

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 16 & 17, 2017
John Crosby
GRIT / Nehemiah 4:6-12**

Frederick Buechner said, “Your day will be filled with terrible things and things too beautiful to contemplate, and your soul will learn from both.” If this were the kind of world that God had intended from the beginning, the front page of the newspaper would be filled with images that would startle you—of Jupiter from close up, seen like never before. Of Saturn with its rings so bright you could almost touch them. Of one of the moons of Saturn, Titan, that may be almost as big as the earth—because almost twenty years ago, long before laptops, long before smart phones, some scientists lifted off a bus-sized satellite, Cassini, and sent it towards the sun, around the sun, around Jupiter, towards Saturn, and for almost twenty years it has broadcast the magnificent mysteries of creation. Now, this day, this week plunging into Saturn’s atmosphere. Plunging into the atmosphere instead of into one of the moons, the moons so big they might have some kind of life. They didn’t want to hit the moons because they didn’t want to contaminate the possible life, so they threw it into Saturn. This is what we should have. This is surely what God intended—that His children would learn to play in the sandbox. This is Section B, page 10, because page 1 was filled with different images, sometimes of natural disasters where we are called to respond and help one another, and other times of economies that are devastated, but far too often they are pictures of this. [Picture shown] This is Aleppo, a city in Syria that is as old as Jerusalem, destroyed. When we talked last week about Nehemiah hearing that the walls of Jerusalem had fallen, this is the modern day equivalent right here. It’s destroyed. How could it ever be put back together? How could it ever be rebuilt?

We’re talking about rebuilding things this month, saying that this series is called “Grit” because the dust from this kind of damage fills our lives and to change it, to rebuild, would require a different kind of grit and courage. For those of you that weren’t here last week, Nehemiah is a Jew who finds out that his beloved country is conquered and the capital, Jerusalem, destroyed. And he knew that he was called to do something about it. You can’t do something about everything, but everybody has to do something about something. Nehemiah taught us last week how to start to rebuild. His story says that if you feel like you are called to rebuild, it begins when you hear the news, when you hear some news that makes you sit down and weep. It stops you. You sit down and weep so it becomes personal; it’s not just another headline, it’s not just an emotion. It stays with you, and it stayed with Nehemiah...the plight of the Jews. And after he sat and wept, he began to kneel and pray. For months he fasted, kneeled, and prayed. He asked God for

plans that he would do. He would trust God. Ten times in Nehemiah's story he said, "Oh God, remember me. Remember me. What did you get me into God?" He sat and wept, and then he knelt and prayed...and that's where church usually stops. The story of Nehemiah is that the walls are rebuilt because people sit and weep and kneel and pray and then they stand and act. That's the story that we are trying to learn as we rebuild here, as we see this season in our lives. And I asked you to try to remember one phrase. It was from the hero of Chariots of Fire, Eric Liddell, the Scottish missionary who goes to China, and in a prison of war camp in China, he finds his life turned upside down. In the middle of that he says, "Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins." That's the phrase. I just want you to cling to that. Circumstances may change, but God is not helpless among the ruins. As a matter of fact, I think that it's in the mess that God seems to do His best work, and Nehemiah can show us how. So last week, Nehemiah sits and weeps, kneels and prays, stands and acts, and then he gathers what he needs. He asks the king, and the king gives him permission to rebuild the city. Nehemiah journeys to the broken walls of Jerusalem and he looks things over. For three nights he sneaks out by himself, goes all around the city, and sees what is worst. And after those three nights, he rallies all the troops.

Chapter 2:

¹⁷ Then Nehemiah said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be a disgrace." ¹⁸ And I told them what God had already done [how God's first miracle was getting Nehemiah there] and when they heard that, the people said, "Let us start rebuilding." So we began the good work.
[Paraphrased, Nehemiah 2:17-18]

Well, it doesn't take three weeks for that. Good! Things fall apart, God shows up...all better. Happily ever after. Wrong. It doesn't go from things fall apart, to God shows us how, to us building it, and that's the end of the story. The very next verse after "we began the good work" shows what happens. It says,

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab [to the north, to the west, to the east] heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. [Nehemiah 2:19]

Anything worth doing stirs up opposition. Anything that involves change is hard. It inevitably raises people who do not want to change. In the last service I was walking around and I came to an elderly African American woman and I said, "What are you doing sitting over here? You're messing with me!" Because she always sits right there...that's her spot. And she leans over to me and she

whispers, “I came in and some new person was sitting in my spot.” And she said, “I didn’t want to be like an old person, so I came over here.”

