

Knocked Out, but Not Knocked Out
Nehemiah 4:1-9 and 2 Corinthians 4:4-7
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Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
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We are engaged this fall in what is quite a long sermon series ... on the Book of Nehemiah, a book I knew little about until Sam introduced me to a popular book about Nehemiah by the American pastor and author Charles Swindoll.

That book is *Hand Me Another Brick*, and it will be available at the next book stall, in case you are interested.

So, last summer, as I was preparing for this series and as I was spending more time with Nehemiah than I had ever spent before, the more energized I became. As I hope you've realized by now, there is a great deal to learn from this book and from this Old Testament figure named Nehemiah.

To bring you up to speed, Nehemiah was one of God's people in exile. After Jerusalem and its walls and its temple were destroyed, the leading citizens were marched off into exile, which was to last about 70 years, one of the most disruptive events in Israel's history, and if you know anything about Israel's history, that's saying something.

And Nehemiah, who was most likely born in exile and who had never seen the land of his parents and grandparents, rose to a very high position in the palace of the Persian king ... only to feel God's call in his life to return to Jerusalem, to take part in the rebuilding – specifically to rebuild the wall of the city.

We haven't talked about this yet, but in many ways this is one of the classic call stories in the Bible. God's call in our lives, maybe you're aware of this – God's call is almost never to higher salaries and better climates. Have you ever noticed that? You might think that if you listen to your Christian friends, but it's not true.

And if you doubt that that's true, I have a few stories – Old and New Testaments – I would like to show you. In fact, Jesus was very direct about this when he said that to follow him was to follow the way of the cross.

Such an easy part of the Bible to gloss over and ignore.

In any case, Nehemiah hears God's call and then asks the king, Artaxerxes, for a transfer to Jerusalem, and last week, as you may recall, he arrived at last in Jerusalem only to see the desperate situation there.

Jerusalem in the 5th century BC was a ruin – or close to a ruin, and somehow (we looked at this last week), somehow Nehemiah convinced the people who were still living in the land to join him in rebuilding the walls of the city, which (as it turns out) triggered a great deal of criticism and opposition.

Our New Testament lesson for today is from Paul, who was no stranger to opposition. He experienced far more opposition, in fact, than Nehemiah did – beatings, and once a stoning, and imprisonment.

And so, what I want you to hear today is what the Apostle Paul has to say about all of that from his experience...

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Criticism, opposition, resistance, hostility – these are unpleasant words, aren't they? They stir in most of us – they certainly stir in me – some strong feelings, such as hurt and anxiety and fear.

They make us want to fight back.

There isn't a person here, I imagine, who enjoys being attacked, who looks forward to having his or her integrity questioned, who is thrilled when his or her motives are ridiculed.

Most of us are conflict avoiders – to one degree or another – and opposition is a kind of conflict. We avoid it, if we can.

So, I am approaching this subject today with a great deal of caution. This is a difficult subject for us.

When I preach sermons about forgiveness, there are always people who need to talk afterward about people they can't seem to forgive, or about situations (sometimes from many years ago) that they can't seem to put behind them.

Well, this is another subject like that.

All, or almost all of us, have experienced criticism of one kind or another. And when we hear it, when we receive it, it feels unfair and undeserved.

We think, **“How can you say that?”** Or, **“Who are you to say that? Who died and made you king?”**

And even if there was a tiny, microscopic bit of truth in what was said, the criticism often feels as though it's been given in an insensitive or uncaring way. That's why it stings.

So, our first response is often to hit back. Or to escalate. We feel like responding in kind.

Or sometimes, people just leave, they walk out, as if to say, **“Who needs this?”**

Many of our responses in adulthood are responses we learned in childhood. So, if we are criticized in adulthood, our response can often be traced to something we experienced as children.

If our parents criticized us, or they were not especially loving in offering their feedback, we have this automatic or built-in defense. And it comes from deep within.

