

Timeless Leadership Lessons from Nehemiah

Ezra 1: 1-6

Nehemiah 1: 1-4

August 10, 2008

First Federated Church

Peoria, Illinois

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(*SERMON NOTES*)

Separating life into distinct categories of “sacred” and “secular” we do so at our own peril because it damages, sometimes irreparably, any attempt on our part to lead whole and satisfying lives, an integrated lives.

I frequently tell people that we are made up of two components—the physical and the spiritual. Just as we need to eat in order to feed our bodies and keep them healthy, we need feed our spirits. To neglect one or the other will quickly through us out of balance. When we get out of balance we are like a car that needs a tune up, we may still run but we don’t run smoothly!

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are two perspectives of the same event—the rebuilding of the wall in ancient Jerusalem. It had been destroyed when the Babylonians invaded and carried off many of the inhabitants in what is called “The Exile.”

Ezra looked at the events from the perspective of an architect. He saw it in terms of Word and Worship. Nehemiah, on the other hand, saw like a contractor. He was a “brick and mortar” kind of guy.

From their stories we are given 5 timeless leadership principles that we all need to work to incorporate in our own lives. For each one of us, whether we want to be are not, are leaders. There are people who look to us for guidance and direction. It doesn’t make how old you are, or where you are; in the classroom or on the athletic field, in the office or in the neighborhood, away or at home.

The first leadership principle is that everything begins with a dream, a glimpse of what can be, a vision. Visions give us focus.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah the vision was to rebuild the city wall because it represented the ancient nation of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel.

In the late 1950’s my parents, like many of the World War II generation, had a vision for a better life. They wanted to own their own home, a place of which they could be proud. They scrimped, saved and sacrificed to buy a small four room house with a half basement on Farmington Road. A few years later they began to dream of owning a house of their own design. They spent Sunday afternoons looking at new subdivisions like Rolling Acres, and studying the floor plans that appeared in the Saturday Peoria Journal Star. After a Christmas visit to southern California they decided that it was time to build their new home. They employed an architect who drew up the plans. The feature that they were most proud of was a touch of California—a cathedral ceiling with exposed dark wooden beams in the living room. Next the hired a contractor and the house was built.

In the 1930's members of First Congregational Church and Second Presbyterian Church began to cast the vision of a new congregation. They formulated a federation agreement that took the best attributes of the congregational and Presbyterian forms of government. Then they wed. Shortly after that a new vision was cast. They purchased some land on the outskirts of the city and built a new worship home.

Right now two groups within our church have a vision to make a difference in the lives of children. One is moved by the Holy Spirit to make a difference in the lives of God's disadvantaged children in our city. The other has a vision of making difference in the lives of God's children halfway around the world.

Vision gives us focus.

The second principle is that we need to move beyond the vision to implementation. This means that we have to evaluate where we are and what we have, in other words, assemble our resources.

Nehemiah went to King Artaxerxes and secured his "building permits." He received permission to go to Jerusalem to be the general contractor that would rebuild the wall. He identified and made arrangements to assemble the raw materials that would be needed for the work.

Identifying and assembling our resources is so basic that we may not even realize that we are doing it.

A student in school may set out to get an "A" in a particular class. The first thing that the student may do is look over the syllabus or lesson. He or she will then assemble the resources that they will need to complete the job.

Whenever you decide to make dinner, you do the same thing. You have a vision of what you want to eat. You figure out how to make it. Then you gather the resources that you will need. Even if it means making a special trip to the store.

The third principle is to include other people in the work of the vision.

One of my regrets in life is that I never went farther in Boy Scouts than I did. I have a great deal of admiration for those young men who plan and complete their Eagle project. They make a positive difference in their community, *and* they learn valuable lessons in leadership that will carry throughout life.

The key to an Eagle Scout project is to enlist the help of others. We can't do anything of any real consequence by ourselves.

One of the biggest mistakes that people in leadership positions make is to think that they have to do something by. The old adage "If you want something done right you'd better do it yourself" is simply not true. You see, there is no real "success" without a "successor." The most important element of leadership is teaching others to do what you do.

When a leader decides that if something is going to get done that they are going to have to do it themselves they are making a big mistake. Moses learned this. In the early days of the Exodus, Moses decided all problems that arose among the people. Eventually his father-in-law Jethro took him aside and said that what he was doing was not good. It was killing him—Moses—and it was making the people too dependent. So Jethro told him to select able individuals from amongst the people and give them the authority to

decide the smaller issues. If they could not decide a particular issue, then they were to bring it to Moses. Moses took his father-in-law's advice.

