

**Sunday, September 24, 2017 – Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Preacher: Rev. Douglas J. Brouwer**

**Scripture: Nehemiah 2:11-20 and Mark 1:35-39**

**Sermon title: “Getting off Dead Center”**

Note: On September 10, I began a sermon series based on the Book of Nehemiah, with guidance and insight provided by the “minor classic” *Hand Me Another Brick*, a book by the American pastor Charles R. Swindoll. The readings from Nehemiah will be the focus of the sermon, with the second reading providing further illumination or insight.

1. Before we move on to the second half of chapter 2, I want to address with you an issue that was raised last time about the connection between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. Nehemiah prayed that the king’s heart would be changed, then he waited, but he also planned. So, when the king asked Nehemiah what he wanted to do, it seems clear that Nehemiah had a fully formed plan in mind. My question is, Does this seem to you like the right balance between God’s sovereignty and Nehemiah’s responsibility? Here’s how Swindoll asks the question:

How, exactly, do our own wills, responses, and choices harmonize with God’s sovereign will and infinite knowledge? Such a profound mystery we may never understand, but we can still respond to this mystery by obeying Scripture’s admonitions to do our part in seeking the Lord in prayer and giving Him the glory for what He accomplishes in, through, and often in spite of us!

2. Once Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he faced an enormous rebuilding project. He brought materials with him, as granted by Artaxerxes, but his workers were already living there. How do you go about motivating a group of people to do a big job? Have you ever had to gain the trust of a group of “volunteers” and get them to do something that might not have wanted to do? Again, here’s how Swindoll asks the question:

When Nehemiah journeyed to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, he faced the immense task of inspiring those around him to pick up bricks and begin a grueling project. Some were young novices with soft, callous-free hands. Others were old and accustomed to living without the wall—perhaps lethargic and disinterested. They all came from different walks of life with diverse expectations. The sands of time had smothered much of the patriotic zeal that had once burned in the hearts of the Jews. It’s easy to see that motivating them was one of Nehemiah’s first challenges of leadership.

3. When Nehemiah first arrived in Jerusalem, he dropped out of sight for three days. No press conference, no Facebook posts, no high-profile meetings with the leadership. Instead, what did he do? As Swindoll puts it, Nehemiah met with “the real mayor of Jerusalem” who is Yahweh. So, once again Nehemiah spends time – precious time! – in prayer. Can think of some good reasons for doing this, beyond the obvious one – namely, that Nehemiah had a close relationship with God and truly believed that only with God’s help would the wall be built. Here’s a hint: what message did Nehemiah send to the people by taking this time in prayer?
4. With the beginning of verse 17, Nehemiah ended his silence and made his

“recruiting pitch” to the people who were going to help him with the wall. What does he say? Can you analyze his message? Would you have said something else?

5. Here is how Swindoll summarizes Nehemiah’s “pitch”:

Nehemiah also laid out the hard facts about the dire situation. He made no effort to motivate the people with external rewards or gimmicks like new chariots, campouts at the Dead Sea, or bricks in the wall with their names on them. Though workers need to be adequately compensated, strictly material incentives produce short-lived enthusiasm and lead to feelings of entitlement. Enduring motivation is that which comes from within—intrinsic motivation that appeals to their immaterial, spiritual desires. Nehemiah appealed to the Jews’ desire to do what God wanted them to do—to assume national prominence again as God’s holy people.

In the end, the only motivation that would work would be the inner desire to do God’s will. How many times have you been in organizations (or churches!) where the appeal was to all of those things that Swindoll mentions? Would your name on a new building or a new piece of furniture or an endowment motivate you to give? Think of a time that you have given a substantial gift, and ask yourself: what motivated you?

6. In verses 19-20 we read about the criticism that would follow Nehemiah throughout his work. What was his initial response? Is there anything to learn from his example? To make sure that we keep the connection to the New Testament, can you see any parallels here between Nehemiah and Jesus? (Think of the story in Luke where, after Jesus preached in his hometown, the people tried to throw him over a cliff. Did Jesus face opposition? Yes!)