

More than Dollars and Cents

Nehemiah 9:38-10:39

So this morning we are continuing with our study in Nehemiah where we've been learning about living our lives based on the True Story, the True Story of God's great love for us. So, let's recap. After being called to be God's chosen people, Israel had been living out the story of a cyclical relationship with God. It began with a recognition of this special relationship, a time of seeking God's direction, and then it shifted to a time of questioning the parameters of God's covenant while still expecting God to uphold his end of the agreement, and then time of outright disobedience, and then a time of experiencing the affects of breaking the covenant with God, and then a time of repentance and seeking forgiveness, and then a time for renewing the covenant with God. And then, and then the cycle would begin again. Over and over again. Until the now divided nation, Israel and Judah, came under foreign rulers, first Israel and then finally Judah, the home of Jerusalem and the temple. The city was destroyed; the people were carried from their promised land into exile in a foreign land where they lived among strangers and strange gods; where they were no longer enjoyed the privileges of living as God's, Yahweh's Chosen children. And it remained that way for over 150 years – several generations. And then a man named Nehemiah, one of those Chosen children, rose to a position of prominence in the palace of the foreign King, and when he heard that Jerusalem was still in ruins, it brought him great grief. And so he risked everything: settled life in Babylon, a cushy job in the Palace, his good relationship with the King, even his own life, to go back to Jerusalem and oversee the project of rebuilding the city walls which not only provided security from would be attackers but also helped to reestablish the identity of the people of God who lived within those walls. It reminded them who they were; whose they were. But the city walls alone could only do so much to restore the long broken relationship with God. And so after the walls and gates had been rebuilt, the people themselves, Israel, the chosen children of God – both the remnant who had remained in Jerusalem during the time of exile and then were a part of the rebuilding project and those who returned to the city when they heard that the walls had been restored - the people themselves now set to work at an even greater rebuilding project: rebuilding their relationship with God.

It began by going back to the very foundation. They gathered together to listen to the Word of God. By the Word of God they had been created, created in the image of God. By the Word of God they had been called, a promise spoken to Abraham; that he would be the father of many nations. By the Word of God, they had been freed from slavery in Egypt to enjoy God's blessing in the land filled with Milk and Honey. God had promised: You will be my people and I will be your God, but they had not kept their promise, their covenant with God. As they stood together again in Jerusalem and listened to the story of God's blessing, God's promises, their sin and disobedience, all the ways God tried to restore the broken relationship, and His abiding love for them through it

all, they were overcome with emotion. And there was great celebrating. This was the beginning – gathering together as a people formed by the Word of God.

After they had gathered and been reestablished as a community formed by God, after the initial thrill and relief and celebration settled, they gathered a second time to hear the Word of God and this time they responded with a posture of confession and repentance. They acknowledged the many times and ways that they, the generations which had come before them and of which they were a product, the many times and ways they had strayed from God. And despite the restoration of the temple which had begun sometime ago, the rebuilding of the city walls, and all the celebrations, finally they were able to face the truth. We are in great distress. Or if you want to put it in less formal language, we're in trouble. After retelling the story of their long bi-polar relationship with God, I'm not talking about God's role in the relationship – don't misunderstand me, I am talking about their end of the relationship – after retelling the story, they can now see it as plain as day: they are in trouble. Not as in, you're in trouble and I'm going to tell on you. No, they themselves have recognized the very troubling patterns that have been repeated through the generations, the cycles, and here they are again. And they want this time to be different.

So rather than just paying lip service again to their failures and their infidelity, rather than just giving a verbal promise to renew the covenant, they went one step further, and they wrote it down, a new agreement, and they signed their names to it. And it wasn't just Nehemiah and a couple of local government officials. It wasn't like today when the Government of Canada enters into an agreement and sends a few officials to sign off on it and we are all bound to the terms of the agreement. In the first verses of chapter 10 we find the list of names: yes, come government officials including Nehemiah, names of the Levites which was the tribe or clan who had responsibility for the temple, and then the names of the priests which had spiritual leadership over the people and then, the names of nobles – the wealthy or those with access to other kinds of social standing are recorded, and then, the names of the heads of families and then names of individuals. The whole people are responsible for the keeping of this covenant. The whole people. Not just a few. Not just the very religious people. Not just the professional church workers, not just the rich people, not just the young energetic ones or the ones who are retired and have time. The whole people. Everyone is a part of the community; everyone is a part of the covenant. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that covenant is upheld. And so, in the rest of chapter 10 we find a summary of the covenant agreement. I want us to understand that this was a covenant the people themselves wrote – it is what they signed up for. It wasn't something that God told Nehemiah to get out his pen and write this down and present it to the people and demand that they sign on the dotted line. This covenant was written in response to the people coming face to face with a renewed sense of their identity as the beloved children of God and in the acknowledgment of generation after generation after generation of turning their backs on that very same God of love. They wrote it and signed their names. And here's what they promised.