The Caterpillar, Inc. wouldn't exist today if Benjamin Holt and Daniel Best thought that they had to make "every" tractor that their company produced. Or can you imagine Jim Owen signing off on every decision?

A leader may cast the vision but at some point the leader has to trust others to work out the details toward implementation.

If when you get home, you read the third chapter of Nehemiah, you will find that he names all of the people who helped build the Temple wall. Everyone had a role whether it was rebuilding the "Dung Gate" or constructing watch towers.

Just as it is said that there are no small roles on Broadway, no job is too small or person insignificant in doing the work of the Kingdom of God. Leadership recognizes that everyone has something to contribute. A leader encourages people to identify and use their talents.

A fourth leadership principle is that leaders must be willing to set an example.

Good leadership is about doing what is real and right. John Ortberg once asked a group of leaders **"Is the life you're inviting others to lead the life that you are leading?"**

I don't know how old I was when I first read that a leader never asks someone to do something that they are unwilling to do.

On the last night that Jesus was with his disciples he met them with a servant's towel wrapped around his waist and washed their feet. When he had finished Jesus said to his disciples, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me 'Teacher'/'Rabbi' and 'Master', and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do, also. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn't give orders to the employer. If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life." (John 13: 12-17, [The Message](#))

The apostle Paul wrote "Follow me as you see me following Christ."

When a leader stumbles in the area of integrity the destruction is far reaching. It is eternal. Jesus told his disciples to be careful how they live for if they cause even a child to stumble that it would be better for them on the day of judgment if a millstone had been tied around their neck that they drowned in the deepest sea.

I have known far too many people who have left the fellowship of the church because of the transgression of a pastor or leader.

The fifth principle of leadership is that there will always be critics and naysayers.

In Nehemiah's case it was Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem the Egyptian. They criticized the project from the beginning. They kept telling Nehemiah that the people's resources shouldn't be used in that way, that it was a waste of time, that it wasn't necessary, that it was silly.

When that didn't work they tried to get him side-tracked on other projects. He responded by telling his critics that he was doing a great work and that he could not come down from the tower.

And when none of those things they tried worked in getting him to abandon his project, they began to spread rumors concerning his loyalty. This last assault fell flat because of the fourth lesson—he was a man of principle and integrity.

Through it all he was steadfast.

I've often wondered why change—large or small—brings out not only excitement—as illustrated in the workers enthusiasm—but critics—as illustrated by Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem.

I've come to this conclusion, the status quo is like a sleeping dog. Most people think that it is best to let it lie even when letting it lie is ultimate suicide. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book Guns, Germs and Steel Jarod Diamond explored how civilization from ancient Egypt to Rome committed suicide. Of ancient Rome he writes:

Rome had guaranteed every citizen a daily ration of bread since 58 B.C.E. to assure political stability. To create fields to produce enough grain (and to provide construction and shipbuilding materials), forests were cleared around much of the Mediterranean. Deforestation and erosion worsened as fields were carved out on ever steeper slopes in an attempt to produce still more grain. Rome was forced to virtually abandon several major cities such as Leptis Magna, in what is now Libya, as erosion and climate change caused by deforestation destroyed their harbors and grain fields.

The Empire began gradually to contract as environmental destruction, outside military pressures, and internal dissent mounted. By the time the Roman capitol was overrun in the early fifth century C.E. by the Goths, the western Empire was only a shadow of its former glory.

In other words, they knew what was happening but they couldn't stop themselves. They were "hooked" on a lifestyle.

Leaders point to a new way, a better way, a more secure way.

Here's a bonus leadership principle, worship. The story begins and ends with worship. It began with the Message of God that was first preached by Jeremiah, a message that touched the heart of Cyrus the Persian. It touched the heart of Nehemiah, who when he heard of the conditions of the exiles in Jerusalem, sat down and wept. He mourned for days, fasting and praying and confessing his sin and the sin of the people. *Never underestimate the necessity of confession when doing a right and good thing.*

When the wall was finally constructed,--in record time, 25 days—the people gathered and worshipped God who had called them and led them through the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah.

As the Executive Board meets in a couple of weeks to discern where God is leading us as a community of faith, I ask for your prayers. I also encourage you to take these lessons and apply them to your life—for the glory of God. Amen.