

## **“Permission Giving: Empowering”**

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 19, 2015

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Nehemiah 1

Theme: Jesus gives us permission to say “Yes” to a life of service and living out your vocations, which is found at the intersection of your deepest gladness and world’s deep need.

### **Nehemiah 1** (The Message)

The memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah.

It was the month of Kislev in the twentieth year. At the time I was in the palace complex at Susa. Hanani, one of my brothers, had just arrived from Judah with some fellow Jews. I asked them about the conditions among the Jews there who had survived the exile, and about Jerusalem.

They told me, “The exile survivors who are left there in the province are in bad shape. Conditions are appalling. The wall of Jerusalem is still rubble; the city gates are still cinders.”

When I heard this, I sat down and wept. I mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God-of-Heaven.

I said, “God, God-of-Heaven, the great and awesome God, loyal to his covenant and faithful to those who love him and obey his commands: Look at me, listen to me. Pay attention to this prayer of your servant that I’m praying day and night in intercession for your servants, the People of Israel, confessing the sins of the People of Israel. And I’m including myself, me and my ancestors, among those who have sinned against you.

“We’ve treated you like dirt: We haven’t done what you told us, haven’t followed your commands, and haven’t respected the decisions you gave to Moses your servant. All the same, remember the warning you posted to your servant Moses: ‘If you betray me, I’ll scatter you to the four winds, but if you come back to me and do what I tell you, I’ll gather up all these scattered peoples from

wherever they ended up and put them back in the place I chose to mark with my Name.'

"Well, there they are—your servants, your people whom you so powerfully and impressively redeemed. O Master, listen to me, listen to your servant's prayer—and yes, to all your servants who delight in honoring you—and make me successful today so that I get what I want from the king."

I was cupbearer to the king.

## **An Examined Life**

The story begins in the time of the Babylonian captivity. [1]  
The Babylonians had overrun Israel and Judah in 598-597 b.c.e.  
Many Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon;  
    some fled as refugees to other countries;  
        and some toughed it out in their homeland under  
    foreign rule.

Nehemiah ended up in Persia.

He secured a job as the king's cupbearer,  
    a job with certain perks yet also some risks.

He tasted the wine before the king did just in case someone slipped  
in a little poison.

When you are a cupbearer, it pays to serve a popular king, yes?

One day Nehemiah got news from his hometown of Jerusalem.  
His brother Hanani said that the walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins, still,  
    even after almost 100 years!

Hanani said the surviving Jews lived in shame,  
    unable to break free from their past and rebuild.

Nehemiah prayed.

He prayed for mercy for those who grieved and were broken.

Nehemiah said, "When I heard this, I sat down and wept.

I mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God-of-Heaven.”

He prayed for the sins of himself and his people.

Nehemiah said, “God, God-of-Heaven, the great and awesome God, loyal to his covenant and faithful to those who love him and obey his commands:

Look at me, listen to me.

Pay attention to this prayer of your servant that I’m praying day and night in intercession for your servants, the People of Israel, confessing the sins of the People of Israel. And I’m including myself, me and my ancestors, among those who have sinned against you.”

He prayed for the strength to return to Jerusalem,

to rebuild the walls and homes,

and to restore the city and the pride of God’s people.

“We’ve treated you like dirt: We haven’t done what you told us, haven’t followed your commands, and haven’t respected the decisions you gave to Moses your servant...

Well, there they are—your servants, your people whom you so powerfully and impressively redeemed. O Master, listen to me, listen to your servant’s prayer—and yes, to all your servants who delight in honoring you—and make me successful today so that I get what I want from the king.”

### **An Examined Life**

Nehemiah began fasting and praying,

hoping for help from above, help from someone, from somewhere, somehow.

The only things he knew were true was that he needed help and he trusted that the Lord would provide.

When the King of Persia inquired as to why he fasted, Nehemiah prayed again

before he shared his story and his need with the king.

He requested the permission of the king

to be given leave to help his people, his Jerusalem, his city of

God.

Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount to prayerfully ask and you shall receive.

Nehemiah prayerfully sought permission to leave and go serve God elsewhere;

    this first prayer was answered and granted.

Nehemiah's task when he arrived back in Jerusalem was mind-boggling.

