare of the city or of its people. Under their watch the walls of Jerusalem had continued to lie in ruins. The people continued in despair. And they had done nothing about it. They were the Guardians of the Rubble. They liked things the way they were: walls broken, gates burned. They didn't want anything changed. And Nehemiah was all about change.

If God uses you to rebuild some part of your broken world, watch out for the guardians of the rubble! Every ruin has them. Every organization. Every church. Every city. No matter how broken or dysfunctional things might be, there are always some folks who don't want a thing changed. They like it just the way it is.

Guardians of the Rubble hate change. They fear it. Guardians of the Rubble prefer familiar brokenness to unfamiliar health. I have consulted with churches on what it would take for them to get healthy and grow. And they couldn't do it. Even when some leaders wanted to do it, the Guardians of the Rubble were too powerful.

And I have seen it in families. It is a fearful thing to say to a loved one, "Listen, your drinking is destroying your family." Or "Your child is out of control and needs counseling." Or "If you don't

stop flirting, your marriage will be on the rocks.” Now are these people typically grateful for your advice? Not if they are Guardians of the Rubble. They'd rather cling to the brokenness they know than risk an uncertain healing. This is particularly true for someone in an abusive relationship or the spouse of an alcoholic. They will not risk the intervention that is the only hope of saving their marriage and, often, their lives.

Isn't this exactly what Jesus faced when he was confronted by the Pharisees and Sadducees? Here was the very Messiah for whom they had prayed and waited. Here was God in the flesh ready to bring life and wholeness and joy. Instead, they clung to their tired, broken, corrupt religiosity. And because the change was too painful to bear, they chose instead to kill the Bringer of Change.

I once thought that the way to win over your steadfast opponents was to recruit them into leadership. It almost never works. All it does is give the Boo Bird greater power to oppose you. I wish I'd paid more attention to the last words of Nehemiah to his opponents. Here's how the Message puts it:

I shot back, “The God-of-Heaven will make sure we succeed. We're his servants and we're going to work, rebuilding. You can keep your nose out of it. You get no say in this— Jerusalem's none of your business!”

If God is going to use you to lead change in your city, it might mean having the courage to stand up to those who will cling to what is broken no matter how miserable they are.

OK...we are trying to provide you with tools that can help you in being for the city. T shirts, decals, the Echo App...those are all tools. Here's one more...lower tech.

We designed this card so that you can carry it around for the weeks to come. Imagine you are Nehemiah...examining carefully your city and neighborhood. I invite you: jot down what you see. On one side, you'll find a place to write down names of un-churched people God is laying on your heart. I have three so far...two neighbors and a friend. On the other, write down situations you're concerned about. I'm not asking you to do anything about them. Just notice...jot them down...and pray. Each week, I'm going to ask you to wave these cards to show me you are using them.

I want to close with good news. Let's re-read Nehemiah's last words. “The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build...” I have no idea what God might call you to do for your city. That's the beauty of this; it's not a Chapel Hill program. This is a Holy Spirit program. Maybe there's a little bit of the Guardian of the Rubble in you that needs to be chipped away. Or maybe God has called you to a work of restoration. Claim this promise: “The God of heaven will make YOU prosper, and YOU his servants will arise and build.” I can't wait to see what you create with God's help!