

The Steps We May Take to Rebuild (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

My associate pastor recently gave a sermon whereby he named the kinds of morning people that we can be as we awaken in the world. He gave enthusiastic descriptions, naming specific traits that we may embody upon waking; or what can be defined as our particular chronotypes.

These ‘morning person labels’ or “chronotypes” include; (1) **the wolf** - those who do not want to rise (2) **the hummingbird** - those who choose to rise slowly and are comfortable both staying up late or waking early and (3) **the lion** - those who light up the moment their eyes open. It is the kind of conversation that gives me pause when I begin to think about self proclaimed or given labels.

Labels can be important. They can help us identify who we are within the greater world, but also who we may be within a particular community, setting or season.

Another such label, we may give ourselves or one another, is in regard to the hygiene standards to which we keep ourselves. As the saying goes, there are those of us who like to go to bed at night with a clean sink, who inevitably end up marrying the person that believes dishes can be washed in the morning rush of packing lunches & stolen kisses between sips of now cold coffee. In all seriousness, however, there are those who understand what it means to make your bed via the standards of the naval Academy they attended; while there are also those who believe that unmade beds, piles of clothes in the corner and a pathway from the bedroom door to the bed means their standard has been met. The hygiene labels we have may define some as tidy and clean, while others may be defined as dirty, chaotic or overwhelmed. Or as my friend Lynde mentioned the other day when she came for a visit; the characteristics of our children’s personalities can be reflected, simply by opening the door to their bedrooms. One lives their life under the label of tidy, while the other may live their life under the label of organized chaos.

All of these labels and discussions around how clean my son’s bedroom is .. oh sorry, not naming any names...brings me to a few questions I have lingering around the labels and definitions of progress.

You see, jokes aside, my son LOVES to “be himself” and asks me “to just let me be me,” when it comes to cleaning his room. And while that lasts for a few weeks, there inevitably comes a day when I will ask him to take a deep breath and relabel or redefine himself as tidy in order to organize even just a few things in his room.

The immediate answer is almost always no. However, the follow up answer toggles between (1) him wanting to showcase his personality (2) him being overwhelmed with how much may need

to be done, and (3) a desire to leave things as they are; because leaving chaos behind reflects a change. All of these answers sit alongside an initial lack of awareness that something may need to be done at all.

As Nehemiah knew, one of the first steps we may need is the gift of sight. As a society, overall, we often are living in chaos, be that in our own jumbled and beautiful minds, or within the turbulent chaos of too much on our plate, physically and emotionally. And don't get me started on the overwhelm of all those little piles in our houses begin to add up and we don't know what room to move them to next.... for they are full of things that even as adults, we question whether or not they should be (1) thrown away (2) donated (3) saved for later (4) need a new place to be stored, or (4) to be sent to a friend through the post office, which takes an additional hour of thought and effort. It is no surprise that in those moments when I ask my son to clean his room, giving him the initial gift of sight, he will become overwhelmed just as the Jewish people in the Nehemiah story initially become overwhelmed themselves.

The first step toward any sort of vision or progress, is the acknowledgment that there needs to be a first step to begin with. Nehemiah explains that "Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire." Step two follows immediately as we must face what may have been lost, after realizing something was lost or taken at all. For Nehemiah and the Jews, this was the disrespect, disgrace and lack of dignity they felt upon viewing the destruction of their wall. Oddly enough, oftentimes, unless an injustice is pointed out, there are many who would prefer to bury their heads in the sand in order not to see the issue that may be so obviously right in front of them to the people around them.

As we begin to uncover what may need to be rebuilt, here at Main Street, or within our wider world, we may begin to experience the sheer overwhelm of what it means to properly place brick by brick in order to rebuild, let alone the additional steps we must take. Much like my son when he begins to clean his room, the first sentiment we often hear is defeat before we even begin. There's too much to do, too many toys to be put away, too many bricks to be laid, and far too much time that would be utilized. Yet, rebuilding their wall is the task that was placed before the Jews. For all the worry and projections of tribulation, at the end of the parable we realize that it only took 52 days to rebuild their wall! A wall that was not being rebuilt in order to keep others out, but rather to restore dignity within their community - and while 52 days can sometimes feel like a lifetime, at the end of the day it is less than two full months of dedicated work to rebuilding a community who so desperately needed it.

While we uncover that our biggest resourced material is our faith that the hand of God will be placed upon each of us as we rebuild in our own unique ways; we next must face what other materials we may need to rebuild. The third task, now that we know there is a problem and have addressed that the wall needs to be rebuilt, is to decide what to do next, or rather what bricks, or

other materials we may want or need to work with. This, by the way, is the task that helps us lay bare what kind of values are important to us. What is missing within our foundation? How can we organize? And what happens if we dump it all out on the ground?

I don't know about you, but sometimes when I don't know where to begin; I either start small, one step at a time OR I will dump everything out onto the ground to see things from a different perspective and truly organize again. Something that is a 0/10 recommendation to do with a 10-year-old without warning; yet a practice I deeply enjoy when cleaning everything from my purse to my thoughts.

Thus we arrive at the third and final task which embodies the kind of work that we discuss across every space that I occupy; the art of what it means to rebuild and restore dignity or, as the Jews said in Nehemiah, "Let us start rebuilding." The work we discuss in both seminary and yoga, which comes from Brené Brown, author of *Braving the Wilderness & Dare to Lead*, among others, allows us to see Nehemiah's great leadership and the trust in God through the Jews and Nehemiah himself. While Brown encourages many things, the things she may be most known for, is helping us define what makes a truly great and daring leader. Says Brown:

"When we dare to lead, we don't pretend to have the right answers; we stay curious and ask the right questions. We don't see power as finite and hoard it; we know that power becomes infinite when we share it with others. We don't avoid difficult conversations and situations; we lean into vulnerability when it's necessary to do good work. But daring leadership in a culture defined by scarcity, fear, and uncertainty requires skill-building around traits that are deeply and uniquely human. The irony is that we're choosing not to invest in developing the hearts and minds of leaders at the exact same time as we're scrambling to figure out what we have to offer that machines and AI can't do better and faster. What can we do better? Empathy, connection, and courage, to start."

This summarized intention of her work centers us in the reminder that when we come together across shared values, no matter what our surface differences may look like, we can create foundational places of understanding and agape love. It calls us in by asking curious questions, instead of calling us out by creating shame for having questions to begin with. And right now, we should all be full of curious questions. Questions we ask aloud as citizens, as journalists, as media specialists, as preachers, as teachers and as people within the wider global network of this world. Let alone the curious questions that you must be filled with the three weeks between your pastors and as you begin to step into a relationship with the temporary. For I fear, If we are not asking curious questions, we may miss the point.

And so today, as you lean into your values and the steps you need to take in order to rebuild here within these walls, as much as beyond them; I encourage you to take a deep breath as your first

step. (Truly). Next, I will invite you to look around you, perhaps even turning your head left and right to see that your neighbors are right here next to you. Lastly, I will challenge you; to find the four values that mean the most to you in this moment and carry them forward; not just into mission and messages of Main Street Congregational, but also the messages that you would like to continue to send out into the wider world and the values from which you are grounded in. For it is only then, that we can begin to understand how a new foundation can be laid; be that brick by brick, Bakugans by Lego's or with the values that we collectively hold. It is only then that you can invite daring, brave and wonderful leadership into your community in order to begin again whilst rebuilding in harmony with one another. Amen.

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