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Across the Lines: Living as a Minority in the U.S.

It's really great to be here. I love the series title and the courage to venture into some deep waters. I'm going to jump right into that deep end of the pool with you this morning to talk about what I call restoring or rebuilding under-resourced communities, lessons from the Book of Nehemiah. How do we bring hope? As the church, how do we begin to make an impact? What's our role? How can the church located in your community be a bridge, cross the line, to become an agent of God's Kingdom in some tough places? I hope to get some insight into that out of God's Word this morning.

I don't know if you remember it vividly, but in the last few years there was this movement that began to sweep around the country called the Occupy movement. Remember that? It began in New York with Wall Street, the Mecca of wealth and capitalism, protesting the gap that exists between the rich and the poor. The participants declared to the world that it is not moral or right that 1 percent of the world's, or our nation's, population should control the majority of the world's wealth and resources while the remaining 99 percent struggle to survive on the crumbs that fall from the table. Battle lines were drawn. There was the 99 percent, they were the masses, and then there was the 1 percent. What I've come to realize as I've traveled all over the world is that probably every one of us who call the United States our home live as part of that 1 percent compared with so many of those who are hurting and struggling, barely making a living, around the world.

Thousands of Occupy protestors across the nation began to pitch their tents and move into parks and city blocks for weeks and months at a time, including my city of Chicago. I don't know if there was an Occupy protest here in Minneapolis, I assume there was, but here's what happened. Eventually the protest died out. Eventually the mostly disillusioned young people packed up their tents and went home. The biggest criticism of the movement was that ultimately, it offered a way to protest but no way to invest in creating long-term solutions for the most vulnerable in our nation.

You don't hear about that movement, that protest, anymore. May I say it like this, what was lacking was the power of hope, the hope that we can do something to move the poverty needle, the hope that people's lives can be changed and empowered, the hope not just for economic empowerment, which is critical, but for spiritual, emotional, and community transformation as well.

An important consideration for us today as we gather together is, does faith in general and the church in particular have anything to offer our communities, our cities, our states, our nation, and our world that goes beyond putting band-aids on poverty built on one-way expressions of charity? Do we really have something different to offer? Do Christians have better and bolder

solutions to offer that actually help the poor, instead of creating debilitating dependency that can take decades to reverse? Do we really have the audacity to believe that things can change in marginalized places long ignored by society and by the government and by the church as well? And do we really believe that the faith, love, and hope spoken about in God's Word is powerful enough to see a glimpse of God's Kingdom begin to break through in our most vulnerable neighborhoods with the power to change hearts, to transform lives, to heal families? Does it have the power in vulnerable neighborhoods to help them become places of real flourishing? That is the prayer that we prayed this morning.

¹⁰ Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven [Matthew 6:10].”

We want to see the breaking through of the impact of the Kingdom here on earth. Well, today I want to briefly review what I call the first Occupy movement. We find it in the Bible in the Book of Nehemiah. I want to spend a little time with you in the Book of Nehemiah. I think it's an amazing Book that has so much to teach us around the lessons and things we are talking about here this morning. The Book of Nehemiah is probably the last historical Book in the Bible. It talks about the last period of history in what we find out about Israel in the Old Testament. Basically, it's a Book about an under-resourced, vulnerable neighborhood in the big city of Jerusalem, the city of God, the city of Peace. Here we find a Book that actually tackles head-on, what do the people of God do, what can we do, if we are going to make an impact in a broken-down city? I want to say that I travel all over the country and almost everywhere I go, there are neighborhoods where I would say, "That is not what God intended that neighborhood to be like." I think the Book of Nehemiah addresses that. If I were to close my eyes for a second and say, let me picture that neighborhood I have driven through or maybe lived close by or know somebody who lives there, and imagine in my mind and heart what that neighborhood could look like if God really showed up, if God's people were there as agents of hope and change and love, would it be different? I think the Book of Nehemiah gives us a great truth around that.

Four points of Nehemiah that I want to talk about this morning: I want to talk about a **new burden** that we find in this story. I want to talk about a **new leadership approach**. I want to talk about a **new partnership** and then, finally, about this **new Occupy movement** that I talked about. So in Nehemiah, chapter 1, listen to what it says.

