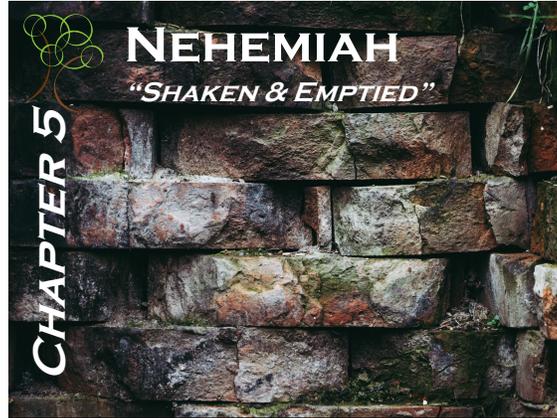


“Shaken and Emptied”; Series – Nehemiah
Nehemiah 5
Westside Fellowship CRC; 7 October 2018
Rev. Heidi S. De Jonge



A couple of Sundays ago, I introduced those of you who were here to the Restorative Questions—questions that can be used in the midst of conflict or just to talk about difficult things.

1. What happened? What were you thinking about when this happened and what have you thought about since?
2. What’s the impact or the effect of what happened on yourself and others?
3. What’s the hardest part about this for you?
4. What needs to be done to make things right?

The more I have dwelt with this questions, the more I see them as a really good rubric for unpacking, not only the tangles of a difficult conversation or a conflict, but also unpacking a Scripture text. So, I just want to let you know that these simple (but profound) questions are making up some of the deep structure of the time I spent with Nehemiah 5.

So, here we have a story in Nehemiah of the relationships of the Jews with one another. This chapter starts with the Jews telling Nehemiah what’s happening and what they’re thinking about it. If you know from your reading of the biblical prophets like Amos and Isaiah something about the sins that the Israelites tended to slip into, the stories that these Jews tell are not surprising. It seems that the ‘haves’ are exploiting the ‘have nots’. The people of Judah and Jerusalem already lived in a precarious financial situation. Those farmers who gave their time to work on the wall did so without getting paid for it.. and they did it during the harvesting time...

Combine that with a drought in the land, and you have a lot of people doing desperate things in order to have enough money to buy food.

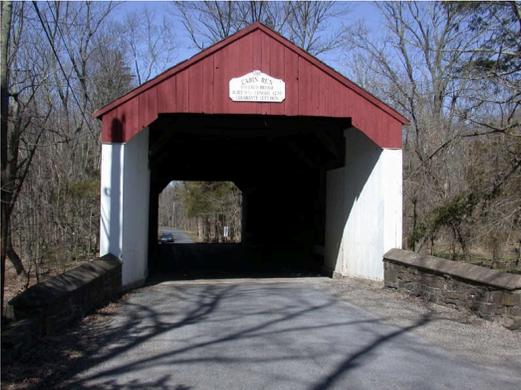
First, in the building of the story, we just hear that, hey, we've got a lot of kids – and in order to stay alive, we need to eat... but in order to get grain during this famine, we're having to mortgage our fields and vineyards and homes... And then, what's more, we don't have enough money to pay taxes and so we're borrowing money from our fellows Jews... and not just that, we have had to sell our children into slavery to our fellow Jews... and you feel the brokenness in their hearts as they specifically single out the daughters. Our daughters have already been enslaved. And you know, Nehemiah, as well as we do, what this means.

Who is affected by what's happening and how? Well, these 'have not' Jews are affected... and their families... the children are suffering, perhaps, the most... And the cry is really for the whole community. Look! Look what we are doing to each other! This should not be! We have had to sell our children. Our Israelite brothers and sisters are buying our children!

And what is the hardest thing for the Jews? Maybe you heard me emphasize this word as I read: Powerless. We are powerless.

Nehemiah hears the outcry and the charges – he hears what is happening and he is angry. And he lets his anger lead him to pondering – to thinking about what is going on. And then he decides to call a large meeting to deal with the issue.

When I read about this, I immediately thought about a story that we were exposed to in our Restorative Practices training. We saw the story of a little town (Bucks County, Pennsylvania) that was torn apart by the actions of a few young men. These young men one night decided to burn down an historic covered bridge.