Change is hard. We laugh because that change is happening to somebody else. Change discomforts everybody. It threatens some; it frightens many. And here shows the worst parts of change. Change is a great idea as long as it’s your idea. If you think you should do this, then it’s a great idea, right? If your mom thinks you should do it, it’s a bad idea, right? This is the first case in the world of NIMBY. What does NIMBY mean? Not in my backyard. The Ammonites and Tobiah and Sanballat...they didn’t care if the walls were rebuilt in Jericho or all the way over in Babylon. They just didn’t want it where they were. That was threatening to them. There was opposition. How about you? Did you ever start something and found it was too hard? Did you ever get into a project halfway and give up? Did you ever try anything new and fail? Have any of you ever tried anything and failed? I have both my hands and feet up. We all know this feeling. But you start with such great promise and everybody is excited, and then all of a sudden it’s one month later and your hands are blistered and people are whining and you have to get up again that day. That’s what happens to Nehemiah. From chapter 4:

⁶So we rebuilt the wall until it reached half its height because the people worked with all their hearts. ⁷But when Sanballat and Tobiah, the Arabs and the Ammonites, the Ashdods heard that the repairs to Jerusalem’s walls had gone ahead and the gaps were being closed [enemies would come through the gaps in the wall; the wall protects people] they were furious. ⁸They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble. ⁹But we prayed to our God and posted a guard. ¹⁰Meanwhile the people inside the city said, “The strength of the laborers is giving out. There’s so much rubble we can’t rebuild the wall.” ¹¹And our enemies said, “Before they know it we will be right among them and we will kill them all.” ¹²And then the Jews, who did not live in the city, came and told us ten times over, “Wherever you turn, they’re going to attack us all. [Nehemiah 4:6-12]

You know what this is? This is the parents of a civil rights worker in the 1960s—African American civil rights worker—and they are saying *I killed myself to send you to college, and instead of going to college, you’re sitting at a bus station? You’re working for voting rights? I didn’t send you to college to go and sit at a lunch counter. They’re going to kill you, and then they are going to come after us.*

This is reality, internal and external opposition. What does he do?

¹³Therefore Nehemiah stationed some people behind the lowest parts in the wall with knives and spears and bows. [Nehemiah 4:13]

And he put them with their families so it's just not something to fight for; it's *someone* to sacrifice for. When your project hits the skids, ask yourself *who else is affected by this?*

¹⁴After Nehemiah looked things over, he stood up and spoke to the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes." ¹⁵When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work. ¹⁶From that day on, half the people did the work and the other half stood there with spears and shields, ¹⁸except for the man with the trumpet who walked with me every step of the way. ¹⁹I said the work is spread out all over the city and we are scattered. ²⁰Whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there and God will fight for us. ²¹So we continued, half of us working, half of us guarding. ²²And I said to the people, "Have all the people stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day." [Nehemiah 4:14-22]

So all the people outside came inside the walls. They were protected and they felt like they were a part of it. And then a verse that men would understand, verse 23:

For 26 days, neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards, none of us took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water. [Nehemiah 4:23]

And it went on like this for another month. And then verse 15 of chapter 6:

¹⁵ So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul. It was built in fifty-two days. [Nehemiah 6:15]

What is the equivalent of this? Everything worth doing is worth opposing. Everything worth doing runs into problems. What do you do when the problem comes to your relationships, your school, your work, to your retirement, to your friendships, to your home? What happens when the wall gets knocked down and you cannot fix it? That's where Nehemiah comes in. It totally applies. One of the reasons we are doing this series is because we are doing a building project, right?

