

The Holy City
Nehemiah 11:1-12:26

It is easy to see how this passage would have been of interest to the people of Nehemiah's time. They would have known all these folks, or at least their family lines, and they would have wanted to make a lasting record of their names to acknowledge their bravery. We do the same sort of thing when we put the names of all the officers who served at Valley Forge on a monumental arch on the site, or when we list all the soldiers who didn't come back from Vietnam on a big black wall in Washington, D.C. It's an effort to ensure that people who did great things will be remembered by their posterity.

But that's just the problem – we are their posterity, the people in their future who share their faith. And when we look at this long list, our eyes glaze over. So how do we reclaim this passage? What should this history, what should all these names mean to us?

Well, in the first place, and perhaps most obviously, all these names should remind us that the Church isn't just a phenomenon of the present, a bubble on the stream of time that will soon pop, only to be replaced by the next fad that comes along. No, just as these people recorded their names along with their genealogies, we belong to the extended family of the faithful, a line that stretches back beyond the Protestant Reformation, back beyond the days of the Apostles, even back beyond the time of this passage, all the way back to Abraham, who lived, as best as we can tell, some 4000 years ago. We are all part of one great family of faith, so in a very real sense, all the people listed in today's passage are our brothers and sisters.

And that means that whenever we gather for worship, we are not just joining believers all over the world today. We aren't just joining the angels and archangels in Heaven today. No, when we lift our prayers and sing God's praise we are joining a great company of the faithful who have lived for the last 4000 years, and who will live for who knows how many more years into the future. In our day of 24 hour news cycles and conflicting truth claims and internet hoaxes, it's worth remembering that there are, in fact, some permanent things, some real things, some true things. The Church of Jesus Christ is one of those things.

Okay, so it's a good thing just to know that God's people have a history. But what can we learn from this specific chapter in history? What can we learn from these real people who were really chosen by lot to move into a real place called Jerusalem about this time of the year in 445 BC?

Well, in the first place, why did the leaders have to cast lots to determine who would make this move? If we look back in chapter 7 and verse 4, we recall that, even though the great project of repairing the walls around the city had been completed, and even though the newly enclosed area was large and spacious, there were few residents and few homes for them to live in. In other words, those who were selected to move into Jerusalem wouldn't have the fun of house hunting, deciding which floor plan best suited their family, or which kitchen layout they liked best. No, they were more like the pioneers who first moved into the Natchez District around 200 years ago. If they wanted a house, they would have to build it themselves.

Moreover, like those early Mississippi pioneers, indeed, like their own ancestors who returned to the Promised Land from their long years in exile, they had to leave behind their networks of friends and neighbors, and the comfort and convenience of living in an extended family. Perhaps most

seriously, those farmers or herdsman who moved into the city (and that would be the vast majority of people in those days) would have to leave their lands and flocks behind, and with them, their principal source of income. I think we can understand how big a deal this was for them.

So, why were they asked to make such a sacrifice? Why was populating the city of Jerusalem so important? After all, it would no longer enjoy the same prominence as it did when David first selected it to be his capital city. Since the whole area had become merely a province of the Persian Empire, Jerusalem would no longer have a royal palace. It would have no grand houses for the king's most important nobles and advisors. Oh, 11:24 mentions that a representative of the Persian king would live there, along with the governor of the province. But because the real power lay in the Persian king's court in far-off Susa, Jerusalem had become a whole lot more like a county seat than a national capitol.

But if Jerusalem was no longer to be the home of an earthly king, it remained the location of the Temple, the House of God, the place where God had chosen to place a physical, visual manifestation of His dwelling among His people. Moreover, the Law of Moses made it clear that all the men of Israel were to travel to worship at this Temple three times a year, to observe the festivals of Passover, Firstfruits, and Tabernacles.

And that's why it was just as important for the city of Jerusalem to be repopulated as it was for the walls to be rebuilt. Yes, gates and walls would protect the treasures and offerings in the Temple from being stolen or destroyed. But soldiers would need to guard those walls and man those gates. Priests and Levites would need to staff the Temple, and carry out all the ceremonies prescribed as part of the daily worship of God. And a host of craftsmen and shopkeepers and servants would be needed to support not only those who worked in the Temple, but also to provide accommodations for the worldwide Jewish population that was expected to show up three times a year.

