

Gratitude in Action

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[0 : 00] Good morning to you all. My name's Tommy. I'm the rector here. If you're new, we're delighted that you're joining us. We are in a series reading a memoir. It's an old memoir from a long time ago.

It's the memoir of a man named Nehemiah. And Nehemiah is a man whom God used to physically rebuild the city of God and to spiritually rebuild the people of God. And we've been applying this story to our lives here in D.C. We've been finding a lot of parallels between where Nehemiah is and where we find ourselves in our life as a community, Church of the Advent. And so we're essentially sitting at the feet of Nehemiah and we are learning everything we can. We're mining everything we can about what God is calling us to do and to be here in D.C. as we look forward to our life together in the coming chapter. Nehemiah is someone, if you're not familiar, who works as a civil servant in a pagan government. And he learns that Jerusalem lies in ruins and the people living there are destitute. And after months of prayer and fasting, he asks the Persian king for permission and resources to go and do what he can to help. And miraculously, the king grants his request. That brings us to

Nehemiah chapter 2 verses 9 through 20 where Nehemiah actually makes the journey to Jerusalem and he sees it for the first time. And there are three parts to this story that we're going to look at. Each part of this story teaches us something, informs how we think about what it means to be a community of God's people here in D.C. Now this happened a long time ago. This is 2024. Seems like it wouldn't be applicable at all and yet we keep discovering that in fact God's Word is timeless and therefore it is always timely. It can always speak into our present moment with the power of the Holy Spirit. So let's pray and ask God to help that happen and then we're going to open God's Word together. Lord, we thank you that you are in fact already present and at work in us. That we have only to attune ourselves to you. To allow ourselves to become aware of your presence with us now. Lord, may we relax into your presence. May we relax away from whatever distractions or sources of stress are tugging at us right now. May we relax into your presence and find rest there. I pray that you would open our hearts to receive your Word for us this morning. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So we're going to look at three things, three parts of this story. Nehemiah's arrival, Nehemiah's assessment of the situation, and then Nehemiah's gratitude. So first of all, Nehemiah's arrival. As I said, the Persian king gives Nehemiah letters of safe passage along with material resources and a military escort. And Nehemiah sets off for Jerusalem and he crosses into the trans-Euphrates, which is the sort of western region of the Persian empire, and he immediately encounters some local officials. These are local leaders. Now, they work for the Persian king, and so theoretically, they should align themselves with what the Persian king has decreed, and yet they're very clearly not happy about what they hear about Nehemiah's mission. They are not happy. We're going to talk more about that next week. They immediately set to work opposing and thwarting Nehemiah's mission.

[3 : 31] But what I want us to focus on is Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem. Nehemiah wanted to come in person to see it with his own eyes. That's the first thing that I want us to notice. It's easy to take this for granted. It's just part of the story, but Nehemiah did not have to come in person. Like, Nehemiah did not have to go himself. He could have sent someone else. He could have just sent money and resources. He could have sent his brother back with money and resources because he had already been there, but Nehemiah wants to go in person, which means he's willing to travel almost 900 miles.

He's willing to risk his life so that he can personally get to know both the conditions of the city and the people who live there. So that's the first thing. He wanted to come in person. Number two, he

not only gets to know them, but he actually identifies with them in their suffering.

He identifies with them in their suffering. Verse 17, Then I said to them, he's talking to the people who are living there, 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. Nehemiah has not suffered any derision. I mean, to appreciate this, you have to remember, all of Nehemiah's life, he has lived in a Persian world very far away from Jerusalem, as did his parents, as did their parents. And you may say, well, they're all Jewish, so they all sort of...yes and no. There was a major culture gap between Jews like Nehemiah who grew up in a Persian world and the Jews still living in the ruins in Jerusalem. There was a major culture gap. It had been long enough. It had been 140, 150 years by this point that really they had become culturally very distinct from one another.

And yet, Nehemiah moves to the city, and then he takes time to listen and learn the needs, to invest in relationships, and then most importantly, to identify with the vulnerable and the suffering in the community. And so, Nehemiah, at this point, verse 17, feels the needs of the city very acutely. It's as though he's been living there personally his entire life. The point is, we might put it this way, Nehemiah doesn't come to the city as a tourist to sort of see and experience and then to move on. He shows up as a stakeholder. He comes to the city with a mentality that says, I'm here to stay. I'm here to invest. I'm here to become a part of life and all of what that means and to take that on myself. He's personally invested in the welfare of the city where God sends him. And that's something worth dwelling on for us, for those of us who have not grown up in D.C., for those of us who moved here from somewhere else. It is so easy, even if we've lived here 10 years, 15 years, it's so easy to live here and to maintain a kind of tourist mentality. You know, D.C. residents, when tourist season comes and the traffic gets bad, we like to complain about that. But how many of us live and relate to the city as tourists?