There is a criticism of young adults today – I’m sure you’ve heard this – that they have been shielded from criticism and have been pampered too much.

When they were growing up, they were given medals and trophies simply for having shown up to play the game, or whatever it was.

So, the thinking goes, they are ill-equipped now in adulthood to deal with honest feedback. They are confused in the workplace because no one has ever given them direct feedback about their work.

Look, I really don’t know what to think about that, I’m tempted to think the problem is exaggerated, but I know this much: *no one*, young or old, likes to receive criticism. No one is really prepared to deal with opposition.

When Nehemiah, against all odds, convinced the elders of the city to join him in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, we would have expected admiration for his efforts. No one else had volunteered for the job, right? We would have expected people at the very least to express grudging appreciation to Nehemiah for having gained the support of the people. It was no small accomplishment.

But if that’s what you think, then you have never introduced a new idea. You have never offered a suggestion. You have never started a new venture.

The fact of the matter is, **opposition to new ideas and new ways of doing things almost always results in criticism, opposition, resistance, hostility.**

And the question is, How does the person of faith respond to that? How do Christ followers deal with the inevitable opposition that comes from living and working with other people? What do we do?

If you’ve heard at least one sermon in the series, then you already know how Nehemiah responded to Sanballat in our story for today. Does anyone know? Please tell me you’ve heard me say this!

Nehemiah prayed. His first response? Well, of course, it was to pray.

Nehemiah’s first response to *everything* he did was to pray about it. God called him to return to Jerusalem – and he prayed. He wanted to ask the king for permission to leave his position in the palace – and he prayed. He arrived in Jerusalem and saw the sorry state of things – and he prayed.

You know, by now I’m a little tired of it. Nehemiah prayed about everything. I will never be as good as Nehemiah. I try, I really do, but – let’s face it – he was a superstar. There’s a book in the Bible about his life.

My first response to reading that Nehemiah prayed about Sanballat’s criticism – a which was totally unfair, by the way – was to roll my eyes, thinking that this man Nehemiah was too good to be true.

And then, I remembered something. My understanding of prayer is often – far too often – quite limited.

What if Nehemiah’s prayer – we don’t know exactly what he prayed – but what if at that moment his prayer sounded something like this: **“Dear God, I can’t stand that guy ... Sanballat. I hate him. I’m not**

proud of that, but I do. I ask your forgiveness. But I could sense from the moment I first met him that he was an evil person. I wish you would smite him with your mighty hand and teach him a lesson he will never forget. Amen.”

What do you think about that prayer?

You know, if that prayer sounds strange to you, if you couldn't imagine saying those words or words very much like them, I wish you would read the Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms has a number of prayers, they're called "imprecatory prayers," which, I would say, are surprising in their intensity, in their anger, in their honesty, and in the way they speak about enemies.

What if you were to learn something from the person who wrote the Psalms about how to pray in these situations?

Swindoll, whose book has been the inspiration for this series – Swindoll has a wonderful way of putting this, and since I can't improve on his words, I'll quote them. He says, **“Let your first response to criticism be an honest, cathartic, soul-cleansing season of prayer – [and] take as long as you need.”**

My favorite words there are a **“soul-cleansing season of prayer.”** I don't think that anyone in my life, certainly not my pastor in childhood, ever encouraged me to enter a soul-cleansing season of prayer.

But I think I would like it. Wouldn't you? Why don't we pray like that more often?

Maybe your prayer life could use a good dose of honesty and authenticity. And when you're finished praying with honesty and authenticity, a few things will become clear:

- **One**, God is not shocked by anything you said. He has heard it all before – and much more.
- **Two**, you will not have responded to your enemy in a way you later regret, because of course you didn't say to this your enemy, but to God.
- **And three** – maybe best of all – you will be changed. In the act of prayer, you will be changed.

Maybe this is the reason that Jesus encouraged us to pray for our enemies. When you pray for them – or about them – you will be more willing to listen, maybe, more willing to get along, more willing to re-focus on the project at hand.

