

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 23 & 24, 2017
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GRIT | Nehemiah 8:1-8**

Good morning! Like David [Hammond] said, I came on staff about two months ago in the middle of July and walked right into a construction zone. It's been this sort of beautiful, chaotic mess, and every time I come to the church I feel like something is completely different than it was the time before and I'm here almost every day, so I know most of you feel this way—the place is constantly changing! I think that's a really cool thing because the idea that we are works in progress may forever define my view of CPC. We are in the middle of one in a long series of building campaigns over the church's history, which shows me that our building has always been a work in progress. I think that's cool because that mirrors us; we are works in progress. God is always doing something in us no matter if we're young or old. We are in fact works in progress that God is doing something in, and therefore we are people who need grit. We need the capacity to live with determination and commitment over time. We need grit in our lives and we understand building. All of us build something; we're always building. We build schedules, and bank accounts, and companies. We build spreadsheets, we build families and marriages, and we build toys when they come home and they're not fully assembled. We know building all too well, and so did Nehemiah.

So, we've been studying the book of Nehemiah the last two weeks. This is our third and final in this series, looking at Nehemiah and looking at grit. The first week we looked at how Nehemiah (who was this Jewish man living as the cupbearer for the Persian king, away from his homeland) had gotten word that Jerusalem lay in ruins. His heart was broken and he wept for his ancestral homeland. He prayed to God and said, "God, we've got to do something", and then he had the grit and the determination to lead the charge, to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem so that God would be glorified in the world. In the second week we looked at how the people faced all kinds of internal and external opposition to the building and how, without grit and without a vision of who they were and where they were going, they would have not gotten through all the internal and external opposition. Finally they finish the walls; the walls are done. Now what? It's a relevant conversation because before long, I know it feels like a long time, but before long we will be finished with this building campaign. Our building will be renovated and we'll be asking, "Now what? What does it look like to live faithfully into this project?" I think grit is every bit as much important once the physical building is done as it is during the building process.

So this morning we're going to look at Nehemiah 8:1-8. Nehemiah 8 is sort of a turning point. Up until Nehemiah 8 they've been in the building process. Now the walls are finished and they're turning to *how do we live inside these new walls?* Beginning with verse 1:

1 All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. [Nehemiah 8:1]

Pause right there. Two things. Ezra is the chief religious leader in the nation of Israel, and Nehemiah is sort of the chief government official. The Book of the Law of Moses is what we call the Torah—it is the first five books of our Bible, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These books were sort of the founding documents of the nation of Israel, they gave Israel their identity, so he says, “Get up and read these”, and that’s what Ezra does.

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand (so we take that to mean children who are of the age of understanding at that point). 3 He read it aloud from daybreak (so early morning) till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. 4 Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood (several men whose names you won’t remember and I can’t pronounce) Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were (names I can’t pronounce and you won’t remember) Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. 5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7 The Levites (12 men whose names I won’t pronounce and you won’t remember and I’m sure were very important)—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. 8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. (So the Levites who were kind of like temple assistants or priests assistants were making sense. They were interpreting the law to the people) [Nehemiah 8:2-8]

So what’s going on here? What is happening? I want you to imagine how it would go over if we announced that the building has been finished, the renovation project has been done, and that tomorrow to commemorate this we’re going to take John Crosby and put him up on a high wooden platform in the parking lot. Then we’re all going to gather around in this lovely Minnesota weather and we’re going to listen to him read the Bible to us from sun up until lunch time. I know you’re excited. I know that gets you fired up. I’ll be honest . . . I love God’s word, but I don’t want to be there, right? That does not sound like a good time. Yet, here we find these people and they seem to be excited about this, so why are they doing this and why do they enjoy it? Let’s say that you love football. I know all of you don’t love football, but let’s say that you do. Imagine that you have your favorite team. It can be the Gophers, or the Badgers, or the Packers, or the Vikings. You have your favorite team, and you follow them very closely . . . you’re so passionate about them. But let’s say you’re 35-years-old and football just completely

disappears. It's gone. There is no more football and then time passes, and passes, and passes, and you're sad there is no football. Then let's say that it's 40 years later, you're 75-years-old and you have kids and grandkids. There has been no football for 40 years and then all of a sudden football comes back. There's football again. When it comes back you would know exactly what to do. You'd know what cheers to cheer, what songs to sing. Things that you hadn't said in 40 years would just roll off your tongue like it was yesterday. You'd know what was good and what was bad. You'd know exactly what to yell at the refs about, right? You'd say things like, "Yes! We're back!" and "This is what we've been missing."

For years the Jewish people had been anticipating a future with a restored Jerusalem. They had heard stories of the promised land from their parents and their grandparents, and they had sung songs of their ancestral heritage. They had gone through rituals, and they had rehearsed getting ready for the time to come. And now, now, for them to read God's word over the rebuilt walls was to say, "Yes, we're back! We've made it! This is what we've been missing." And after the joy and enthusiasm and euphoria is over, they might then say, "Now what?" If we want to live into this, if we want this to be truth for us, if this is who we are, "Now what?"