1 . . . In late autumn of the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. **2** Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had survived the captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. **3** They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been burned." **4** When I heard this,

now listen to this,

I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.

So the very first thing we see in this story is that the city is in shambles and turmoil. It's been like that for many years as the Jews have been exiled, first into Babylon, and now Persia comes into power. There were many examples of Jewish leaders who had become somewhat prominent in

this new administration, this new reign, this new kingdom, but who always kept the concern for their roots, their heritage. Nehemiah was one of those leaders. He had never spent any time in Jerusalem, but he must have known about the conditions of that city. Now his brother comes back with a first-hand report and what he hears blows him away. I mean, his heart is ripped. Now think about it. What was different this time hearing the report about the broken walls and the disgrace of the people, the hardship and the toil? What was different this time more than any other time he had ever heard about Jerusalem?

As I've studied and prayed about this passage, I've often asked myself this, but then I just think about myself. I am aware of many needs around the world. I'm aware of what is going on in Sudan. I'm aware of what's going on in South Africa and in different parts of the world after the *tsunami*, after Katrina. I've heard about all that stuff, but something happens when information is turned into a burden, right? It changes everything. When Nehemiah became burdened with the problems of the broken city, as a person of faith, he couldn't stay the same and this is what I think is instructive for us today. May I say it like this - it causes us to turn to God with this burden. It says Nehemiah fasted and prayed, "How and what should I do about what I know is going on in Jerusalem?"

It would have been very easy for him to have said, "Man, that is just too bad! Ain't I blessed because I have this great government job! I'm doing well. I've got vacation time accrued. I've got my vacation home. My family is great. We're blessed. We're doing so fantastic. Man, I'm going to pray for those folks down in Jerusalem." He didn't do that. God grips him, and he takes that burden and begins to put it into action. For Nehemiah, it was risky. It was life-changing because what he did was, he actually went to the king. He didn't know how the king would respond but he said, "I want to take a leave of absence from my job and go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of that city."

The story in Nehemiah begins there. God gives him favor and he goes to Jerusalem and begins this new project of rebuilding the walls. Here's the thing that I want to just think about for a minute as we are here together, talking about crossing the lines. Because of our different perspectives and contexts, we maybe come at things a little differently, but let me ask you a question. Why would Nehemiah feel a burden to rebuild the physical environment of the city of Jerusalem? Why didn't the burden that God gave him say, "I want to go back and save everybody's soul? I want to go back and make sure that everyone is doing well spiritually. I want to go back and make sure that everybody is in church." You read the story in the Bible and see that it was a spiritual call. It was a spiritual, God-inspired burden, but the burden was about something very earthly, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven." It was about rebuilding the broken structures and physical environment, the walls in Jerusalem that were causing people to suffer.

What I have come to learn in the 30-some years I've been doing this is that the environment in which we live impacts *all* of our life, even our spiritual life. And I want to say to you that there is no great virtue in living in a poor, run-down, unhealthy, unsafe, violent neighborhood. I think many times the approach that we have taken, and I'm not just saying *us*, I'm not just saying the church, I'm not even just saying the government or the Pope, has been, "Let's rescue people *out* of the *barrio*, *out* of the hood. Let's get them out of there and get them to build a good life." There are many, many stories of people who have left tough situations and now they are doing well. Praise the Lord for that! So that's one approach, help people escape. The other approach has been this. "Oh, man, let's help people get Jesus, and then they can survive in that tough

neighborhood. They have walls that are broken down, things are bad, but now they've got Jesus. Praise the Lord! Everything is going to be okay. So let's just help them, 'Hang in there, buddy. We're praying for you.'"