How many of you have ever had a remodeling project of any kind that comes in ahead of schedule and under budget? Nobody raises their hands...no! Let me give you a big secret: there are cost overruns, right? I was walking around, literally walking around praying, and I came to a part of the building where nothing was happening and all of a sudden I saw them digging down deep into the foundation, and I said, "Guys, you're digging at the wrong wall! What's going on here?" One of the workers says, "You better talk to the supervisor. I don't

know.” I go to the supervisor and ask, “What’s going on here?” He says, “Better you don’t know.” I said, “Better I do know.” He said, “Well, water was seeping into this part of the building. We never would have found out without the construction.” Can I just tell you this? It’s not a \$500,000 fix, but it’s not a \$5.00 fix. There’s a cost overrun, there are building permit problems. You get halfway into this, and there are people who are unhappy—even in this church. I know it’s hard to believe. There are groups who out in the parking lot are going *I told them this was a bad idea*. We have staff that have turned into migrants...some of them have had to move three times. We have missions that we can’t do this year...the place is a mess. And just when you think it cannot get worse, whether it’s a building project or your life, it does. There’s a mom, and she’s going crazy so she takes her four kids out to the forest reserve and she’s going for a walk and she turns around a corner and all of a sudden right in front of her there is a little obstacle and it’s bad. [Picture of a family of skunks is shown] She turns to her kids and says, “Very quietly, let’s back away, and when I say ‘Run’, run away. Now, back away, back away.” She said, “We were doing fine, backing away, and then I said ‘Run!’ and all four of the kids ran toward the skunks. Everybody grabbed one and ran away!”

Trust me, it will get worse. Nehemiah sees it get worse, and he just gives two lessons here...for your life and for our church. The first is what I call the “26-Day Rule.” Nehemiah teaches the 26-Day Rule. In 19th century revivalism in America, revivalists would come into towns twice a year and make big altar calls—put up tents and make altar calls. Dozens of people would come forward, and one time Zeke came out of the crowd and knelt and gave his life and he was filled with the Spirit. And the next year, the revivalist came back and Zeke came forward again, and he was repentant and filled with the Spirit. The third year the revivalist came, and Zeke came forward again. He said, “Oh Lord, fill me with the Spirit.” And somebody said, “How come Zeke keeps coming up? Isn’t he already filled with the Spirit?” And another person answered, “Zeke leaks.” You leak too. The Spirit leaks, the courage leaks, the faith leaks. And because we leak, vision leaks. And the 26-Day Rule says that you need to repeat the vision every single month. You need to repeat the vision until the people are sick of it—until they can say it to you faster than you can say it to them. Because when they are sick of it, they start to believe it, and when they start to believe it, they start to own it, and when they start to own it, they can be refilled easier when they start to leak. Part of our vision here is to boldly extend the invitation that Jesus makes to us, to everyone. We need to do that again and again. It’s one of the reasons that groups need leaders. Leaders aren’t special people. Leaders are just people who every once in a while get up and say, “This is how we got into this mess, this is what it’s about, and this is where we are going.”

Now, how do you do that? How do you give a vision so that it leaks and then gets refilled? I’d like to give you an example, but I think it would be better if I just showed it to you. It takes two minutes. You probably know this story, but it starts with an African American saying to the President, “Hey, I don’t blacken boots

anymore, and I don't cut hair." [Film shown of a Civil War battlefield and an African American soldier talking to Abraham Lincoln, culminating in the soldier reciting The Gettysburg Address to Lincoln] *That this nation...of the people and for the people and by the people shall not perish from this earth...*