He faced lots of opposition.

The Samaritans complained that the Jews didn't trust him;

    a man named Tobiah criticized his technical knowledge;

        and liberal Jews ridiculed his holy airs and faith.

And to add fuel to the fire,

    when they were half way done a labor strike halted

construction.

As they say, the proof is in the pudding.

With grace and sweat, perseverance and prayer,

    the walls were rebuilt, homes were rehabilitated,

        and the faith community re-established a place called

home.

What made this miracle come to fruition

is the blessed combination of faithful prayer and faithful action.

We know from the Hebrew Scriptures

that Nehemiah was known for being both a great builder

and an eloquent and passionate person of prayer.

Consider:

When he learned about the suffering of the people in Jerusalem, he prayed.

Because of his prayer and fasting,

he had an opportunity to ask permission to serve.

When he was working alongside his neighbors building walls,

he prayed.

Because of his passionate faith and prayer life,

he helped his community overcome division and discord.

We have before us a biblical witness of one who bridged what for some is a division separating a practical life and a prayerful life.

Christian spirituality and a solid work ethic need not take disparate paths.

Nehemiah courageously combined his personal prayer life with the personal commitment to social responsibility.

### **An Examined Life**

If ever there was a time when God needed people to examine their lives,

to step forward and step up and step out on faith,  
to link their Christian spirituality with their Christ-like actions,  
now would be a very good time.

The Resurrected Jesus gives permission to say "Yes"  
to a life of faithful prayer and faithful action.

If ever you want to see or witness or experience the resurrection of Jesus,

look deep within yourself and look around you  
for the linking of a passionate prayer life and faithful action.

E. Claiborne Jones is an Episcopal priest in the Atlanta area. Claiborne Jones once offered a list of ten things to consider in life and ministry, including a word of encouragement to believe in "authentic humanity as the place where resurrection takes place."

In other words, the human condition is the place where God chooses to work miracles,

where God's renewing power is made real,  
where God is working Her purpose out,  
where God changes lives and reshapes souls.

Claiborne Jones spoke recently about a story she had read that moved her.

"I read a story...about a little girl and her mother  
who visited a sculptor's studio each day,

watching the artist carve a lion out of a huge block of marble.

Finally, one day, the animal's figure was clear,  
and the child recognized what it was.

She turned to her mother and said,

"Mom, how did that man know that there was a lion in there?"

"As we, all of us, continue to grow and to flourish,  
I hope that we will remember that it is, finally,  
love alone which set us free.

Christ's love, offered to us through 4-year-olds and grandparents,  
teachers, and friends, who have the courage to tell the truth.  
Christ's love alone sets us free to be ourselves,  
whether we are wealthy or poor, famous or unknown, not so  
good or good."

Claiborne Jones went on to say, "In my yearbook my senior year,  
a friend wrote, 'Claibby, remember how many of us love you  
just for being you.'

Remember how many people love you, just for being  
you."

Remember that God loves you, and we do, too, just for being you.

## **An Examined Life**

One of the gifts of being a Christian  
is cherishing the reality that God gives us permission  
to be formed and reformed and transformed;  
this is akin to a daily dose of empowerment.  
God is like a divine sculptor releasing a lion from a block of stone;  
like a potter molding and shaping clay into a new form,  
like a loving creator who joyfully makes you in God's own image  
and is so happy, so proud, so delighted to send you forth to serve.

The Resurrected Jesus gives permission to say "Yes"

to a life of faithful prayer and faithful action.  
We call this your vocation, the living out and embodying of your purpose and meaning,  
which comes from the Latin Vocare, meaning "to Call, to Name."  
Your vocation is discovered and lived out at the intersection  
of your deepest gladness and world's deep need.

On a fairly regular basis  
I get invited to represent the Church of Jesus Christ  
by speaking with and listening to folks of all ages and  
backgrounds  
at local schools, nursing homes, and a wide  
variety of settings  
to discuss calling and vocation.

One time I went to speak to a second grade class.  
The children were quite noisy when I walked in.  
I started the lesson using only mime  
and ended up teaching the fifty minute class without saying  
one word.  
Another time I spoke about vocation to the elementary class of our  
son Henry.  
Walking down the hall of the school I felt pretty sharp in my three  
piece suit.  
A First Grader was standing by his classroom door.  
"Excuse me, Sir," he said. "Is today crazy hair day?"