Well, Nehemiah takes a third approach that I think is very instructive. "Let's *transform* the city. Let's make it a healthier neighborhood." That's what I've been engaged in for the last 35 or 40 years. How do we go as agents of the Kingdom, not to truncate and dichotomize the Gospel to say, "All we care about is getting you saved" or "All we care about is fixing the spiritual problems in your neighborhood" or "doing community service"? Let's do it *all*. Let's go and be agents of a literal transformation of the community. But I want you to see that *it takes a new burden*. I pray that Christians all over the country, in this church, in this series [Across the Lines] that you will be getting, all the stuff that you've done will do this. You know, for many years your church has been a great partner with CCDA [Christian Community Development Association]. I know that you're involved in many different ministries here in Minnesota and around the world. I know John Crosby is on the board of World Vision and you are having this kind of impact, but imagine if every church in America had the same kind of heart that you all have to really make a difference in vulnerable neighborhoods.

So, if we are going to make a difference, the first thing is, we have to **have a God-given burden** to say, "I don't know all the solutions but I'm going to go and be an agent of transformation and change like Nehemiah." There are so many lessons in this Book that are amazing. Nehemiah gets there, gets to the city, and the second thing that we see is that Nehemiah begins to **implement a new leadership approach**. This is chapter 5 of Nehemiah. You'll see it up on the screen.

14 . . . for the entire twelve years that I was governor of Judah—from the twentieth until the thirty-second year of the reign of King Artaxerxes—

listen to what it says,

neither I nor my officials drew on our official food allowance. **15** This was quite a contrast to the former governors who had laid heavy burdens on the people, demanding a daily ration of food and wine, besides a pound of silver. Even their assistants took advantage of the people. But because of my fear of God, I did not act that way.

So Nehemiah comes in and he begins to say, "Look, if we're really going to make a difference and rebuild this community, there's got to be a whole new approach. There's got to be a whole new leadership approach." An interesting fact about Nehemiah is, not only does he state publicly, "You know what? We're going to do things differently. No more corruption. We're going to clean up shop," but he actually builds a house himself and lives in the neighborhood. I don't know how many politicians do that. But here is another little interesting thing, Nehemiah comes and he is appointed the governor over Jerusalem. Here is this politician who is a man of faith, that kind of blows our mind, but then he decides he's going to live in the neighborhood himself. He is going to say, "You know what? Those red slippers that the Pope usually wears, we're not going to wear those any more." You know all the ruckus that the Pope is causing by beginning to do things a little differently. Nehemiah kind of did the same thing. Then here's some of the response that he began to find when he began to disrupt the way things were being done in the city. Chapter 2:10,

10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

I see this all the time. So many people in poor neighborhoods have been promised help over and over again. There are neighborhoods where billions of dollars have been allocated but a lot of times that money never gets to the real problem. It's only these groups that are there to kind of take advantage. They know how to write the proposals and do this and that. We see the same thing happening here but Nehemiah is there as a great leader to really combat this. We go on to Nehemiah 2:17. It says

17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire.

Then listen to this. Here's the new leadership approach. I love this because I think this is what it's going to take to really make a difference.

Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace."

You know what I love about Nehemiah? Even though he came with government coffers, even though he came as an educated guy from the outside, he did not treat the people of Jerusalem as a project or with paternalism, "I'm here to save you." You know what he did? He organized the people in those poor communities and said, "Let us rebuild these walls *together*. Let's work *together* to begin to change the environment we live in. We don't have to live like this. We can really make a difference." All of this was motivated by his burden that it had come from God. Isn't that amazing? I have seen this happen in neighborhoods all over the country, but it does take somebody who is willing to be there with the people and to say, "Let's work together to begin to organize."

When I was in Chicago, we began to organize a project to combat gang violence in my neighborhood because there were so many gangs. We began projects and said, "Let's organize the workers to help them start small businesses." We are going to talk about this here on Wednesday night [John Crosby will facilitate a discussion from 6:00 to 7:30 p.m. on *Immigration: Being Latino in the US*]. Let's begin to organize all the people in our community who are having problems with their legal status being in the country as undocumented workers. And let's figure out how to address on a policy level the very complicated solutions that we need to bring about a change in our country's immigration policy. But we don't come in to fix people. We come in to work *with* people. How many of us want to be the object of somebody's project? Nehemiah didn't do that. I love that. He comes with burden, but his burden is to do things differently and to empower the people.