And by that, I mean we just simply view the city only through the lens of what we can get out of it. You know, we come here, people come here to have fun, to get an education, to launch their career, to advance their career, to network. And then a lot of people move on. You know, I was once talking with a lifelong D.C. resident and I asked him how the city had changed. And without missing a beat, he said, well, it's become a playground for young white professionals. That's how it's changed.

[7:17] And you know, we can live here for years and never take the time to listen and learn the needs. Never take the time to invest in relationships outside of our immediate friend group. I know people who have lived here for years and still their best friends live elsewhere. And they have a very small circle here in D.C. We can never take the time to identify with those who are vulnerable.

We can sort of live above and apart from it if we have the privilege in our lives to be able to have that as an option. So here are some questions simply for us to reflect on. Again, we're looking at this memoir and we're drawing out of it things that can prompt our reflection here and now. So here's some questions for reflection before we move on. What kind of relationship is God calling us to have with the city? Are we tourists or are we stakeholders? And as you think about your own life, are you open to the possibility that you're in D.C. because God has called you to be here for however long that might be? It could just be for a few years and then God calls you elsewhere. Or it could be that God is calling you to stay here long term. You know, we call those sprinters and marathoners. And there's a huge value and a place for both. We need the continuity and stability of marathoners. We need the fresh energy and perspective of sprinters. We need both. But is God calling you here? And if so, for how long?

And then this question that we're asking all through the fall, what is God wanting to do through you in the city while you're here? What are the things that God is wanting to accomplish? If and when you leave, will there be lives that have improved? Will there be people who are better off because you were here?

So this is the first thing. When Nehemiah arrives, he shows up in person and he takes time to invest and he becomes immediately a stakeholder in the welfare of the city. That's the first thing.

Now let's look at his assessment of the situation. Most of this passage actually describes Nehemiah inspecting the perimeter of Jerusalem. And he does this at night to avoid drawing unwanted attention from his opponents, as we said. People are already conspiring against him. We'll talk about that more in weeks to come. But here's what he sees when he does the inspection, verses 13 and 14. He says, I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had

been destroyed by fire.

[9 : 45] Then I went on to the fountain gate into the king's pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Serious problems. A city needs walls and a city needs gates.

Walls are essential to protect the people of the city. Walls are what allow the people who live inside the city to develop their own culture, to become a community. You need walls to protect them and set them apart. And gates are also essential. You need gates so that people seeking refuge can come into the city and so the people in the city can go out into the world. A lot of people sought refuge in the city because it was protected by a wall and they were trying to get away from a dangerous world.

And so they would come into the city to look for the kind of stability and the kind of culture where they could actually build a life for themselves. So you need walls and you need gates. In other words, a city cannot be a city without walls and without gates. Especially this city. Remember God's purpose for Jerusalem. God called his people to be a light to the world. Isaiah 2 is a prophecy that describes Jerusalem as a city on a hill where God's very presence resides. And this prophecy describes God drawing people from all of the nations who come streaming into the city because they're being called to come and follow and worship God. But despite all of the efforts of, spoiler alert, people like Nehemiah, people like Ezra, people like Zerubbabel, Jerusalem never became such a place.

It never fulfilled that prophecy. That prophecy was looking beyond this city. Well, where was it looking? Well, that's why it's so significant when Jesus, 500 years later, says to his disciples in Matthew 5, you are the light of the world. You are the city on a hill. And he's communicating something very clearly here. The community of Jesus' disciples, the church, is called to be what Jerusalem failed to be. And that points forward to the new Jerusalem when Jesus comes again. But until then, the church is called to be what Jerusalem failed to be. Through the Holy Spirit, God's presence doesn't just reside in a city. It resides within each Christian, within the community of Christians who follow Jesus. And so just like Jerusalem, just like any city, the church, this kind of city of God that now exists all throughout the world, the city within a city, the city of God within the city of man, to use the words of St. Augustine, the church needs both walls and gates.

Now, I'm not talking about physical walls, although they help. I primarily mean cultural walls, spiritual walls. The church is meant to be an alternative society, living an alternative lifestyle.

[12 : 54] Where we live our lives, we live our everyday lives in ways that are markedly different and distinct from the surrounding community. That's what the church is called to be. We are called to offer and put on display and then invite people into a different way of being human together, a way that glorifies God rather than the idols of the city, such as success or money or power or pleasure or comfort. And you say, well, what does this look like in practice? Well, just imagining what this looks like for a moment, we are called to be the kind of community where we work hard at our jobs, and yet we regularly take time to rest, and we do not measure our worth by our accomplishments.

