

Nehemiah – Naming our Privilege, Choosing Solidarity

A Sermon preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church on August 29th, 2021

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.
Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears,
For the dawn draws near,
And the world is about to turn.

What a wonderful song to sing on this last Sunday in our summer worship series on justice. It is Mary's song, we do well to remember, a song that burst out from this young Jewish woman after Elizabeth's spirit-filled blessing on her womb, a womb carrying little baby Jesus, the one who would grow up to declare good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19) Our summer series on justice has been rich and challenging, inviting us to explore many different stories from scripture that each illustrate God's justice being lived out in the lives of many different characters. Each story that we looked at gave us a vision for God's justice that challenged the prevailing assumptions that we work with in our world about what is just and right. There were stories that focused on the just distribution of land, such as the story of the daughters of Zelophehad who demonstrated their agency and their courage as they asked for a land inheritance in a system that had been set up to privilege male sons. There were stories that demonstrated the prophetic call and challenge to name injustice when we see it amongst our leaders, such as when Nathan called out King David for the murder of Uriah and for taking Bathsheba to be his wife. There were stories that showed us how appropriate righteous anger over injustice can be, such as when Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple. And every Sunday, as we sang our theme song, "there's a jubilee a-Comin,'" we were invited to see how God's justice continues to break into our world today. A worship series exploring the biblical vision of God's justice could go on much, much longer, for it really is a topic that runs like a thread through all of scripture, and not just in those places where we might expect to find it.

When Barb and I were discussing the service for today, she had wisely noted that among the many stories of justice that we have explored this summer, however, none have really taken up in earnest our calling as Christians to pursue justice for creation—justice for “all things bright and beautiful,” for this world that we inhabit and make our home in. To be sure, there have been connections to the theme of justice for creation at some points in this series: Leviticus’s proclamation of Jubilee, for example, is not simply about economic justice, but also about how that economic justice also entails providing time for the land to rest (Leviticus 25:4). I’m sure that if we really started to take the time to re-read many of the stories we have been looking at throughout the summer, it would soon be evident that these justice stories are not unrelated to issues of justice for creation. And this should not surprise us. More and more we are realizing just how much economic, social, and interpersonal matters of justice relate directly or indirectly to justice for creation. On a basic level, we know that the choices we make in our individual and corporate lives have a direct impact on the world around us. The investments we make, the food we eat, and our purchasing habits, all have an impact on our world; on the climate, the land, animals, oceans, and the list goes on. We know that everything is inter-connected. Among other things, what this should teach us is that God’s justice transforms all of creation, not just individuals or communities. Knowing this, sometimes the pursuit of God’s justice can seem daunting. But we can take heart, for seeking God’s justice is not about unilaterally changing the world in a day, and not about setting up a perfect community, but about being honest about where we have gone wrong and persistent in the struggle to be faithful. As we draw our series on justice to a close today with the story of Nehemiah, I hope that we keep the stories of all the biblical characters we have been examining close to our hearts, letting them inspire and challenge us to seek God’s world-transforming justice.

So, what about Nehemiah? How, can our reading of Nehemiah’s memoir from way back in the 5th century B.C.E. help us catch a vision of God’s justice? I’ll be honest, when I initially read through the book of Nehemiah to get a sense for the rest of his story, I began to feel that Nehemiah might be a

strange place wrap up our series on justice. Despite belonging to an exiled and captive nation under Persian rule, Nehemiah was a high-ranking official in the Persian court and he had become a man of considerable economic and political means. In addition, once he received permission to go back to Jerusalem to help his people rebuild the city, he was appointed to be the governor in the land of Judah. Nehemiah is in a place of significant privilege, having the power to shape public policy in the land of Judah. Not many of Nehemiah's kin had such privilege. In terms of political, social, and economic power, then, he is more like the powerful judge we heard about last week than the poor persistent widow who demanded justice until she got it.¹ In fact, if you read the whole book of Nehemiah, there are certain aspects to Governor Nehemiah's public policy that, in our present context, might give us pause when considering him an example of God's justice.