It was a prank that turned into a nightmare. The town was outraged. People who had been trained in restorative circles were called in and they called a large meeting, and in that meeting every person got to answer the restorative questions.



What happened? What were you thinking? Who has been impacted by this and how? What's been the hardest part about this? And what needs to be done to make things right? The townspeople answered the questions... a teacher, a pastor, a city councilor... the guys answered the questions... their parents. And you watched as all the people began to see the story from other points of view.

Now, this large meeting in Nehemiah wasn't quite the same. Not everybody was there, and it seemed like only Nehemiah spoke – at least at first. He put it out there... He named what was happening and the nobles and the officials – the haves – it says in verse 8 – “they kept quiet because they could find nothing to say.” They knew what they were doing was hurting their very own flesh and blood.

And the impact of what was happening wasn't just impacting their own flesh and blood and them... it also had an impact on the Gentiles. Nehemiah said, “Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies” (v. 9)? In other words... when we exploit one another and enslave one another, this dishonours God and it tarnishes our witness to the surrounding nations. The more we talk about the impact, the more we realize that a conflict is never really just between two people – or isolated to a small spot. The ripple effects touch our neighbours and God.

And after saying things, Nehemiah does something very interesting in this big restorative meeting that he's called. He owns his own complicity in the toxic mess of the system. "I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest" (v. 10)! As what was happening and the impact of what was happening was being named, Nehemiah needed also to name that he was a part of the problem. This is the best thing that can happen in a meeting – is for every person who has responsibility for a problem to own their responsibility for a problem. This is what it means to have integrity.

And now – Nehemiah lays out what needs to be done to make things right. We have to give back their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, WITH INTEREST.

And the people commit to it. They make a vow. At the end of a restorative circle, there is a covenant made. The young men in Bucks County, Pennsylvania made covenant with their community. They wrote letters of apology. Eventually there were days in jail, fines and community service. That was part of their covenant that reintegrated them back into the community.

And so it is here. There is a covenant. "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say." And Nehemiah seals the deal with the symbolic action of shaking out the folds of his robe. If we don't keep this promise, may we be shaken out of our homes like the dust is shaken out of my robe."

Furthermore, Nehemiah embodied this commitment by living in a way that did not put undue burden on the people. Though he was appointed governor for 12 years, he did not lord it over the people, or put a heavy burden on them, or take the taxes that he was allotted. He worked on the wall, he cared for the people, and he gave from his own wealth. He was generous with the Jews and officials *and those who came to him from the surrounding nations*. He opened his table.

The great thing about preaching through a narrative like this is that you get to find yourself in the story... And so, as you ponder what you've just read and heard, I want you to wonder what part of the story you saw yourself in.

- Maybe you connected with the hardest thing – the powerlessness of the ‘have-not’ Jews... being between a rock and a hard place. Either in your situation, or perhaps you are able to think of modern day examples of human trafficking and exploitation. In preparation for this sermon, I ended up reading quite a few stories about human trafficking in Nicaragua, and I read about a World Renew partner organization in Nicaragua called ‘The Nehemiah Centre’ that is doing many things, including helping people recognize the warning signs of human trafficking, so that they or their children don’t end up in any form of indentured servitude.
- Maybe you connected with the power-full in this story and you find yourself drawn to confession... you know that you are exploiting someone in some way... Or in some way you are hurting your brothers and sisters in Christ and in so doing, not only are you hurting them, but you are tarnishing the witness of the church to the wider watchful world.
- Maybe you are connecting to Nehemiah. There is something that is happening that is wrong and you are angry and you are pondering this thing that is happening that you know is not right. Perhaps it is time to speak truth to power. Perhaps it is time to call a meeting, to name the injustice that you see – perhaps to even own your complicity, and come up with a plan to make things right.
- Maybe you are feeling the call to give of your gifts in a dramatic way, like Nehemiah gave of himself, opening his table to hundreds and hundreds every week. How can you share from your gifts... M2S, Special Meals, etc...

As I prepared this message, I just kept coming back again and again to verse 13 and this image of Nehemiah shaking out his robe and saying, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be ***shaken out*** and ***emptied***.”