We begin with the faith that we are made good and formed in the  
image of God.  
We affirm that we're still being formed and reformed and  
transformed.  
And then we move into the specifics of being empowered  
by faithful prayer and faithful action:

"The place God calls you to  
is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world's deep hunger meet." – Frederick Buechner

1.                   What makes you truly glad?  
                      What makes you deeply happy when you do or  
participate in this?
  
2.                   What deep hunger or hungers do you see in the  
world?  
                      What are you thinking of when you say,  
                      "Someone should do something about that"?

Where these two intersect, that is your vocation.

That is where God is calling you.

Everyone has a vocation. How about you?

God empowers you to live and breathe

                      at the intersection of personal gladness and service above  
self.

Your vocation may be full time or part time;

                      it may be your daily life or a hobby or a rare, occasional,  
special experience.

Beware that if you only seek after that which makes you glad  
and make no attempt to serve the greater good,  
                      your life may become empty, lacking in depth,  
fulfillment, and meaning.

Yet also be aware that if you only practice addressing the hungers  
you see

                      and have no joy, no gladness, no thrill or happiness in the  
effort,

                      then you run the risk of burn out & depression,  
                      and may feel as if your efforts are in vain.

Let's be real here.

Did you ever learn from a teacher who did not like teaching?

Is anyone healed by a physician who doesn't want to be a doctor?

Is a soul transformed by a pastor who wishes he or she was doing  
something else?

Follow your joy and seek to make a difference.

Be flexible.

Your vocation may evolve and shift and change over time.

Be like new clay in the hands of the Potter.



Be open to be shaped and reshaped as the Lord has need of you.  
Talk about reshaping, changing vocations:  
Your pastor went to clown school,  
    juggled for spare coins on the streets of Boston,  
    performed in a circus,  
        and then ran away from the circus to join the  
    church.

## **An Examined Life**

Don't let the naysayers or negative energies of the world  
dissuade your calling or dampen your gifts and gift-giving.  
Nehemiah had plenty of opposition,  
plenty of folks mad at him,  
plenty of challenges and closed doors,  
yet he kept his faith, kept his composure, kept his word to God,  
and kept up the good work  
'til the city walls and faith community were formed.  
Focus on what God is doing with you  
and those around you  
without feeling guilty of not doing those things  
that matter little to you.  
Lyle Schaller said to count the "Yes" votes  
on your vision of trying out something new and meaningful.  
If the first people you approach are negative or critical,  
persevere and seek out other votes for a broader perspective.  
Prayerfully assess the overall response and then make a wise  
decision.

We have to find the balance of what we need to subtract  
    and what we need to add.  
Each of us needs to find the balance that's right for us.

There was a story on the news recently about a football player  
named Jason Brown.  
He was a center with the St. Louis Rams with a \$37 million contract.  
The life he was living was not satisfying him and he decided to give it  
up.

His agent told him he was making biggest mistake of his life  
and he said, "No, I'm not. No, I'm not."  
Jason decided that greatness came from being a servant  
and so he learned to farm from YouTube videos,  
and he started a farm in Louisburg, North Carolina.  
He wanted to feed the hungry and spend more time with his family.  
He calls his farm "First Fruits Farm"  
because he will give the first fruits of every harvest  
to food banks in that area of NC.  
Last November he gave away 100,000 pounds of sweet potatoes;  
he plans to do more next year.  
Jason Brown said, "Love is the most wonderful currency you can give  
anyone."

Jason describes seeing the sweet potatoes being harvested:  
"When you see them pop out of the ground, man,  
it's the most beautiful thing you could ever see."  
He has never felt more successful.  
Not, he says, by human standards, but "in God's eyes." (from CBS  
News)

I'm not advocating that we all change directions and become  
farmers!

The Good News is that we are invited to live what we'll call "the  
examined life."

The intentional life.

A life which is focused and faithful;  
prayerful and active;  
personally fulfilling and communally uplifting.

In other words, a resurrected life in Jesus.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Nehemiah exegetical notes adapted from the Presbyterian Men's Breakfast Bible Study Series by John Congram.