This third thing we see that I think is very instructive is that Nehemiah comes in and we see a **new partnership**. We see a partnership between Nehemiah and Ezra. Nehemiah and Ezra are contemporaries, and here's the thing. Nehemiah was called by God with a burden to rebuild the walls of the city, right? About 12 years earlier, Ezra had been given a burden from God as well. "Go to Jerusalem and be the priest of that city. Rebuild the spiritual vitality of the city. Get people to rally around. Finish rebuilding the temple. Get people fired up to be sold out to God." But Ezra was having problems. If you read the Book of Ezra, you see that people had stubborn hearts and weren't really coming around. There wasn't that zeal for God that Ezra wanted

people to have. Nehemiah shows up and starts rebuilding the walls and then, low and behold, in 52 days they actually complete the job of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. And something amazing happens. Nehemiah reaches out to Ezra and says, "Listen, the work that I'm doing here is connected to the work that *you're* doing. We need to rebuild both the physical *and* the spiritual environments of our neighborhood if we're really going to honor God." And together they began to work at restoring all of this great worship and commitment to God. Listen to what it says in chapter 8.

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. **10** . . . This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve,

this is where that great verse is,

for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Because the people had seen God deliver them *again*, bringing this leader to come and rebuild the walls of the city. Now the city is fortified. The city is stronger. The city is able to keep them safe. I have learned first hand in Chicago the power of a partnership between what I would call the sacred and the secular. I don't think there is that dichotomy in the Kingdom of God. I think everything is for the purposes of God. When I arrived in Chicago 25 years ago, we did it in ministry with a church that probably many of you know about, Lawndale Community Church in a black neighborhood of Chicago on the west side. Next door in the Mexican neighborhood, I worked in partnership.

A few years before I arrived there, a doctor had been thinking about going to Africa to start a medical clinic, but instead he saw the medical needs of people in that neighborhood. He said, "Man, infant mortality rate, heart attacks, diabetes! It's so bad here. There is no adequate place to meet the medical needs of people." So motivated by his faith, he establishes a clinic. He and one other person from the neighborhood go knocking on doors, "Hey, come to our clinic." It was housed in the little church, Lawndale Community Church, and little by little, that clinic began to meet a very real need in the community. Here is the mission of that clinic: to provide quality affordable health care in an atmosphere of Christian love. Don't you love that?

This clinic kept growing and kept growing and today it has really transformed the physical health of people in that community. Almost 500 staff people, many who live in the neighborhood. About 40 full-time doctors, all kinds of folks being treated there. About 200,000 patient visits a year. It's about a \$40 million-a-year clinic operation and here's the interesting thing. A number of years into the project in order to serve even more people, they had to make a decision. Should we partner with the Federal government and with the city of Chicago to receive a little bit of Federal funding to care for the poorest of the poor? And Lawndale Clinic decided to do that. Many people thought, "That's the end. Our mission is to proclaim the love of God." But I want to tell you something, and I was the chair of that board for many years when this was going on. Every time we met with government leaders, this is what they would say. "You all are doing something so amazing. If you were not here, this neighborhood would not have the kind of health care that you are providing. Hey, we don't care what you're doing. We just want you to keep doing what you're doing." Unbelievable partnership!

I want to say this because sometimes I think it's difficult to think about the complexity of what it takes to change a city that's been down or a community that's been down for many, many years. People need Jesus. Absolutely! But friends, we are also going to rebuild the city to provide adequate housing, adequate education, safe neighborhoods, and parks for kids to play in. If we're going to help create jobs, if we are going to build healthy neighborhoods, we are going to have to be open to working in partnership with agencies and individuals who don't all believe the same thing that we do. We're going to have to *cross the lines*, and we're going to have to say, "Man, we can work on trying to build homes *together*. It doesn't matter if we all have exactly the same belief or faith but here's the thing that I've seen happen over and over again. When we as Christians, for the sake of the Kingdom and out of a burden for God, engage in this way, you know what happens? Our faith becomes relevant to the people in that neighborhood. What if we just came into the neighborhood and said, "Uhhhh, all we care about is telling people about Jesus. If they don't want to hear it, they're going to hell. That's their problem." What kind of response do you think we would have? But instead, we go in and say, "We're here to be part of the solution. We're here to establish a new partnership."