The promised to live in accordance with or under the authority of the law of God. That is to say, that they would no longer just take matters into their own hands or make things up as they went along or reinterpret the

laws that had been handed to them because they seemed to restrictive, unfair, out of touch. They would once again understand God's laws as necessary for living in a right relationship with God and with one another.

The promised to provide what was necessary for the upkeep of the temple. The temple, they acknowledged was at the very centre of their life together as a community, as a people. Therefore, they could not neglect the temple. If they were sincere about their desire to have a renewed faith and to make that faith central in their lives, so that they lived out their relationships through their faith, they did their work through their faith, they raised their children through their faith, then the temple was where they would gather as a community, as a family of faith, to have that faith built up, strengthened, encouraged. And in order for that to happen, they had to step up and provide what was necessary for the upkeep of the temple. And so they agreed to pay a set amount – 1/3 of a shekel which was a piece of silver, though there is no way for us to really understand the value of it in Nehemiah's time. This fixed donation was to cover the costs of the services at the temple. But that wasn't all they signed up to give. In addition to this fixed donation, they also promised to bring the wood for the fire for the burnt offerings and then the offerings themselves – the first fruits, meaning the very best of their livestock, of their bread, their fruit and vegetables, their wine and oil. They promised to bring the very best. Even their first born sons – not that they would be sacrifices – but as a symbolic offering - as a way of also acknowledging that their children were gifts, blessings from God and that they also belonged to Him. And then, in addition to all of that, they offered tithes – 1/10th of what they produced, earned each year, again for the ministry of the temple. Howard Vos helps us to understand the importance of the temple to that restored Jerusalem community. He writes “The temple provided the religious and social cement to bind members of the community to each other and preeminently to God and his service.”ⁱ Those men and women, the leaders and governors, the priests and Levites, the heads of families and individuals, they knew that if they truly wanted to live differently from the generations that had gone before, if they wanted to live as a people who kept the covenant with God, they would have to commit themselves to life lived with God and to put the law and worship and community and giving at the centre of their lives. And so together they declare that they will not neglect the house of their God, for indeed it is God who builds the house of Israel.

This week a few of us have been looking at “the numbers” in preparation for our upcoming Budget meeting at the beginning of December. We have been adding up the dollars and cents. We have been talking about the costs of doing ministry: paying down the mortgage on this facility, the costs of maintenance, the costs associated with programs, the costs of having staff, the costs of supporting work in this community and around the world. We understand those costs because we live in a world that operates within a financial framework. We understand the sometimes precarious relationship between income and expenses because our own personal lives, the lives of our families, are also often affected by those same factors. But the cost of discipleship is not counted in dollars and cents. The currency of discipleship is obedience. It is obedience. Or as James Montgomery Boice puts it, Lifestyle Stewardshipⁱⁱ. The currency of discipleship is not only counted in dollars and cents – that would actually be so much easier. But the currency of discipleship is counted in the ways that

we spend our lives; all the different parts of our lives. The ways that we spend our money, how we spend the gifts and skills we have been given, the way we spend our time, the way we give ourselves in relationship to each other, they ways that we serve. Being a disciple must cost us. It is not a free ride. It is not a life of holding back, of measuring first what to keep for ourselves, of waiting and watching to see who else will step up to do what I could do but don't want to. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected. In the wilderness God gave Israel the manna every day, and they had no need to worry about food and drink. Indeed, if they kept any of the manna over until the next day, it went bad. In the same way, the disciple must receive his portion from God every day. If he stores it up as a permanent possession, he spoils not only the gift, but himself as well, for he sets his heart on accumulated wealth, and makes it a barrier between himself and God. Where our treasure is, there is our trust, our security, our consolation and our God.....Discipleship, Bonhoeffer wrote, is not an offer that man makes to Christ."ⁱⁱⁱ What a profound insight into our shallow understanding of discipleship. Discipleship is not an offer than we make to Christ, as if he's getting some great deal. It is a life Christ invites into: a life of following, a life of surrender, a life of serving, a life of obedience. Bonhoeffer knew this better than most. He was a German pastor and professor during the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime. And he was instrumental in training Christian pastors to provide underground ministry because Hitler had coopted the state church. It was during this time that *The Cost of Discipleship* was written. The pressures around him were mounting now and in 1939 Bonhoeffer left Germany to study at Union Seminary in New York. But almost immediately, he recognized what he had done. In a letter to his colleague, Reinhold Neibuhr, Bonhoeffer wrote: "'I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people..." Sounds like something Nehemiah might have said. He returned to Germany, and he was later sent to Flossenburg Concentration Camp, where he was executed just 2 weeks before the liberation. That is the cost of discipleship, a lifestyle stewardship – to live in community with God's people, to enter into the covenant and to sign your name to be a part of the reconstruction, to be willing to risk it all, to live in obedience to the One who gave it all for you.

Thanks be to God who has freed us to live freely in Him.

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ⁱ Howard Vos, Bible Study Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, 1987

ⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, Nehemiah: And Expository Commentary, 1990

ⁱⁱⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, 1937.