And I thought about how the Jews – none of them perfectly kept their promises not to exploit... They needed to be ***shaken out*** and ***emptied***... And I thought to myself how many

promises I have not kept... how many ways I have failed to protect the dignity of my neighbour... I know that I deserve to be **shaken out** and **emptied** from the robes of God.

But, we have one who knew no sin, but became sin for us... We have one who was in very nature God, but who did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage – No! As it says in Philippians 2, he made himself *nothing*... he **EMPTIED** himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross, so that we might be gathered up into the robes of God.

Before he died, Jesus taught us - “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap” (Luke 6:37-38).

Though we deserved to be **shaken** from the robes of God – though our own actions condemn us – because of Jesus, we are forgiven... and not only that – the abundant life of God has been given to us... A good measure. Pressed down. Shaken together. And running over. Poured into our laps. Poured so much into us that we cannot help but pour ourselves into others.

And then there's just something about verse 13... Something humbling... shaken out and emptied... and how Christ took this on himself. He was shaken out and emptied. Philippians 2. Some sort of bit that highlights how we say we are going to live a certain way and we don't... and so we need Jesus who was shaken out and emptied for us...

Luke 6:37-38

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JEWS:

What happened and what were you thinking? Vv. 1-5

What's been the impact on you and others? Losing fields and children.

Hardest thing about this: Powerlessness

NEHEMIAH:

Hears what happened... his feelings/thoughts – anger and pondering.

Called a large meeting – said what was so... included himself in it.

Impact – God / the Gentiles

EXPLOITERS:

They listened, because they could find nothing to say.

Is this where I might break in with an our-world story? Either Nicaragua or something else?

Making things right:

Give them back their land and property – with interest.

What about the people??

Commitment / promise – giving word.

Beyond that... the open table. Including foreigners...

And then wonder what part of the story people might feel called to receive and embody...

- Maybe the powerlessness of being between a rock and a hard place. Either in your situation, or perhaps you are able to think of modern day examples of actual human trafficking and exploitation, and the thought of powerlessness.
- Maybe confession... you know that you are exploiting... or in some way damaging your brothers and sisters in Christ and in so doing, tarnishing the witness to the wider watchful world.
- Maybe connecting to the role of Nehemiah. You have been told about something and you are angering and pondering and you know what is happening isn't right. Perhaps it is time to speak truth to power. Call a meeting. Name the injustice that you see – own your complicity, and come up with a plan to make things right.
- Maybe connecting to the role of Nehemiah with respect to his open table. The kind of food he was able to provide indicates that he was a person of means. And he gave... How can you share of your gifts... M2S, Special Meals, etc...
- And then there's just something about verse 13... Something humbling... shaken out and emptied... and how Christ took this on himself. He was shaken out and emptied. Philippians 2. Some sort of bit that highlights how we say we are going to live a certain way and we don't... and so we need Jesus who was shaken out and emptied for us...

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.² Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

³Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine."

⁴Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. ⁵Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are **powerless**, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others."

⁶When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷I **pondered** them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a **large meeting to deal with them** ⁸and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They **kept quiet**, because they could find nothing to say.

⁹So I continued, “What you are doing **is not right**. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the **reproach of our Gentile enemies**? ¹⁰I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! ¹¹**Give back** to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

¹²**“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”**

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and **officials take an oath to do what they had promised**. ¹³**I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!”**

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.

¹⁴Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year—twelve years—neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. ¹⁵But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. **But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.**¹⁶**Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.**

¹⁷Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials **ate at my table**, as well as those who came to us from the **surrounding nations**. ¹⁸Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people.

¹⁹ Remember me with favor, my God, for all I have done for these people.

Nehemiah as a type of Christ...

Trouble in the text: Exploitative practices within the Jewish community... Powerlessness.

Trouble in the world: Human trafficking – Nicaragua, particularly?

Grace in the text: God working a restorative movement toward new ways of being together – modeled in the generosity of Nehemiah – Nehemiah presenting himself to God as a living sacrifice.

Grace in the world: The work of World Renew / Nehemiah Center in Nicaragua...

Christ shift somewhere in here? Either through the emptying / shaking out of the folds... (Christ emptying himself) the generosity of Christ

Preaching into communion...