

They Now Understood

Nehemiah 8:1-12

January 24, 2016

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

You know, I was paging through this book I have. It is a book in which I have recorded baptisms, weddings, funerals, and sermons preached. Thirty-seven years of records in there. And I discovered that I have not preached from the book of Nehemiah in...oh...like never. It is the Old Testament Lectionary text for today. So I thought why not. Won't be the first time I have done something for the first time these past few years.

I like the Tonight Show. Its latest iteration with Jimmy Fallon as host is pretty good. I remember many years ago watching one particular episode. It was the early 1970's...around the time I made my decision to follow Jesus. This was when Johnny Carson was still the host. One of his guests that night was Pat Boone. He had Pat Boone on fairly regularly. Pat came out wearing his trademark white shoes...white belt. Carson and Boone got to talking religion. The Watergate scandal was in full swing at that time. Pat Boone told Johnny Carson that Watergate had been prophesied in Scripture. Carson expressed skepticism. So Pat Boone quoted Nehemiah, chapter eight and verse three. Ezra stood at the Water Gate...and read the law.

Now I am fairly certain that one has not much to do with the other. But this was one of my earliest introductions to the book of Nehemiah. By the way, the word "gate" has become a kind of suffix that is added to any potential scandal. There was Whitewater-gate. Football fans are surely aware of last year's deflate-gate.

Nehemiah is a book of history. Nehemiah is considered a companion book to Ezra. Each book is called by the name of its central character. We know how after years of disobedience, the people of God—Israel—were taken captive. Babylon came in and pretty much plundered and destroyed the city. Jerusalem was left in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The protecting-wall around the city was broken down. Years later a remnant returned to the Holy City. It was still in ruins. The temple needed to be rebuilt. The wall needed to be restored. Ezra deals with the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah is about the rebuilding of the wall.

That is Nehemiah the book. As far as Nehemiah the person, there is not a whole lot known. We can glean some nuggets from his book. He was a leader in Judah...in Judah after the return of the exiles. So he was a man of some importance. He was a man of character. He may have served as a priest. He was a man fully devoted to God.

A couple of other facts...many exiles returned. Nehemiah did not return at first. He held an important position in the earthly kingdom where God's people had been taken captive. He was a cupbearer for the king. One of his duties would have been to taste the wine for the king to make sure it was not poisoned. He would have also had some administrative duties.

Anyway, a remnant of God's people—the exiles—returned home...this after many years in captivity. Nehemiah then learned that Jerusalem—his people's holiest of cities—was in ruins. This kind of depressed him. In the second chapter, Nehemiah wrote, "I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me,

'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.' I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God in heaven, and I answered the king, 'If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.'"

The king allowed him to do this. Nehemiah travelled to Jerusalem. This would have been the first time he saw it. He immediately began rebuilding the walls. He succeeded. The wall was restored...along with the gates that provided entrances into the city.

Once this project was completed, Nehemiah then instituted a number of social reforms. One of these reforms was the people were to be instructed in the law...in the word of God. This was accomplished by public readings of God's word...and by the preaching of that word. This was what was happening in the portion of Nehemiah we read this morning. The people gathered near one of the gates...one of the entrances to the city...the Water Gate. Ezra, the priest, brought the law—the word of God—before this large group of people. And he read. He read not for a few minutes. He read from sunrise until noon...about six hours. And notice...all the people listened attentively.

So what lessons do we learn from Nehemiah? I am going to lift up, quickly, three lessons...and then conclude with a bigger fourth lesson.

First, we must read and hear God's word.

Read Psalm one hundred and nineteen sometime. It is the longest chapter in the Bible. It is all about the word. The Psalmist early on asked the question, "How can I keep my ways pure?" It was not a rhetorical question. He answered it. "By living according to your

word...I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." The apostle Paul wrote, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word...."

We need to avail ourselves of every opportunity to read the word...and to hear the word. It will guide us. Here in Nehemiah, the people had six hours to listen to the word. And listen they did.

Second, we must respond to the word.

You all know I read. I enjoy novels...the classics. Some of you know my favorite novel is Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Great book. I have read it more than once. It may inspire me just a little. But it does not instruct me in much. And it certainly does not require that I make any kind of decision...other than maybe to read another book by Hemingway. The book does not require that I believe or not believe a thing. It does not call for a commitment.

The word of God does instruct us. It does ask that we respond and make a decision...a decision to follow Jesus. In Nehemiah, the people heard the word of God, and they responded. They said, "Amen." They repented. They worshiped.

Third, we grow to understand more of God's word. But we must first respond with faith.

I have met many people who want to understand God's word first. When they understand it, then they might believe. Doesn't work that way. The word of God is understood through the heart of faith. We believe first. Then we will come to understand and know more. I mean, hasn't that been your experience? It has been mine. We say "yes" to Jesus. Then we begin to understand and know more. We first decide to follow Jesus...to walk the path that Jesus walked. And then the word begins to light the path for us. I had to jump into the pool before I learned to swim. I had to jump in and follow Jesus before I learned more about following Jesus.

In Nehemiah, the people listened to the word. They responded. They wept and mourned. They heard the word explained to them. They were told not to grieve. They were instructed in joy. And they went away with great joy...because they understood. They understood after they responded.

Hear the word. Respond to the word. Grow in the word.

There is one more thing here. As I read Nehemiah, I am struck by one other thing...Nehemiah's passion. Nehemiah was passionate about the word...passionate about the truth of God's word. Passionate. If you read this book, this just might stand out to you as well. So it got me to wondering just how passionate I am—or am not—about God and God's word.

Here's the deal. There are a lot of words coming at me...at us. I can remember when a half-hour television show contained two sixty-second commercial breaks. Now a half hour television show is really more like a nineteen-minute show that fills a half-hour time slot. There are in the neighborhood of ten minutes of commercials. Time it sometime. A sixty-minute football game with time running off the play clock even when no action is taking place...it lasts over three hours. And there are those little ads that appear in one corner of your TV. I will watch the Super Bowl and possibly enjoy the commercials. I am being told what kind of car to drive...or deodorant to use...or beverage to drink. All these voices telling us how to improve our lives...how we can know more happiness and even joy.

Oh...and this is an election year. You know there will be no shortage of voices telling us how they can improve our lives. There are all kinds of voices telling me how to think...what to think...what to believe.

Then there is the word of God...the voice of Jesus. That still, small voice. Jesus simply says, "Follow me." Jesus says, "Learn from me." Jesus says, "Let me be your guide." Jesus tells me that in him is found fullness of joy. Can I hear that voice—can we hear it—amongst the babble of other voices? We will if we listen. We will if we are passionate about

hearing Jesus...if we are passionate about the truth Jesus speaks.

A passion for the truth as Jesus speaks it. The world could use a little more of this passion. I could be more passionate.

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.