Two hundred and seventy-two words—I can't do that. I can't say my name in 272 words. But that's a vision to which slaves would give their lives, to which free people would give their lives, because they heard it again and again and again. So if you are stuck, ask yourself *what's the vision?* I'm not Lincoln, but I need to be crystal clear about CPC's vision. I need to say it again and again and again. Christ Presbyterian Church, on the corner of 70th and Highway 100 for 60 years, has been called by God to be a hospital for sinners. And every person who comes through these doors is sin-sick. For the last 60 years, Christ Presbyterian Church, in a lot of different ways, has been called to be a locker room for people engaged in the tough business of life, so that they would come in at least once a week and get bandaged up where they are broken, and redirected when they are going the wrong way, and they would receive a new strategy and go back out into the game. This right here is not the game. God has brought you here that you might get into the game of the kingdom of heaven, and that is the only reason that these doors should keep opening. We are called to boldly extend the invitation Jesus makes to us, so that our lives are changed by grace, and so that their lives are changed by the love of God. That's why we need to work on our walls. Because these walls are as important as helping the Upper Room get planted eight years ago, as supporting the launch of Genesis Church three years ago, as being the Christmas offering for Lighthouse Church this last Christmas, as last week being present at the launching of The Table as a new church in Minneapolis. You know, new churches are frankly more exciting than sixty-year-old churches. They are more visionary, more radical. My friend says, "You know why? Because it's easier to make a baby than it is to raise the dead." He worked with Presbyterians! But both of those give life; both of those need life. Jody (Phenow) and I were sitting at Know Presbyterian last Sunday night and I was praying that the seeds of those 120-130 young people would take root in that community and that God would bring healing and blessing and life and gospel there, and I came back here and thought: *thank God there is a place here that can do that.*

I had a chance to go to London for two days this week and we stayed at the airport. It is fifteen minutes from the airport to Windsor, so we went to dinner in Windsor one night and as we drove through there, I saw a church in Windsor that my wife loves to go to. Every time we are in Windsor, right next to the castle is a little church, and Laura loves to go to this church because every time she hopes that the queen is going to be there. This is where the queen worships, literally. If the queen is there, there is Laura and then five or six other people. The walls of that church are fine, but the inside is dead. Our task is not just to build the walls, it is to recapture the vision.

So first, Nehemiah repeats the vision, again and again.

I stood up and said, “Remember what God has done. Now fight.”

The second part of it though is different. When you hit the wall, literally, when you hit the wall and it is only half way up and you're stuck and you don't know what to do next, here is Nehemiah's key: *Do not try harder. Try different. What got you here won't get you there.* And so he makes adjustments. He brings the families together so they know why they are fighting. He stations guards so they feel secure. He says *if you blow the horn, I will come.* He brings protection from those outside the wall, inside. He makes changes. If the wall is going to go up, things will have to change.

If this church is going to be as effective in the next sixty years as it has been in the last sixty, it will look different. There will be a lot more of you having to move your seats. What do you say? Is Missions going to look the same in the next sixty years? For three years we put together a million meals for Feed My Starving Children, we sponsored over 2,500 kids...probably a half dozen ministries have flourished here. That's what God did here in the 90's and early 2000's. What does God need to do differently in the 2020's? How do we build community for singles here so they don't feel like spare parts? How do we build community for you when you are busier than ever and your life is fragmented? How can we do worship in a way that engages young and old, singles and families? How do we reach out and welcome newcomers while we make the folks who have been here feel like God is not done with them yet? Don't work harder; see how God wants you to work differently. That's the case with your wall too—with your disappointment. The chapter that you thought was going to be written is going to turn out differently this year. What does God want you to do differently?

So Nehemiah repeats the vision again and again. He tells people not to work harder, but to adjust and work differently. And then he gives one last lesson when the wall is only half built and people are struggling. He points out the worst problem when opposition comes to something God wants done. The worst problem is not that your hands get tired or you run out of money or that people are yelling at you. The worst problem comes from distraction. The worst problem comes and you don't have one problem, you have two problems. Then you have four problems, then you have six problems and an opportunity...and you're distracted. In chapter 6 it says the enemies of Nehemiah came four times to the bottom of the wall and called up to the top of the wall and said, “Hey, come down here. Let's talk about it.” And their only job was to try to delay, to distract them. Best verse in Nehemiah—chapter 6, verse 3:

But they were scheming to harm me; ³ so I sent messengers to them with this reply: “I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?”

Four times they called and four times he said, “I am here on the wall.”

Do not get distracted by overruns, or by dust, or by disruption, or by criticism. And don't get confused that these stupid, shiny new walls are our job. They are not. The real work here is to use this space to expand the work of King Jesus so that other people might believe there is justice in the world where people don't have it. That other people might believe that grace can forgive even them. That our neighbors might have life, and flourishing life in all its fullness. And you and I don't need to wait for the contractors to show up on Monday. We can start that right now.

*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.*