Then the last point. So you see Nehemiah with this new burden. You see this new leadership approach. You see a new partnership between the secular and the sacred and amazing things beginning to happen, but the last thing is something very interesting. It is something that I've come to learn first-hand over many, many years of doing this and that is where I say, there was **a new Occupy movement**. Now Nehemiah was a pioneer. He moved into Jerusalem when things were not looking good. They rebuilt the walls. Things started to go up, but then here's what he knew needed to happen. "If we are going to sustain this new revitalization that's happening in that neighborhood, we're going to have to repopulate the community." Listen to this verse in Chapter 7.

4 Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt.

They rebuilt the walls but what he was saying is, "Look, there are just not enough of us to have a healthy neighborhood." Something amazing happens in Chapter 11 of Nehemiah. Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor, this catalyst for community change, and all the other leaders get together and they say, "We're going to hold a holy assembly and we want everybody to come in from the suburbs and everywhere, from all over. We have some business to do with God and with each other." This is what happened when they came together.

11 The leaders of the people were living in Jerusalem, the holy city. A tenth of the people from the other towns of Judah and Benjamin were chosen by sacred lots to live there, too, while the rest stayed where they were.

Not everybody moved, but it says "a tenth."

² And the people commended everyone who volunteered to resettle in Jerusalem. ³ Here is a list of the names of the provincial officials who came to live in Jerusalem. (Most of the people, priests, Levites, Temple servants, and descendants of Solomon's servants continued to live in their own homes in the various towns of Judah

Here's what we see in this little passage. The people come together and say, "Look, we need to have an influx of 10 percent of all the population to move into the hood, to move back to

Jerusalem, if this is going to continue to be a healthy neighborhood.” They drew straws and one-tenth had to volunteer to move into the city if they drew that straw. I’d like to say that if you had any qualms about the possibility of moving into the city, that would have been a good Sunday to miss church. Like, “Okay, you know, maybe I shouldn’t come at this time,” right? You know what I love about this? This kind of voluntary movement into tough neighborhoods is happening all over the country today, but thankfully it is not drawing straws any more. You know what happens? And I hear these stories everywhere I go. People, and a lot of young people, but not exclusively young people, they tell me about this burden that God has put on their hearts. “Man, I’ve been praying for Detroit.” “I’ve been praying for this little community in West Virginia, this Appalachian community of poor white folks.” “I’ve been praying for East Los Angeles.” “I’ve been praying for the south side of Chicago, and I think God is calling me and my family to live in that community and be an agent of God’s Kingdom so we can see the kind of restoration there that we saw in the Book of Nehemiah.”

You know what I believe? It would be the key to transforming neighborhoods if we in the church were to come around those individuals who have that kind of burden and just love on them, support them, cheer them on, and then find ways to walk *across the lines* and be partners with them, whatever it is we might do. I also love that not 10 out of 10 were called to move into the hood. That would gentrify the whole neighborhood. Just a few were called. What could happen if, in our country, the entire church of Jesus Christ for the sake of the Kingdom would act on the burden to say, “We are going to take action and we are going to get involved. We’re going to make a difference.” It’s going to be hard. It’s going to be complicated and it might stretch us, but I’ll tell you something, it could be the key to transforming neighborhoods in our own country the way Nehemiah helped transform his neighborhood a couple thousand years ago. Let’s pray.

Father we thank You for Your amazing love. Thank You for your Word. Thank You for the story of Nehemiah that puts it so clearly, God, that You care not only about people but the places in which they live because it does impact those people. Lord, give us courage. Give us wisdom to know to how to engage. If we are one of those folks who are called to consider going in and living in one of these neighborhoods, help us to do that with great wisdom. If we are one of the nine who are called to stay where we are but to be engaged in supporting this kind of work, help us do that with great wisdom and generosity as well. In Christ’s Name we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.