

# Marion weekly update

AUGUST 7, 2022

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON July 31, 'Prayer: It's Okay to Not Be Okay' Nehemiah 1:1-11, Matthew 26:38-45

As we continue our series on prayers in the Bible, we look at two prayers from two testaments that are similar but different.

Nehemiah is centuries before Christ. He is in exile with the Israelites. We see something we don't often remember when talking about the exile. Not all of the Israelites were taken into exile. Nehemiah is one that was, but his brothers were not. One of them comes to visit him and brings him a disturbing report. The symbol of their homeland, Jerusalem had been overrun. The wall was destroyed.

Nehemiah is crushed. He is pained. He is in despair. He is NOT okay. He prays to God this prayer of sorrow and anguish. He asks for nothing specific but for God to redeem the people back to Israel. There is a recognition of Israel's great sin, and lament at it. Nehemiah knows the cost of this kind of unfaithfulness.

Nehemiah at this point has no idea what is yet to come. What he does know is that he is incredibly pained and desires the restoration of Israel.

That he was cupbearer to the king is significant. He is regularly in the king's presence. As he is in the company of the king, the king recognizes his forlorn, depressed condition and calls him on it. The king knows Nehemiah isn't sick, so it must be something else. Nehemiah is afraid when the king calls him out. He asks what's wrong. Rather than make something up, Nehemiah responds with what is paining his heart. The result is that the king extends grace to Nehemiah to take leave, return to Jerusalem, and rebuild the wall.

It turns out Nehemiah is the answer to his own prayer. He wants to restore Jerusalem and redeem God's people back to God. He is the one God will use. But it won't be easy.

From those outside Israel, there will be those who fear the wall being completed is a sign that God is favoring Israel once again. There are plots on his life. From within, he must confront the influential and wealthy who are exploiting the poor among them. They are embracing the same sin that got them to exile to begin with. Nehemiah has to reign them in. He must also deal with the weight of knowing that not every Israelite cared enough to return or to help with the project. In many moments he must have felt incredibly lonely.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah succeeds in the building project. The wall is restored. This is a sign that God was once again favoring Israel. There are chapters given over to the service where Ezra leads the people in re-establishing a covenant with God and committing to returning to worshipping God on God's terms rather than their own. There is restoration and redemption.

The end is amazing. The beginning starts with a man who is anguished and far from okay.

This is similar but different from Jesus in the Garden. Jesus too is on a mission of restoration and redemption. His is a much larger group. Unlike Nehemiah, Jesus also knows the hardship ahead. He knows the pain and the death awaiting Him. And He is NOT okay.

Likely Jesus feels more alone than He ever has. All He asks is that His friends, the disciples, stay up with Him as He prays. Over and over they can't be bothered. They just fall asleep. How saddening that in His darkest hour He couldn't even count on the company of His best friends. He is utterly alone.

His prayer is one of terror, fear, anguish, and wanting the mission to be taken away. He wasn't poised and controlled. He was afraid and weeping. He wasn't boldly strutting to His moment and ordeal. He was asking for it to be taken away. Find something, or someone else. Just don't make ME go through this.

This is JESUS. Not our average, fallible person. The Son of God. The Savior. The Messiah. HE is afraid and trying to back out. Yet ultimately, through His fear and anguish He goes through with it. The ending is grand, but getting through it was hell.

When we look at a Nehemiah, or a Christ, we find something that puts the lie to a lot of popular Christian thought. Often Christians put this thinking out there without even realizing it, even though making the exceptions in our own lives by giving ourselves grace. We tell people that fear, or confusion, or despair equals a lack of faith. Somehow if we have "genuine" faith we'll manage to kick all of those things to the curb. We should operate in perfect peace, clarity, and happiness. It does not work this way. You can't get a more clear depiction of this than Jesus. If Jesus did no wrong, and He was scared and wanting to back out...we can be too.

There is no such thing that fear, sorrow, doubt, and so on means faith is shallow. In fact it often reveals faith that is rock strong and dug in deep. What matters isn't what we're feeling, it's what comes next.

With a Nehemiah, and Christ, their fear and uncertainty actually underscores a greater faith. Both of them had a greater vision for what their people needed and what they could become. Both saw what had been and what could potentially be. Both were committed to God and to God's children. Both also knew that to see what they desired for God's children wouldn't be easy, and it was fraught with a checkered past of sin.

Restoration and redemption wouldn't come cheap.

Jesus knew the cost at the outset. Nehemiah found out as he went along. Both had fear and uncertainty to overcome.

I suggest that their prayers are what gave them the ability to follow through on what God asked of them DESPITE their fear and uncertainty.

Hiding from these things means we don't acknowledge them and as a result don't deal with them. We have our insecurities, fears, and questions but since we're "not allowed" don't address them. We don't and so ultimately when we're in the place of having to act we're prone to freeze because the things we've denied creep up in grand and ugly form and we choose to flee.

Not Jesus and Nehemiah.

They had the guts to be honest. They had the guts to be straight with God and let God know they weren't okay. The guts to let God know they were uncertain. The guts to look God in the face and say "NO! I'm not okay with all of this!"

And when it came to carrying out what they were called to do they didn't flinch. They didn't cut and run. They faced it head on because they'd already dealt with their fear, confusion, and questions before God. It's my belief that often avoiding or outright running from what God is calling us to is the result of unresolved and unadmitted fear and uncertainty.

Going to God like a Nehemiah or Christ means we've faced these head on, wrestled with them, and embraced the will of God. To not do so is to hide, and when reality comes knocking it's easier many times to run.

If no one has given you permission before, you have it now. It's okay to not be okay. It's okay to be scared, confused, and doubting if you can do what you know you need to do. That's what we call normal. There's something that isn't okay.

What isn't okay is to live there. It's not okay to live in the fear, confusion, and being paralyzed from reaching the people God is calling us to reach. We find ourselves in dark places and that's normal. But we don't set up camp and live there.

We get honest with God, ourselves, and those we trust. And we find the strength as God speaks through all of it to do what we need to do regardless.

For most of us we won't find ourselves with callings as substantial and earth shattering as Nehemiah and Jesus. Not as daunting and not for as many people. But what we are called to do may mean the world, life, and a new beginning for one, or two, or three people. If we trust scripture, those one to three are just as valuable to God as an entire nation. So we live our lives in the light of Christ and Christ's example in the hopes that even one person will find their way into relationship with the Lord.

No matter what you are going through, God has a use for it. God is with you. God loves you. God can use you even if you never even see the net result. And God will NEVER go against you for dealing with the very human feelings that go along with hard decisions.

To the opposite, God will warmly walk with us through it as we partner hand in hand with God to fulfill God's greater purposes in the world.

Please know this, whatever you are going through it isn't too big for you or God. Whatever you are going through it doesn't disqualify you from being a powerful instrument of God in the world. Remember that whatever you are going through God wants to speak through it to both yourself and the world around you to God's grace, kindness, and love.

If we can let go of the forced guilt for our real feelings and walk with God through the circumstance we can and will punch through to fulfill God's calling in our lives. That way lies healing and wholeness. That way lies influencing the world for grace, compassion, and the Christ of the Bible.