Take, for example, just a couple of the major policies that Nehemiah seeks to enforce as he governs: building a wall to keep enemies out and calling ethnic Jews to reject intermarriage with other peoples.² It is perhaps unsurprising that the pre-inauguration church service for the previous president of the United States included a sermon on Nehemiah—a *man* with significant *political power, money, and influence* who sought to *build a wall* around the nation to keep enemies out and put the priorities of *his people first*.³ Clearly, Nehemiah's 5th century memoir can be put in service of some grim political

¹ The major difference between Nehemiah and the unjust judge is that Nehemiah demonstrates fear of God (Nehemiah 4:1-11, 5:9) while the unjust judge does not (Luke 18:4).

² There seems to be some debate here on whether or not Nehemiah's actions were as "protectionist" or as "separatist" as they seem at first blush. Robert Alter argues they were: "...the ideology promoted by both Ezra and Nehemiah was stringently separatist." (*The Hebrew Bible: The Writings*, p.804) On the other hand, Prof. Jacob L. Wright and Prof. Rabbi Tamara Cohn Eskenazi argue that Ezra and Nehemiah's forbidding of intermarriage, for example, was not as sweeping as it might seem and that they were "more interested in drawing attention to the problem [intermarriages causing loss of culture] and the communal process for rectifying it." See "Contrasting Pictures of Intermarriage in Ruth and Nehemiah." Accessible at: thetorah.com/article/contrasting-pictures-of-intermarriage-in-ruth-and-nehemiah.

³ See, for example, the Washington Post article titled "'God is not against building walls!' The sermon Trump heard from Robert Jeffress before his inauguration." (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/20/god-is-not-against-building-walls-the-sermon-donald-trump-heard-before-his-inauguration/>) Jeffress used the biblical memoir preserved in Nehemiah for the 'divine' endorsement of Donald Trump's protectionist and anti-immigrant political ends.

ends when interpreted to fit those ends. Considering this, we might be even less inclined to see Nehemiah as the place to end our series on justice. But then there is chapter 5, which the reader's theatre depicted for us, which gives us a more hopeful picture—a picture of a different Nehemiah...a picture of a Nehemiah who has righteous anger at injustice and exhibits enough self-awareness and compassion to begin to unravel the intertwined inequities and unjust systems that are there to prop up the powerful and push down the lowly.

As we prepare to enter the events of chapter 5 of Nehemiah, we do well to remember the context: Jerusalem is still, many decades after its siege by Babylon (586 BCE), trying to rebuild. Later, after Babylon fell to the Persian empire, the new Persian King Cyrus gave the Jews who had been carried away in exile (many of whom had been Jewish cultural elites) permission to return to the land of Judah and rebuild the temple. Upon their return, the questions facing the community were important and difficult ones: **How will we rebuild? Where do our priorities fall? How will the work be distributed?** The years of rebuilding efforts leading up to Nehemiah's visit seemed to have been difficult ones, one step forward to rebuilding and two steps backwards. By the time Nehemiah hears an update on how things are going, it does not sound good: the people in the land of Judah "are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire" (Nehemiah 1:3). When Nehemiah gets there, he immediately rallies the people to rebuild the city and its walls, and this seems to go very well. The work to rebuild Jerusalem is happening. But there is a problem. It doesn't take long for Nehemiah to become aware that the people in the land of Judah are living in a highly stratified society: there are Jewish nobles and officials on the top, and then there are Jewish laborers on the bottom, working as slaves in the very fields and vineyards that had previously belonged to them but were now in possession of the nobles and officials. Nehemiah hears a "great outcry" from these laborers describing their plight and he is filled with righteous anger. (Nehemiah 5:6) Nehemiah doesn't stop with anger, however, rather he decides to take public action; he is the governor after all. What Nehemiah

does next is instructive, especially for those of us who also exercise a great amount of privilege in our society: Nehemiah publicly calls out and names the injustice he sees saying:

