

11.06.22 – Pentecost 22

“Stirred to Restore!”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Nehemiah 7:4-5a; 8:13-17 (NIV) ~ Pam

The List of the Exiles Who Returned

⁴ Now the city was large and spacious, but there were few people in it, and the houses had not yet been rebuilt. ⁵ So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first to return.

¹³ On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters”—as it is written.

¹⁶ So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

L: These are the Words of God. All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 10:40-42 (NIV)

⁴⁰ “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. ⁴² And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

Leader: These are the Words of Jesus. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Bountiful God, we thank you again for a rich Bible history of men and women of faith. We thank you too for new ways to look at ordinary life, both trials and delights. Help us to see and feel your presence in a more extraordinary way than usual. We are grateful for the freedom to worship and have the Lord’s Supper; please be with those who are not here today. Open our minds and hearts now as we hear more of Nehemiah’s story. Let me be your messenger today. Amen.

Good job! We all remembered to turn back our clocks last night! I will say I forgot to do so before I went to bed, but when I woke up in the night remembered, and was so happy that I had an extra hour! Debbie and I had a lively worship time at the NorthStar Church Network 20th Anniversary celebration with Author and Speaker Bob Goff. He was funny as well as inspirational. You will be hearing some of what he said for the next several weeks as I pepper my sermons with his insights. And we are reading his new book Un-Distracted. Happy to share with you. His first tip is about loving those around you, even the unlovable. We've heard that before, right? From Jesus, of course!

Well, today is the last of **our** Nehemiah story; there are more chapters to read about this man of God, so I hope you'll continue to read on past chapter 8. Over the last few weeks, we've seen how Nehemiah led the people to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem after the enemies had destroyed the city. Remember his great leadership idea to group the clans and families together to rebuild the wall and defend themselves as families because of their loyalty to one another? Well, there were not many Jews left in the city, so in Chapter 7 where we started today, Nehemiah decided to record the names (create what we call a "census") of those who had returned, and he started with those who had helped to build the wall and lived there. The end of the chapter is the list of citizens.

Today, I'd like you to pretend to be one of these Israelites who had returned from exile to Jerusalem, had restored the wall, and prayed to the Lord for strength and courage to continue re-building. These people, most of whom could not read, had all assembled at the Water Gate of the wall. Some of Nehemiah's enemies that we learned about over the last few

weeks gave up, but many were still lurking in the city, so he kept up his security measures around the wall. The City Gates were to be opened only a few hours each day, and citizens who were wall repairers were chosen to serve as guards. Nehemiah, by now, was the Governor and Ezra the priest.

On the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the scribe brought the book of the law of Moses to them. He read from it so all could understand. As they heard Ezra the scribe and the priest read the words of the Lord, they began to weep. They finally realized they had been punished by exile for **disobedience** to the Lord. They had not even told their children about the law of Moses, or how to celebrate the religious feasts, like this Feast of Tabernacles. “Read the Word to us” they asked with a real reverence. They felt regret and repented; their hearts were opened by God’s word, so this would be a lesson they would never forget. In rebuilding the wall and now their shelters, they were obeying God! So, Ezra blessed the Lord, and all the people raised their arms in honor and answered “Amen, Amen!” Then Nehemiah renewed their covenant with God on this holy day and the people ate and drank with one another in joy and delight. Feasts were normally times of rejoicing, but this time of obedience and repentance was the real celebration.

This Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated for seven days in the seventh month (a different calendar, remember) between the fifteenth and twenty-second, in the fall. It is also known as Feast of Booths or *Sukkot*, which in Hebrew means shelter or booth (in Leviticus 23:39-40, 42). They had not celebrated this in a very long time, so Nehemiah had the people gather branches from various trees to build booths or temporary shelters

to recall their legacy of wandering in the wilderness. They feasted on the opening days and on the last day of the festival, Ezra led a solemn assembly using the Holiness Code from Leviticus 23.

The “In-Gathering” festival was held early autumn (September and October) in connection with harvesting (“Sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our festival [Psalm 81:3].”) The Festival of Booths (*Tishrei*) occurred in the next month in what we call November when the harvested produce was ready to be processed in vats and on the threshing floor. This work brought many Israelites to the Temple, and this is the festival we’re reading about today in November!

The families made shelters of palms, olive branches, nut trees, or cypress. The people built booths, like today’s fall festival tents (except made of wood, not metal) on their homes’ flat rooftops or courtyards. God’s word **stirred** the people to do this new restoring work; by that I mean restoring a Biblical historic tradition to pass on to their children by involving the whole family in the celebration. It is possible that Nehemiah had linked the genealogical enrollment with the re-building. As a leader he knew these actions would stir the people to restore the whole city of Jerusalem to its earlier better days. It is also likely that it was God’s supernatural vision and loyalty to his people that motivated them by the holy human need and significance of “community.”

That need and significance is similar for us when we celebrate communion in the presence of others; there is more power and connection with Jesus when we observe and participate in The Lord’s Supper together as believers. Many of us tried to have meaningful communion during the pandemic, but it was different when we regathered and had

communion together, wasn't it? In the same way that Nehemiah and Ezra renewed God's Mosaic covenant with the people, when we share the cup of the new covenant through communion, we are renewing our covenant with God, the Father of us all, Jesus, our Savior, and each other in community.

In the Matthew passage for today, Jesus reminded his apostles they would be received as if Jesus himself were there. Even a cup of cold water given to one of these "little ones" (i.e., disciples) would be like sharing water with Christ. Interesting that we often interpret this to mean children, but Jesus meant specifically his "insignificant" followers (to remind them of the need for humility in their travels). God would see their efforts and they would reap the reward. Essentially, Jesus said: "If you are received well, they receive me, and if they receive me, they receive God the Father in heaven."

Jesus also warns them they are like lambs being sent out to the wolves, and there will be persecution and difficulty; not everyone will be kind or open-hearted to the Gospel message. Isn't that true for us today? The cup of water he speaks of represents comfort and nourishment; our cup of juice and wafer you receive reminds us not just of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, or his covenant with us as our salvation, but should also remind us about the cost of discipleship under the authority of Jesus. We may not be received well as we share the Gospel, and the rewards of service seem minimal, but in the Father's eyes, the rewards of service to Him are **eternal**. Just a little a bottle of water, or a sandwich – "are you thirsty? Are you hungry?" That's all you have to say; then provide it. God will do the rest in that person's heart. These are ordinary questions and

small acts of service, but extraordinary change can happen if we listen for the work God wants us to do. Amen? Amen! ||

Will you pray with me? Forgiving God, thank you for these illustrations of both human leadership and supernatural power to have ordinary families do the extraordinary. May their faith and the disciples' courage **stir us** to reach goals set by you! May we continue to listen for your guidance in all we think, say, and do, and stretch for the goals you give your congregation. We renew our covenant with you and each other. We humbly ask these things, in Jesus' name, **Amen**.