Look, a great deal has been written about criticism and how to respond to it. There is a lot of advice out there about healthy ways to handle criticism.

Most of the advice I found says that we should listen to criticism, no matter how unjustified, no matter how angry it makes us feel. We should listen. Proverbs 15, which Swindoll quotes in this connection, tell us that **“a wise man [and a wise woman too, I imagine] listens to a rebuke.”**

Another Proverb – this one is in Proverbs 27 – says that sometimes we *need* the **“faithful wounds”** of a friend. That's interesting. So, take the time to listen to what your critics have to say. Ask clarifying questions. Make sure you understand ... before you react.

A person who won't listen can't be helped. That one isn't in the Book of Proverbs. I made it up. But it's true. People who don't listen will never get better at whatever it is they are doing.

Then – next – don't over-react. Don't speak too quickly. Jesus, as you know, was often silent in the face of accusations. Even when we want him to defend himself, he was stubbornly quiet.

Whatever you do, if you respond in anger, chances are that you'll regret having done so. So, step back. Take a deep breath. Bite your tongue. Not literally, but you know what I mean. Don't hit the send button on that fiery email. Let it sit and simmer and soak for a few hours – overnight would be better.

You know, in the good old days – before email – people would leave church on Sunday, they would think about what they heard in the sermon, and sometimes they would get a note card, write a few thoughts, tuck it in an envelope, put a stamp on it, and then get it in the post on Monday morning. And by Wednesday, which is I would receive them, I would be able to listen to just about anything. Just about!

Today, criticism comes so much faster. One time, at my last church, there was text message, composed during the offering, waiting for me in my office after the sermon. It was in response to something I said in the sermon. It was okay, not devastating, but I would have responded so much better if it had come on Wednesday.

Proverbs 15 again ... **“A soft answer turns away wrath, but harsh words stir up anger.”**

Next time, wait a few hours before hitting the send button.

Next, I would say, learn from it, from the criticism. And yes, I know, most of the time the criticism we receive is way wide of the mark. You might be criticized for something you could do nothing about. It rained, and somehow that was your fault.

But *sometimes* there is a nugget of wisdom, something that might be useful to you. So, hunt for it. Take it to heart. Apply it.

All of the literature I could find – the Christian literature – counsels us to pray about criticism. And sometimes those prayers should be requests for wisdom. In other words, **“Lord, is this true? Should I pay attention to this criticism ... or not? What are you trying to say to me through this? Grant me your grace to respond as I should, as Christ would respond.”**

And then, last but not least, maybe the very best bit of advice that I could find about this subject, the response that Nehemiah models for us ... **Forget about it.**

Listen to your critics, as I said, learn what you can, but then forget about them and move on.

If the criticism was useful, well then you've gained something and grown as a person. If the criticism was not useful, if it wasn't even justified, then you've learned something about patience and understanding and turning the other cheek.

Congratulations. But whatever you do, keep moving forward.

Do you know something? Nehemiah, who can be too good to be true sometimes, remembered who he was in this situation. He was the leader of a group of people who were doing hard work. So, instead of

letting the criticism get them down, instead of letting the criticism derail the rebuilding project, he took the opportunity to encourage his workers.

And when the critics heard this, maybe you recall from hearing the story read, the critics were all the more intense, they criticized all the more. So, Nehemiah did something else that I like. He posted guards ... to protect his people.

Here's what I would like you to remember.

You are going to be criticized. Unless you never leave your home or your apartment, you are going to be criticized. And most likely, someone will criticize you for never leaving your apartment. You can't win. Criticism is a part of life. It's unfair, but then life is not always fair.

- Pray about it.
- Express every unholy thought you have to God above. God has heard it all before. And ... God will be pleased that you are finally getting serious about your prayer life.
- If there is anything in the criticism to pay attention to, do that.
- And then, finally, get back to work, the work God has given you to do. And do it as well as you are capable of doing it.

Let us pray...