



November 13, 2005

Nehemiah 2:11-20
Investing in the City of God
Commitment Sunday
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The year was 445 BC, and the city of Jerusalem was in trouble. Over one hundred years earlier, the Babylonians invaded the city, burned the gates, tore down the walls, and carried the young people into captivity. So for over a hundred years Jerusalem sat in ruins. After a while, the people who remained in the city got used to things being so bad. Eventually, they couldn't even see the problems because everyone learned how to cope. Few things are harder on the human soul than learning how to cope with misery.

One day, a Jew named Nehemiah entered Jerusalem for the first time in his life. He had grown up in exile, where he eventually became a high ranking civil servant in Persia. Although he had never been to Jerusalem, as an exilic Jew, Nehemiah must have heard stories about the city on the laps of his grandparents. We can imagine their descriptions: "Oh Nehemiah, you should have seen how beautiful Jerusalem was with its towering walls and majestic gates surrounding the holy temple where God was in the midst of his people." So when Nehemiah finally arrived into town to see Jerusalem for himself, he already had a vision of what the city was supposed to look like.

This is not unlike those of us in the church who have heard sermon after sermon about the City of God. This is the city where, according to Revelation, God makes his home among mortals. It is a city in which death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. It is a city where peace and justice kiss, and a city with a tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. That's God's idea of a city! It is his new kingdom, his holy dream. And it is a dream God has called us to share that we may join in his building of it on earth. Like Nehemiah, we have inherited this dream from those who have gone before us. So we know what a city is supposed to look like. But it doesn't matter if you live downtown, in East End neighborhoods, or the suburbs of the North or South Hills, no one is claiming that Pittsburgh looks like the City of God. For the sake of our souls, we dare not settle for that - not when God has called us to rebuild all of his cities on earth.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he spent three days riding his animal around the city and was horrified at its conditions. He was even more horrified that the people who lived there had settled for these conditions. So the first question Nehemiah asks of the residents of the city was, "Can't you see the trouble we are in?" Can't you see?

I grew up in the shadow of New York City, went to graduate school in South Chicago, moved to Washington DC, and now I live with you in Pittsburgh. One of the striking things about all of these large cities is that after a while, the citizens really don't see how bad the condi-

tions of urban life can become. Like the people of Jerusalem in the fifth century BC, we do what we have to do to cope with the poverty and crime. And our favorite coping device is to train our eyes not to see. So we do not see the homeless sleeping in the doorways, the woman who takes two buses to get to a grocery store, the children who play on streets where drugs are dealt or who go to movie theaters where young men are gunned down. We can move our families to better neighborhoods, and take parkways that bypass the things we don't want to see. So that when the news comes on at night to tell us of the shootings in town, they might as well be talking about Baghdad because, well, "I didn't see it."

Last Thursday while rushing to a meeting downtown, I was so lost in my thoughts that I almost walked into a woman asking for a quarter. I didn't even see her. I am not saying that we should always give change to the panhandlers, and I am aware of the good arguments against that. But it does seem to me that we should at least look at them. Maybe we would be better people if we carried their desperate faces in our hearts. Maybe we would be a little more interested in building the City of God here.

For the last two weeks, the suburbs of Paris have been in flames. Why? Because the residents of these dire neighborhoods are so fed up with being poor, excluded from jobs and a chance to get ahead that they are willing to destroy their own streets. Not that long ago it happened on the streets of Los Angeles. Don't think it couldn't happen here as well. Desperate people have nothing to lose. So in the words of Nehemiah, "Don't you see the trouble they/we are in?"

Five hundred years after Nehemiah, Jesus Christ also came to Jerusalem riding a small colt. He too spent a few days in the city, and then lamented, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not." Jesus wasn't just talking about the city of Jerusalem. He was talking about the City of God. It can still be built, any place, any time that people gather together under the wing of the Savior and see that "their" troubles are our troubles.

Once you see "the trouble that we are in," you face a great choice. Either you will become frightened, self-obsessed, and anxious about your property values, your kids' education, and your rights that someone is violating, or seeing how it is, you will invest in a great vision for how it can be in the city.

Having heard Nehemiah's sermon, the people said, "Let us start building." Then the text tells us they "committed themselves to the common good." Isn't that a wonderful phrase? They refused to isolate or insulate themselves, and they gave up tending their own gardens. Instead, they "committed themselves to the common good." And in spite of tremendous obstacles, the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt. Anything can be rebuilt when everyone is truly committed to the common good.

Now why was it that for over 100 years the people who remained in Jerusalem could live in a deteriorating city and do nothing, but after listening to Nehemiah they decided to invest themselves again in the city? Certainly their preacher had to do something more than make them see the city was in trouble. Yes, he also told them one other thing. "I told them," Nehemiah explains, "that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me."

People who find grace at the hand of God see the city differently. They are not so quick to tell others to take care of themselves, because they remember that a Savior has taken care of them. They do not rush by human need, because they cannot forget the Savior did not rush by them. And best of all, people who know that they have been blessed by a gracious God do not believe for a minute that God has ever been exiled from the city. We believe God is in the midst of the city because we have experienced his gracious involvement in our own lives.

The reason God has blessed us and our families is so we can be a blessing to the families around us. As we approach the Thanksgiving season, we who have been paying attention to all the blessings God has given us, well, we just want to be a blessing.

That is why on this Commitment Sunday we are inviting you to make a pledge to the church's ministry. You are not just being asked to support a budget. You are being invited to respond to the grace of God in your life by committing yourself to the common good.

What you give to the church is what allows us to raise a generation of children who believe in God's dreams for the world, to conduct a place of worship where these dreams are renewed in all our hearts week after week, to challenge college students with visions worthy of their young lives, to care for the sick and homebound, and to go out from this church as a people committed to making a difference in the city. Some of our members are now tutoring in the schools, serving food in the shelters, trying to get a grocery store in the Hill District where there are none, building homes for those who cannot afford them, helping the unemployed find work, and intervening in the lives of youth at risk. Others are meeting with city leaders to talk about things like "right sizing" the public schools. Many of our members knocked themselves out this weekend with the annual church bazaar to raise money for missions. In a couple of weeks, a new Alternative Gifts Market will be launched to permit us to make a difference in the lives of the impoverished around the world. Your church is clearly committed to the common good because we believe in the City of God, and we are devoted to its construction.

Everything is now in place for this church to make a difference in the city. And with your pledge to investing in the church, we can do it. All we need is your commitment. Amen.

Benediction: *Your life can make a difference. You already know the right dream. All you need now is to pledge commitment to it.*