You are all taking interest from your own people...The thing that you are doing is not good...Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them. (Selections from Nehemiah 5:7-11)

The injustice Nehemiah names comes in the form of exploitation: the exploitation of people, and here special note is made of the exploitation of sons and daughters. Seeing this exploitation, Nehemiah does not beat around the bush—he calls it out—and to drive his point home, he even calls the priests forward to witness a provocative public ritual in which he asks the people to take an oath to do as they had promised. Nehemiah recounts:

I...shook out the fold of my garment and said, "So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen." (Nehemiah 5:13)

At this point, even with the hearty congregational "Amen," we might wonder whether some in the crowd were mumbling: "Easy for Nehemiah to do. Look at his power and privilege. He's a high-ranking official working for the Persian King. He won't be wanting for much any time soon and here he stands asking us to redistribute wealth!" Nehemiah doesn't stop at calling out others, however. In addition, *Nehemiah recognizes, names, and owns up to his own privilege*. In the system of government set up in Judah, Nehemiah was to be paid 40 shekels of silver and was given a food allowance that the laborers were to give him. Rather than assume that he was owed this, or rather than assuming that the hard work of governing made him deserve this extra benefit, Nehemiah chose to forgo the payment and food allowance and *instead chose solidarity with the poorest of the people*. To be sure, the very fact that Nehemiah had this choice reveals just how privileged he was and there is no question that the work of undoing exploitation in Jerusalem would be ongoing. But, as a person of considerable power and influence, Nehemiah chose solidarity with the people over further exploitation or maintaining the status quo.

There is much that we can learn from Nehemiah's memoir, but perhaps it is especially at this point where Nehemiah recognizes his own privilege and leverages it for the good of the people that I suspect that we can learn the most and be the most challenged.⁴ I don't think it is a stretch to say that all of us sitting here today are, in different ways, very privileged folks. I suggest that two of the most important questions that Nehemiah's story directs at us in the church today are, "what is our privilege?" and "what does God call us to do with that privilege?" In his book *Subversive Witness: Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege*, author Dominique Dubois Gilliard argues that

[t]he church should lead the way in naming oppression, confessing our role in it, and addressing as well as eradicating the systemic disparities that privilege engenders. However, conversations about privilege in the church generally end in one of three places: churches and members deny that privilege exists, consider the topic too controversial to address, or lament feeling immobilized by its weight....⁵

Instead of avoiding conversation about our privilege, denying it exists, or being immobilized by its weight, we in the church are challenged today, just as the nobles and officials were in Jerusalem in the 5th century BCE, to name with honesty our privilege and work concretely to subvert it for the Gospel vision of the flourishing of all peoples and indeed, for the flourishing of all creation.

Let us take up this challenge for a moment and silently ask ourselves what our privilege is. You don't have to name it out loud if you do not want to, but just take a moment and name it. What is your privilege? (30 sec of silence) Now, ask yourselves, how might I or how might we, at BMC, use or leverage our privilege to live into God's vision of justice? (30 sec of silence) Having taken time to do this exercise, may we not be constrained by our worries about controversy or be immobilized by the weight of our privilege. May we instead be inspired to name with honesty our privilege and choose solidarity with the least of these in our community. After our prayer of confession and offering, we will sing as our hymn of response, "Touch the Earth Lightly." In it we confess the ways that we endanger, create hunger, and

⁴ My thoughts here have been animated by Dominique Dubois Gilliard's *Subversive Witness: Scripture's call to leverage privilege* (Zondervan, 2021).

⁵ Dubois Gilliard, *Subversive Witness*, xviii.

become agents of death for all creatures that live. May we recognize this confession too as part of naming our privilege and resolving to do justice...to love kindness...and walk humbly on this earth with our God (Micah 6:8). AMEN