When you're passionate about something you lean into it. You go for it, you find yourself gravitating toward it. Over and over and over again you find yourself working on it and pouring yourself into it. You might even say you start to get gritty about it. So, we have a word for that. We have a word for what it is when someone is so passionate about something that they constantly choose it, and talk about it, and pour themselves into it. That word is *calling*. So, the first thing that I want you to see this morning is that grit is a daily choosing that becomes a calling. Grit is a daily choice that becomes a calling. The people had finished the walls in the book of Nehemiah. And then they had the Torah read over them. It was like having their commitments read over them, but we all know that having your commitments read over you one time does not transform you. We can all think of things that we agree to or things we said in the heat of the moment. We were so excited! It sounded so good and then the next morning, or the next week, we're like, "What? I said what? I can't believe I agreed to that, right?" Saying something once doesn't transform you. The people needed the tools to be gritty. They needed the tools to lead them to choose their new calling inside of the new walls. After the walls were built, the people had to intentionally build a common life together that would help them live into their calling.

Growing up, my dad gave my brother and me a pass to stay home in the summers because we played sports and we were always practicing and trying to get better. But when I was 17, he made me go find a job. I went to this temp agency that a friend told me about and they assigned me to work the midnight shift at a fiberglass plant. So, I went for an eight hour shift to stand on the assembly line. Pallets of fiberglass would come by and I had to pick one up, two, three, four, and once I had four stacked up perfectly, I would turn (very complicated), put it into a shoot and hit a button that would send the pallets down to be bagged up. This was my job and I was terrible at it. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to perfectly and accurately shape up four pallets of

fiberglass time after time after time, then turn and put them into a shoot that is exactly the right size. All night long they're turning off the machine, turning off the conveyer belt, losing money to stop and fix the mistakes that I had made. And I felt like such a loser. I went home that morning and I was almost in tears and I said, "Dad, I can't do that again. I'm so bad at it and they make it look so easy." And he's like, "Son, do you think they started doing it last night?" I said, "No." He said, "They've been doing that for years, and years, and years. That doesn't come naturally. You don't naturally know how to stack four pallets and put them into a shoot. It takes time." Grit does not come naturally. It takes time and commitment, and the Israelites, just like us, needed to develop the tenacity to daily choose something new and different—and therefore reading the text over them in this time was the first step on their road to grit. So, what else did they do?

If you have time this week, I would encourage you to read the rest of Nehemiah. It's pretty fascinating. In chapters 9-12—the rest of the book—they do things like confess and repent of their sins, and they make oaths and covenants. They reinforce that everyone has responsibility—every single man, woman, and child has to keep the covenant. They appoint priests, and gatekeepers, and worship leaders—temple singers—into the courts, and they do this to emphasize their commitment to living with God in right relationship and right worship in these newly rebuilt walls. These were simple, regular daily acts that affirmed their calling. They were organizing their lives around commitments that reminded them of who they were, of what they were about, of what they wanted out of life, and of what God had done for them. What things do you need to regularly choose and orient your life around so that you develop grit? To live into the thing that God is calling you to live into?

God had given them a second chance and they could not take it for granted; they had to lean into it. If their hearts weren't transformed, then the new walls, the new Jerusalem, wouldn't mean much. And this is true for us. If we are going to be the people that God has called us to be, it has to be about our calling, it can't just be about walls. It has to be about a call. So, the things that we do regularly together as families, as individuals, especially as the church, these things mark us; they identify us. And it's so important we understand who we are because no matter how good we are at building, our walls will eventually fall.

Some of you are amazing and terrific builders. You have lots to show for the building that you've done. You have amazing families, and amazing marriages, and amazing houses, and amazing companies, amazing foundations. Some of you are not great builders, and yet what we find is that—no matter if we're good builders or bad builders, if our buildings last a short time or a long time—for all of us, our buildings, the things that we build, fall apart. They will eventually fail us. The question is why? Why do they fail?

I'll give you a weird answer. For hundreds if not thousands of years there was one way to be safe in a war. It was to get behind a wall. There were cities that made these massive walls that protected them and everyone would gather in and hide behind the wall and that was safety. And then there was an invention called the cannon, and all of

a sudden to gather together behind a wall was far less safe. In some ways, it made you sitting targets together in one place. Cannons—this invention—rendered the walls less effective and less important when it came to safety.

Now here's the thing, no matter how well we build at some point something is likely to come along that will render the walls that we've built ineffective and inadequate. We can build amazing, good things, things that protect us, things that empower us, things that serve us well, but what happens over time is that we can start to love what we've built so much that we start to forget about our calling; we start to lose our grit. And then we start to transfer our trust, our faith, from our calling from God to the things that we've built. When those things fail, when they fall, we find that we've started to trust more in those things that we've built, and then what? When those walls are no longer there, what do we have left? What now? Which leads us to this—even though life may not turn out how we expect, trust that calling wins in the end. Trust that calling wins in the end.

