



A Place for You At the Wall
Nehemiah 3:1-5
June 16, 2019 (Father's Day)
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Last month, I preached on Mother's Day, and I talked about sewing. Today on Father's Day, we are going to talk about construction.

To introduce our scripture passage, I want you to think about high school or college graduation ceremonies you have been to. You listen patiently to the endless series of names, waiting for that moment when the name of your child or grandchild or friend is called. You are asked to wait until the end to cheer or clap, but of course, no one ever does. Because you just have to cheer when that special name is called.

Last month I went to the graduation ceremony for Seth St John with his Mom, and John and Ruth Dunham. As the names were read off, we realized that they were not calling the names in alphabetical order, so we had no idea where Seth was. We actually got him confused with several other boys who had beards and from a distance looked like him.

As the list of names went on and on, and as they also listed the accomplishments of each student, we still couldn't find Seth. Finally, the last row of graduates started coming up, and then we saw him, almost at the end. As they called his name – Seth St John - we cheered as loud as we could and John said in a loud voice, "Finally!" And the people in front of us laughed.

In our scripture passage today, there is a list of names – just like at a graduation. In fact, the whole chapter of Nehemiah 3 is a list of names, all 32 verses. To us, it is very boring. But you can imagine when this book was read to the Israelite's (that's what they did back then with the law and scriptures; they were read to the people), and they came to this chapter with the list of names, the descendants waited for a certain name to be called, and I am certain cheered when that name was read. It was important to them.

This chapter holds no excitement for us, or seems to have no meaning for us. In our culture today, however, we do have times when names are read. For example, at every

anniversary of 9/11, the names of those who died are read at the memorial where the towers once stood.

So even though we would prefer to skip this chapter of the Bible (it is never in the lectionary), it has insights for us as the modern reader. It actually shows how God works in the world and how we can participate in that work.

Before we read, let me put this scripture reading into context. This passage takes place hundreds of years before Jesus. The city of Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians. The residents of Jerusalem, the Israelites or the Jewish people, were captured, removed from Jerusalem and brought into exile. Imagine Mexico attacking Green Valley and taking us all into exile by moving us to Mexico. Eventually, the Babylonians were overtaken by Persia, a gentler and kinder nation. They allowed the Israelites to go back to Jerusalem, their beloved city.

Well, the city of Jerusalem was in ruins, particularly the wall that ran around the city. Nehemiah, for whom this book of the Bible is named after, is called by God to help the people repair and fix the wall around the city.

The names listed in chapter 3 are the names of the people who worked on the wall. I am only going to read the first 5 verses of this chapter – mainly so I don't have to try and pronounce all the names listed. But these 5 verses will give you the flavor of the whole chapter.

Before we read let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Read Nehemiah 3:1-5

Well, wasn't that fun? Be glad that I didn't read all 32 verses! Commentators have called this chapter such things as:

- "colorless memorandum of assignments"
- "The Fellowship of the Unpronounceable"

It can be discouraging to come to a chapter like this in the Bible, but it tells us of a story of a great work. I am hoping that by the time we are finished this morning, you will look at this chapter in a different light, and maybe go home and read the rest of it. For if you read it carefully, it has much to teach us.

Here is what it tells us:

Your name is important to God.

I have never seen the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. It is simply a black wall with names on it. Yet, all who visit find it very powerful and moving even if they don't know any of the names. Many people will stand for hours in front of it, reading the names. Others will take a piece of paper, place it on the name and run a pencil over it to get a tracing of a name.

This memorial is important to us as Americans because these people, whose names are listed, gave up their lives fighting for freedom. In a similar fashion, this list in chapter three of Nehemiah was very important to the Jewish people. It listed the names of people who cared about their beloved city of Jerusalem; they were willing to put their own lives on hold and came together to build a wall to protect their city.

A great work is being done for God in this chapter. It is so important that God saw fit to list the names of all the workers here in Scripture. And this isn't the only chapter in the Bible that has a list of names. "God is a great believer in putting names down." In fact, the Book of Revelation says that there is a book in heaven with our name in it. Your name is important to God.

Your work is important to God.

This chapter also teaches us that your work is important God.

In this chapter, not only does God list the names of all the workers, God lists what each person did - from laying beams, doors and bolts at the gates to repairing the wall itself. God notices what you do. Many people will not know what you do behind the scenes. You may think it goes unnoticed, but it doesn't.

If you clean toilets here, it does not go unnoticed by God. If you trim or dig out dead bushes on the church property, it does not go unnoticed. If you set up tables and chairs in rooms so meetings can take place, your work does not go unnoticed. If you prepare for our Fellowship time after worship by placing cookies and fruit on plates, and pouring water and coffee, your work does not go unnoticed. If you take our flowers and bring them to the homebound, it does not go unnoticed. If you bring communion to the homebound, visit those in the hospital, bring soup to the ailing, your work does not go unnoticed by God.

Your name is important to God. Your work is important to God. Which leads me to the next point from this chapter:

Teamwork is important for getting God's work done.

Chapter 3 of Nehemiah is about cooperation.

First, let me describe the people. All were volunteers. Some lived in the city; some lived in the outskirts. There were 44 separate groups of people working on this project. They were gatekeepers, guards, farmers, priests, jewelers, pharmacists, merchants, perfume makers, temple servants, district rulers. By the way, not one of them were carpenters or construction workers by trade.

One of the most important phrases in this chapter is "next to them." In other words, who works next to who. This phrase is repeated 28 times which makes for monotonous reading. But, these people were working together, side-by-side, shoulder to shoulder, all with the same purpose...to build a wall for the glory of God. People working together can accomplish so much more than working alone.

Here is an example from car racing: in 1950, Indy car pit crews consisted of four men – including the driver! No one was allowed to get near the car except this small crew of specialists. Do you know how long it took them to replace two tires and fill the tank back then? More than 60 seconds! Today, depending on the kind of race, a pit crew can sometimes involve up to 20 people. When they work together, the team can complete the same job in under three seconds.

The wall of Jerusalem was 2 ½ miles long and 8 feet thick. The rebuilding of that wall was finished in 52 days. They had been living with this wall in disrepair for 100 years. How did they do this?

This is how they worked together:

- The word “section” is another key word in this chapter. It is mentioned 13 times. The wall was divided and people were assigned a certain section to work on. Just as no one person could construct the whole wall by himself, so too, you and I are called to work in a certain part of the kingdom. You are not called to do it all. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.
- Some worked as families. Many worked on the section of the wall that was in front their house. Our work for God often starts at home.
- They helped one another. When some were done with their task, they went to help others. This is mentioned at least 3 times in this chapter.

Do you know what this reminds me of? How we do the Patio Sale. You work next to one another. You are assigned a section (books, jewelry, electronics, furniture, etc). You work with family and friends. And you help one another. How we do the Patio Sale is very biblical!

Now, one thing to note in this story is that not only are the workers listed, but those who refused to work are mentioned as well. Look at verse 5. It says of the men of Tekoa “their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.” God records goof-offs as well! They miss out on one of the greatest privileges of all time – getting involved with God’s work.

God has designed the church to function together. You may feel unimportant, but there is a place for you at the wall. Those that worked at the Sheep Gate (which is the gate where the sheep came in to be sacrificed at the temple so the people could worship – a very important gate) were mentioned right along with those who worked at the Fish Gate (the gate where the fish was brought in so the people could eat – a very important gate) which were mentioned right along with those who worked at the Dung Gate (the gate where the refuse and human waste was brought – a very important gate).

What part of the wall are you building?

There is a place for you at the wall. When we all pitch in to do the work, we can accomplish amazing things to the glory of God.