We're a community where we're politically engaged, and we vote, and we know the issues, and yet we don't put all of our hope in politics to save the world, because we know that our true allegiance is to our true king. We're the kind of community where we love to celebrate, and we love good food, and we love good drink, and yet we also know how to fast, and we know how to have self-control, and we know how to not be controlled by our pleasure and desire, but rather to have mastery over it.

And we know that life is about much more than pleasure, that there is no greater joy than participating in the life of God. We're called to be a community that has a high view of sex, and chastity, and marriage, and family, and yet we want to be a family for anyone who needs a family. Right? We're called to be the kind of community where we do seek greater influence in our jobs. We do seek to advance, and we are ambitious, and yet we understand that the entire purpose of power is to lift up those around us who are vulnerable and oppressed. It's not about us.

We care about having enough money to meet our needs in this community, and yet we care more about being generous and about meeting the needs of others, and we understand that that's the primary purpose of desiring to make more money, is so that we can give more away.

[15 : 26] We're the kind of community where we are, in one sense, at home in this world. We are fully present and participate in every sphere of culture, and yet we know for sure that this world is not our home.

We are called to live an alternative lifestyle, and in order to be that kind of community, we need shared rhythms of worship and spiritual formation that we do in community. We need thick, overlapping networks of Christian relationships. Right? School and sports and recreation and our professional world, right? That there are thick, overlapping networks of Christian relationships. We need shared values around how we raise our children that we agree on and reinforce in one another's homes so that if our children are at your house or your children are at their house, you know that those same values are going to be shared and practiced, because they're not going to be the values of the world. We need strong, clear theological boundaries.

So we need walls. They're essential. But we also need gates. The entire purpose of the church is to bring the gospel to the world. You know, the German theologian and activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, the church is the church only when it exists for the sake of others. We need gates because we're called to go out into the world, to share the good news of Jesus, to do the work of mercy and justice, to care for the poor and the vulnerable. And we are called to welcome in all those who come seeking refuge through ministries of hospitality and mercy.

[17:18] We are called to build a great city for all people, not just the ones who attend our worship services. And for that, we need gates. Now, this is very important. A church needs walls and it needs gates.

I believe that as I look into this room, some of us lean toward one or the other, right? You think about Nehemiah inspecting both the walls and the gates. I think some of us are more inclined to inspect the walls. We're more inclined to be kind of theological watchdogs. You're on guard for any sign that the church might be slipping, that it might be compromising, that the church might be losing its way.

And so you're regularly inspecting the walls just to make sure that they're intact. And some of us are more inclined to inspect the gates of the church. You want to remove as many barriers to entry as you possibly can for people to come into our church. You want this to be a place where you feel comfortable bringing all of your friends. You have a heart for people outside the church and you're horrified at the idea that things that we might believe or say or do would be offensive to people. And there can be a lot of tension and a lot of anxiety between wall people and gate people. You know, wall people and gate people make each other extremely nervous. You know, gate people kind of, they bring their friends and they're like, ah, I don't want you to meet that wall person just yet. You know? And then the wall people look at the gate people and they're like, we're on the slippery slope straight to hell because they're in this church. Right? And so you have wall people and gate people who can very often be at odds with each other. You're in a small group and you're a wall person and a gate person starts speaking and you're like, what kind of church am I in?

[19:10] Here's the point. Wall people and gate people, we need each other because the church needs walls and gates. And so if you're wired in a particular way and you're called to inspect a certain aspect of the church, do that with all your vigor and might you have. But have grace and mercy and patience for the people who are inspecting another section, maybe the gate. Have grace for them and understanding and recognize actually you need them. And that's why the church is called to do mission together as a community with lots of different kinds of people rather than as individuals. So the church needs walls and the church needs gates. See, a church without walls, just to put a, just drive this home a little bit more. A church without walls is a church of the city. It becomes in every way indistinct from the surrounding culture. It loses its ability to offer anything of any value because you can find what they offer anywhere. A church without gates is a church against the city, trying to keep the world and the impurity out and really only focusing on the members within the walls.

But a church that is for the city, which is what I believe we're called to be, needs walls and gates. So we've talked about Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem. We've talked about his assessment of the situation. The third thing that stands out in this story is Nehemiah's gratitude.

It's easy to see why people have praised Nehemiah over the centuries for his exemplary leadership and his strategic thinking. All true. But ultimately, this is not a story about Nehemiah's strength.