Grit will be messy. Life will throw you curves—have any of you experienced any curves in life lately? The walls may fall and you may not know exactly where the road will lead next. For the Jewish people in our story, they were back inside these rebuilt walls, but life was not perfect for them, life was not going to be fine and dandy every day going forward, and yet they felt the need and the compulsion to affirm their covenant with God—that no matter what happened to them, the most important thing was declaring who they were as God's people. Remember that they read the Torah. They came together and they read the Book of the Law, or at least part of the Book of the Law on that occasion, and it says they had the Levites, who were assistants to the priest, "Making it clear and giving meaning so the people understood what was being read." It was important for them—just like John said last week, it's important for us—to have a clear picture of who we are. To read the Torah is to reaffirm and say, "Yes, this is who we are. We agree to this." What they're agreeing to is a covenant relationship with God. It says, "If God flourishes, then we will flourish." If God flourishes—that is the most important thing—then we will flourish. If at the end of the day, we love our shiny renovated building here at CPC and we're so thankful for it, but people aren't coming to Jesus, then we aren't flourishing. If we aren't building relationships with neighbors, then we aren't flourishing. If we're not learning to love people like Jesus and extending an invitation to them, then we aren't flourishing.

I was reading *The Essential Tenets of ECO*, our denomination, and I found a quote I'd like to read. It's a little bit of a mouthful so bear with me, but I think it will help us understand what our calling is as the church.

"We are now in service to God's plan for the fullness of time: uniting all things in heaven and earth to Himself. To this end, we preach Christ, calling all persons to repent and believe the Gospel. We also care for the natural world, claim all areas of culture in the name of Jesus, serve the poor, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, and defend the helpless. We do this work not with any thought that we

are able to bring in the kingdom, but in the confident hope that God's kingdom is surely coming, a day when suffering and death will pass away and when God will live among His people."

If God's kingdom isn't flourishing in this world because of this renovated building then we need to take an honest look at our calling. See, the Jewish people had to learn that the walls weren't going to transform them; they weren't going to save them. If their hearts weren't transformed, the walls of Jerusalem won't mean anything.

We need the grit to declare with our whole lives that our calling, that who we are in Jesus Christ, is the thing that wins. We have to start with personally believing that. We have to start by believing that our calling is found in the transformed life given to us by the grace of Jesus. Can we all start there? Can we find our calling in the One who said to take up your cross daily, and then He took up His cross and He took up all of the crumbled, broken walls of your life and mine and He said, "Let Me rebuild." He said, "Let Me rebuild you." Are you being rebuilt by Jesus?

What does the church need to live with grit into the future? To daily accept and choose the transforming love of Jesus that rebuilds us out of our brokenness. That's what we extend to our friends, our neighbors, and our co-workers.

Now what? This is a unique season. These kinds of moments don't happen all the time. I don't want us to miss it. The future for us is filled with possibility, but it doesn't have to go our way. Just because we built this nice building doesn't mean things will work out in our favor. I wanted you to see a few churches from all over Europe and even a few places in the United States where these beautiful, old church buildings have all been renovated and used for secular purposes.

[Shows pictures of churches. Can be found at this link]

<https://churchpop.com/2016/01/11/8-beautiful-churches-that-have-been-converted-to-secular-uses/>

There's one in Spain called Church of Santa Barbara and it is now a skate park. There's another church in Scotland called Kelvinside Parish Church and it's now an event center, a nightclub, and a bar. And then there's St. Nicholas Church in Kyloe, England. This one's the most fascinating to me. This one is a private home. The most stunning and gorgeous and heavy and sad.

I want you to think, is this building that we're working on right now, is it going to help us be the people of God in the world? Will it turn us outward? Will it give us eyes to see our neighbors more clearly? Will it help us build bridges with those who are like us and not like us?

I said earlier that we are works in progress and I am so thankful to be a work in progress with you, and yet hear me say desperately that I don't want us to be the kind of church that in five years people are looking at this building and saying, "Wow, look how beautiful that building is." I want us to be the kind of church that people look at and say, "Wow, look how amazing, and powerful, and awesome their God is!" Because finishing a building is not our goal. It's a means to our goal. Just like for Nehemiah finishing the wall was not the goal. It was a means to the goal of glorifying God in the world. In this simple moment in Nehemiah they are starting the process of extending the invitation that God had made to Israel to the entire world, and it started there with rebuilt walls in Jerusalem. Now what?

My hope for your life, and for mine, and our life together as a church is that we not be so fixated on the walls, that we not be so fixated on the things that we can build that we miss out on God's calling in our day and in our time. When God is on the move, God is rebuilding far more than walls. God is rebuilding lives, and when He rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem, He's not finished. It's just the beginning for a God who rebuilds. And as He rebuilds us every single day, let us not miss this beautiful opportunity to step into the calling that He has for our lives. Amen. Let's pray.

Holy and loving God, let it be so in us that we would live into Your calling. That we would not be so fixated on walls that we miss what it is that You're doing in our hearts and in our lives. I pray for every single person in this room so that when they walk in and bring the baggage and the brokenness of their walls, You would be at work rebuilding. That You would rework us into a beautiful tapestry, a beautiful people that testify to Your goodness and Your glory in the world and that You would use us, that You would mold us, that You would speak deeply to our hearts that You love us. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, 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.