

Nehemiah 5:1-13
March 14, 2010

South Plains

Calling Ourselves To Account

Nehemiah is not my favorite book of the Bible. For one thing, the main character, Nehemiah himself, is a bureaucrat. That doesn't make him a bad person, but it does mean that most of what he does in scripture is tell other people what to do. Some of his demands seem downright mean-spirited. With those caveats out on the table, I do very much admire one thing Nehemiah does. He calls the people of Israel to account for their sins, and he does it openly and honestly, and with a certain amount of humility. Because he is a good bureaucrat, he is effective in shaping the life of the people of God around the justice and love of God.

There's one word in the passage we read today that caught my attention and changed the way I have understood Nehemiah. That word is "assembly." The prophet calls an assembly of the people of Jerusalem to talk about fairness and justice in the city. This word came to my attention when South Plains joined the IMPACT network of congregations. Every year IMPACT has a Nehemiah Assembly that is modeled on this passage of scripture. I became curious about why they chose to call our big annual meeting with public officials the Nehemiah Assembly. This sermon is the result of my reading that passage again and seeing something new.

The wonderful thing about scripture is the way God can speak a new word to us through the Bible, even through the most familiar verses, depending on what God want to do in our lives at the time. I had been thinking about the March 22nd Nehemiah Assembly at University Hall. I agree wholeheartedly with the issues that will be presented at that meeting. They are described briefly on the bulletin insert you have. Several people, however, have questioned me about the way those issues are presented. Are they too confrontational and controversial? Is the presentation too dramatic for staid Presbyterians?

Let me tell the story of Nehemiah 5:1-13 and you can decide for yourselves how closely IMPACT in the 21st century AD comes to Nehemiah of Jerusalem in the 5th century BC.

The time is immediately after the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people. Israel had been conquered by several armies. These defeats reached a crisis when the Babylonians decided to put an end to further insurrections by not only destroying the city, but by also taking the king, his family, and all the leading citizens into exile. The exiles were forced to live in a pagan country for generations. This experience of the Babylonian exile was a critical stage in the formation of Jewish identity. They had to define themselves in exile by observing worship regularly in the synagogues and by keeping strict dietary rules.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, the people left behind were getting by as best they could with corrupt leadership imposed by their conquerors and in the face of grinding poverty. They are sometimes called 'people of the land' because they lived hardscrabble lives on whatever the land provided. When world events finally took the Babylonians out of power, the exiles could come home to Israel. But their homecoming was not happy. They confronted a country very different from the native land they knew only from stories, and a country very different from their adopted land when they were in exile. The walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. All of society and the culture of the people were in terrible disorder. The returning exiles were coming from a prosperous world to a very poor world. Tensions between the exiles and the people of the land were inevitable.

Nehemiah came to the rescue. He was a Jew who served the king of Persia. Apparently, he was a favorite of the king, because he persuaded his master to send him to Israel with money to rebuild the city. This he did with great success. Nehemiah combined the business savvy of an urban planner with the charisma of a community organizer. But, Nehemiah was more than a bureaucrat, and more than an organizer. He was a faithful reformer and a student of scripture.

Scripture is clear that the people of God were supposed to take care of each other. That's why lending money at interest is prohibited in the Old Testament. When Nehemiah saw the poverty of his fellow citizens

and how the rich took advantage of the poor, he was scandalized. High interest rates meant that some Israelites, and especially the people of the land, were permanently impoverished. Others were sold into slavery to pay their debts.

It's not only the old story of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. The rich lived better because the work of the poor was making life better for the rich. If nothing is done to balance the sacrifices more evenly in that kind of situation, in other words to bring justice and fairness to bear, eventually the fabric of society unravels. This is what Nehemiah saw happening in Jerusalem.

Every community is challenged to insure that all its citizens have access to a fair share of community wealth. Part of the American dream is the opportunity to work hard and move upward in society. The two issues that IMPACT is addressing on March 22nd, Interpretive Services and Pre-Kindergarten education, are two of the doorways to opportunity. It is fair and just that some of the benefits of our taxes are used, not only to make middle class life more comfortable, but to make available opportunities for the poor.

Here's how Nehemiah worked for justice. He charged the nobles and the officials of Jewish society with taking advantage of the poor. And, he did this in a public assembly. In front of a crowd, he pointed out that the recovery of Jerusalem required treating everyone

with fairness. At first, scripture says, “They were silent and could not find a word to say (5:8).” Then Nehemiah went further. He measured their treatment of the poor by the standards of God. Old Testament scripture forbids charging interest rates that foreclosed the future, and the prophets excoriated their countrymen for selling “the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 2:6).” No justice there.

But, the most remarkable step Nehemiah took was to hold himself accountable. He says, “Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them... their fields, the vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine and oil that you have been exacting from them (5:10-11).” In other words, Nehemiah accepted responsibility for his part of the problem. He gave up something of himself for the common good of his community.

At that, the community leaders gave in. They promised to demand nothing more. Nehemiah called the priests and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. To seal the deal, he stood up and shook out the dust from his robes, saying, “If you don’t do right, God’s going to shake loose everything you own just like I’m shaking the dust from my robe.” He was not about to settle for politics as usual: say one thing and do another. This was a religious act, a holy oath with the Lord God as witness. “And all the assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised

the Lord. And the people did as they had promised (5:13),” says the Bible.

There are interesting parallels between Nehemiah’s time and our own. Both societies have faced the problems of immigration. Both societies have had to deal with poverty. Both societies have faced the tension of two groups trying to live alongside each other, sharing a common faith in theory, but in fact having little to do with each other.

Of course, America’s struggle with poverty is much larger than the poverty of immigrants. And, we have rejected decisively any class system that would divide Americans into upper and lower classes, haves and have-nots, light skin and dark skin. Nonetheless, the problem remains: How can we be one people in fact and in practice?

The children provide a place to start. In Nehemiah 5:5, the underclass complains that “our children are the same as their children.” We can agree that all children deserve to be treated equally and fairly. Providing pre-Kindergarten programs for low income families is one proven way to open the doors of opportunity for them. Poor children start kindergarten with a vocabulary much smaller than middle-class children. If they fail to catch up in their reading level by the 3rd grade, the doors of opportunity begin to rapidly close. They are less likely to finish high school and thus much more likely to wind up

on the welfare rolls. Pre-K classes can prepare them to succeed in school.

The situation with interpretive services impacts a broad segment of society, and not just immigrants who cannot speak English. At the IMPACT rally, one immigrant told a story through an interpreter about having his car hit in a parking lot. The guilty driver was there. But because the victim could not speak English and the police officer could not understand him, no police report was filed and no insurance claim could be recognized. When our justice system breaks down because we cannot communicate, the rule of law breaks down. Democracy works when its citizens are educated, informed and able to participate in all the institutions that protect our government.

When people read the Bible today, I often hear one of two responses. People with no church background will say out loud, "This stuff has nothing to do with my life. End of story." People inside the church will be more polite and whisper, "These are nice stories, but we don't live that way any more."

The Nehemiah Assembly March 22 aims to make the Bible relevant for today. The injustice is the same: poor people don't have the same advantages we do. If you have limited English, you cannot participate in society. You and I benefit by having immigrants to do low wage jobs. We need to share the benefits of our

educational system and our justice system. Not to share now, means trouble later. More importantly, it's not fair.

Jesus' parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus is one more example of the folly of delaying righteousness. The reality is that justice makes this life richer for everyone. God's righteousness lead to the blessed life.

You're invited to join us March 22 at U Hall so that all the residents of our community can share in the benefits of our laws and schools.