It's a story about God's strength and how he uses it. And we see this when Nehemiah meets with people after inspecting the walls and gates. He comes and he gathers the people together.

And look at what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, you can trust me. Here's my resume. Here's where I graduated from. Here's the internship I did, the fellowship, the residency I did. And here's all

my references. And here's my plan. And we can't go wrong with this plan.

[21 : 19] What does he say? It's so instructive. Verse 18. And I told them what? Of my credentials? No. And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good. I told them of the hand of my God that had been on me, upon me, for good. Now notice two things about that. Number one, Nehemiah is very clearly recognizes that God is the true source of every good thing in his life. And he's willing to give credit where credit is due. Yes, hard work matters. Nehemiah works hard. And some of us, many of us, I know that you have worked hard to get where you are, to achieve what you have achieved.

You should be proud of that. Hard work is a good thing. It should be one of our values. But it wasn't just hard work that got you there. You had no control over the family that you were born into. You have no control over your strengths and aptitudes. All the opportunities that we've been given, we had no control over much of that. Ultimately, every good thing comes from God.

So that's the first thing. He's willing to give credit where credit is due. Number two, he recognizes that there's a purpose behind God's provision. There's a reason why God has blessed and provided for him. He says, the hand of my God has been upon me for good. God has given him an amazing job with access to money and power. And he understands there's a purpose behind that. He's not just in this high position of influence and power and wealth for his own sake. The purpose of all that is to make it possible for him to help the city become a great city for all the people who live there. Whenever God blesses us, it's usually because he wants to bless others through us. Right? And we, friends, have been blessed beyond anything Nehemiah ever could have imagined.

The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing. He holds nothing back. For those who come to faith in Jesus, God holds nothing back. Everything he has is ours. We have a foretaste of it now in the Holy Spirit, but one day it will all be ours to experience. And the most amazing thing about that is that just like the blessings in Nehemiah's life, we didn't earn it. We don't deserve it. We can't ever repay that. But God doesn't bless us because of our goodness. He blesses us because of his goodness. Because he's a God of mercy and love.

[24 : 01] So here are more questions for us to reflect on. Maybe I can put it this way. What are the stories that you tell about your life?

How do you account for your life? Do we tell stories about our accomplishments? Do we tell stories about our accolades? Now, we probably don't do that blatantly, but we all know how to do it indirectly. How to kind of humble brag, to let people know without seeming like we're wanting them to know. Do we do that or do we tell people about the hand of God that has been upon us?

Do we give credit where credit is due? And if we do believe that all of our resources are the result of God's hand on us for good, then we should be asking, what good does God have in mind?

What is the good that God is wanting to do through us? Especially as we think about our lives here in D.C. And in this way, Nehemiah is really a beautiful example of gratitude in action.

Because that's what gratitude does. The more you reflect on the blessings of God in your life, the more that compels you outward. Because you realize, I didn't deserve any of this. I gotta give it away.

[25 : 16] That's why I have it, is so that I can pass it on. You know, this Sunday, we are focusing on the theme of gratitude. As you walked in, you may have noticed that last week, our kids, I love it, that a lot of our kids took time to write on cards things that they're thankful for, things that God is doing in their lives through this church.

And I love reading through them. It's like, it's like goldfish, Legos. Goldfish, goldfish. Our Trinitarian theology. Goldfish. And so, lots of different things.

You can tell who's been talking to their parents. And, but I love reading through it, because they're all, they're everything listed out there is something worth giving gratitude to God for.

I love goldfish. I love Legos. Praise God for goldfish and Legos. And praise God that that means kids are having fun and that they enjoy being here. Praise God for all the people who love and serve and take care of them and provide those goldfish and step on the Legos and then come back the following week.

Praise God for all of that. But it's an opportunity for us this Sunday to just sort of think about, what are we thankful for? Where is the gratitude in our lives? As we think about kind of how God is at work in and through this community, in our lives, what are those things that we could name and say, I'm thankful to God that he did this in my life through this community?

[26 : 38] So, we're going to have an opportunity to do the same. We're going to have an opportunity for you all. There are cards and there are pens that are in the pews, along the pews. And we're going to have an opportunity to just invite you to just kind of take a moment to reflect on, what am I thankful for?

What are the things that God is doing or has done in my life through this community? And write something like that down. And then just in a little while, Hillary's going to lead us in a time of prayer. And then we're going to have an opportunity during the offering to collect those and bring them up. So, if you need a pen, there's some pens along the sides of the pews. And so, let's just take time to reflect on that. And we're also going to take time to pray together. So, come on up, Hillary.