So, I think we can understand why all these names and genealogies are in this passage – they show us our connection to the people of God throughout space and time. And I think we can understand why these people deserved the great honor of being mentioned in the very Word of God, the honor of having their names remembered for thousands of years. For these heroes of the faith gave up their homes, their families, and their careers, moving into a deserted city to rebuild it as a center for the worship of God as it was expressed in those days before the cross of Christ.

But we are living on the other side of the cross. We don't have to offer all these sacrifices anymore. And our Roman Catholic friends notwithstanding, it simply isn't necessary to go to specially consecrated shrines or even into sanctuaries like this one in order to worship God. No, wherever God's people are gathered, He is with us, whether at a Cursillo retreat at Camp Wesley Pines, or a Presbytery meeting in Houston, Texas, or right here every Sunday morning.

And that means if we modern people were to do exactly what the people did in today's passage, if we were to select a tenth of our congregation to pick up stakes and move to Jerusalem, that would be an exercise in futility. So, what can we possibly learn from all these people and from the way they expressed their devotion to God?

Well, I suppose asking the question that way gets us a little closer to an answer. For if God no longer asks all of us to support and maintain a Temple in Jerusalem, He does ask all of us to devote ourselves to Jesus Christ, the One Who fulfills all the meaning of the Temple, the One to Whom all the

Old Testament rituals and ceremonies point. The question for us is thus, in a sense, the same question that faced all the people named in this passage: how can we express our love for, our devotion to Christ?

So, let's think again about what these people did – not characters in a story, but real people. In order to get closer to God, in order to support and facilitate the worship of His people, they were willing to leave their homes and extended families. They were willing to leave their jobs. They were willing to move into what would have to be characterized as an undesirable neighborhood, a place of little comfort, a place with few amenities. Would we be willing to do all that for Jesus?

We should. For in a very real sense, whenever we do this sort of thing, whenever we make sacrifices to promote the cause of Christ, we are in fact drawing closer to Jesus. For that's exactly what Jesus did for us. He left His perfect home in Heaven, a place where he was surrounded by adoring angels, He left the loving embrace of His Father to move into our sin-broken world. Instead of condemning us from afar, Jesus moved into our run-down neighborhood, restoring the relationship between God and His people, allowing everyone who would trust in Him to live with Him forever. Denying ourselves, putting the things of this world aside in order that others might come to know Christ – that's what it means to follow Christ, because that's what He did.

But there's another way that the people in today's passage demonstrated the character of Christ – they modeled His humility. For they didn't just submit themselves to the leaders of the people when they were chosen by lot to move into Jerusalem. No, as they moved into the city, they were also placing their trust for their livelihood, not just in the hands of God, but in the hands of God's people. They were choosing to live in a radically dependent way.

For think about it. What would happen to all the priests and the Levites if the people didn't show up at the Temple with their offerings throughout the year? They depended on a share of those offerings to survive. Moreover, what would happen to all the innkeepers and shopkeepers and craftsmen if all those pilgrims didn't show up for the festivals three times a year? Who would make up the difference in their business? Jerusalem had become, in a sense, a one-company town, and the company was the Temple. So what would happen to all the people in Jerusalem if the faith of the rest of God's people waxed cold?

Again, isn't that the sort of position in which Jesus placed Himself? For when He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He was at the height of His popularity. Everyone thought He was the coming King Who would set them free from the oppression of the Romans. But when He didn't deliver all the worldly things they wanted, when they turned on Him, He was completely at their mercy. In other words, He humbled Himself not just before the will of the Father, but before God's sinful people as well. Are we willing to do that?

All the people named in today's passage were. And because they were willing to give up everything they had for God, because they were willing to risk their future prosperity and even survival for God, God blessed them. God allowed them to rebuild the city, a city that would one day see not just the symbolic presence of God in the Temple, but the real presence of God in Jesus Christ. And as Jesus did the same thing, giving up everything He had and everything He was, as Jesus put Himself at the mercy of God and humbled Himself before God's people, as Jesus died on the cross, God poured out

even greater blessings. For it is through the submission, the sacrifice of Christ that all who trust in Him have forgiveness and freedom and the joy of His presence with us always.

So, just like the folks in today's passage, we are all called, albeit in different ways, to surrender all that we are and all that we have to Christ. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we are all called to humble ourselves before one another, to rely on one another to meet one another's needs. Such a life of truly selfless service, such a life of love for God and for others is not only one worth remembering. For what greater joy could we have than truly to follow Christ, to walk in His footsteps, to live His life as He lives in us?