

Nehemiah 5:1-13
Caversham Baptist
31.1.16

Highlights from Nehemiah #3
Building Community

Introduction

Take note of the criticism you hear this week. See if the complainer offers a better alternative? Complaint and criticism tells you what a person doesn't like. More helpful is how to fix it. I guess that's why criticism is regarded as negative. The solutions are positive. What terrible refereeing! What's the solution? What does the referee need to work on? What an awful conference! At a conference I want to be encouraged, inspired, or motivated.

What a boring sermon. So?! Oh, so make it entertaining? What is a sermon supposed to achieve? What is the purpose of a sermon? Hopefully the sermon is part of a worship service and heads people towards commitment to Jesus or the values of Jesus. I heard about Tim Shadbolt, Mayor of Invercargill who spoke at a graduation ceremony for SIT, for thirty minutes he spoke, but it only felt like a few, because he was so good, so entertaining. I'll see if he's available for next week!

We can make critical comments without thinking, what do we really expect? Can we be part of the solution?

Nehemiah is horrified with that is happening in his community. Ezra has come to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Nehemiah has come to Jerusalem and is having the walls restored so that the people are no longer in disgrace. Except that they are a disgrace. In chapter five the structure that is at risk is not only the walls but community. And Nehemiah is angry, and probably pretty embarrassed. These people should be acting better.

Let's read about these complaining people.

Read Nehemiah 5:1-13

Make God guide our minds and hearts as we ponder His word.

V1-5 Inequality

There's no problem trying to get ahead in life. That's why we train, get qualifications, look for new challenges. Here we have more than some people trying to get ahead. The people were trying to get ahead at the expense of their neighbours, their fellow Israelites. It can happen in our churches today too. The New Testament talks about this in a number of places. Spiritual gifts are not to be ranked. Just because I have gift 'A' doesn't mean that I'm more important than you. Just because I can't see your gifts doesn't mean you have none. Isn't there something about the toe being as important as the head?

I was reminded of the newsletter front page I wrote eighteen months ago. Roly and I had been to hear the authors of the book *'The Spirit Level'* speak on inequality. It was fascinating. They told us about the vote in Switzerland to limit the salaries of the top executives to no more than 12 times that of their lowest paid employee. The Swiss were trying to take this inequality thing seriously. The vote failed but got closer than many expected.

Trying to be ahead of someone at their expense as is happening in these verses destroys community and increases inequality.

Baptists have been very strong on this inequality thing. That's why one of the tenants of Baptist thinking is the priesthood of all believers. We are each to remember God's regard for us. We aren't to go down

the track of thinking that the ministers are super spiritual, or that they are our way to connect with God. We can each pray to God directly. Our cleaners, caretakers, Sunday School teachers are to be held in the same regard as those with higher profile positions. When we work together, we build community.

We have to recognise and celebrate the skills and gifts of others. I remember Murray Robertson who was the minister of one of New Zealand's biggest Baptist churches talking about visiting. He said that if people saw him coming up their path they'd start shaking and wondering what they'd done wrong. He saw value in other people going out to pray and spend time with others, he knew they were gifted in this area. Are some people's prayers more powerful? Could your answer lead to greater inequality?

What bothers me most about these first verses is the lack of respect and love for each other. The selfishness and greed is quite staggering. 'Let love be your highest goal' says the NLT 1 Cor 14:1 Because we are made in the image of God we can love. Because God so loved us we should love. How? 'It's not what you do, but how much love you put into it that matters.' said Mother Teresa. The best expression of love is time - the heading in Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life (40 days of Purpose pp127) Maybe that's the solution with those who are struggling, giving time by sitting, listening, praying.

Being community.

Your love for each other will be a great witness to the world. Jesus reminds the disciples (John 13:35) and that applies to us, as it did to the people in Nehemiah's time.

The Auckland Rugby Referees Association took me by surprise. From all I'd heard about Aucklanders I expected when I went to my first meeting to find arrogance, selfishness and isolation. I couldn't have been more wrong. What I found was community. Leaders who not only remembered your name but what you'd talked about the week before. Now that's a gift that some have. I experienced a large gathering of around 200 people with a few notices and laughs. And then I experienced small groups for more specific and relevant teaching and input. And this is where the relationships flourished. Why did I have to learn this outside the church?

In Auckland many years before I went to a local Baptist church. It was 1989. I made my way in. Not a word was spoken to me. I wasn't late. The entire service seemed to be for everyone but me. And at the end I was allowed to leave unhindered. In the entire experience not one person talked to me. What a way to treat visitors. What a way to grow! If you go to Auckland next Sunday you won't be able to go to that church, it closed a few years ago.

It's easy to criticise, it's easy to comment on what we don't like rather than what we do want. What do we want as part of this church? Generosity is one thing we're good at here. How many Sundays are there plants, fruit, veges in the foyer, not to make money but to give away?! Is generosity a feature that we want to grow? What more can we do?

V6-13 In this together

The further we get from the Second World War the more we seem to forget. The people here seem to forget that not that long ago they were slaves in a foreign land. What was done to them there, they're now doing to each other. And from verse six Nehemiah steps up and tells the people, this can not be, this has to stop! We are not to be like this! You know better! Nehemiah reminds them how God expects them to live. They're in this together as the people of God.

They were born into their community. For us one of the things we do to signify our intention to be part of the community that is the church, is to be baptised. It's like a rebirth. It's very like citizenship, where you decide not just to live alongside the people of the land, you join them. Dirk and Helen go through this ceremony next week (11th) and it would be great to be there with them as they join us as citizens of New Zealand. What an honour and privilege it is to be Kiwis!

Back on track. Note the repeated word in the last two verses. Promise. Sometimes we need to go back to, to our promise to follow Jesus. Maybe some of us need to make that step. The encouraging thing in these verses is that the people promised and acted.

Wrapping up. There's all sorts of history and links back to Leviticus law in this passage. But the big thing was, they were acting out of their own interests, and not the interests of the group. Building community is something we have to be intentional about. It doesn't just happen. We have to want it, seek it, play our part.

As I waited for my porridge to boil yesterday I read the article (p20 of ODT) on Tony and Heather Cummings. They're the Barbecue people. Tony gave some interesting advice, 'Be fair, treat people the way you'd like to be treated, put yourself in the client's [other's] position and you won't go far wrong. Be honest, don't promise stuff you can't deliver.' It's not rocket science, but many people don't understand it Tony said. We have to play our part.

Conclusion

What is important to us here at Caversham Baptist? How will we grow community? How will we look after each other? As we ponder this, let's quiz David Anderson about how he has seen churches foster community in the churches he's been involved in and lead.

(David talked about the importance of hospitality and eating together in a range of settings. And also how mission or sponsoring a missionary couple helped gel and give people a focus and purpose together.)

As we head into this year, how can we grow, foster, encourage community here?

Consider as we listen - 'They will know we are Christians by our love'. As you see the words, it fits the Nehemiah context very well. Let's listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ugQwh-phnZY>

Benediction

You are the people of God, gifted with dreams and visions.
Upon you rests the grace of God like flames of fire.
Love and serve the Lord in the strength of the Spirit.

May the deep peace of Christ be with you,
The strong arms of God sustain you,
And the power of the Holy Spirit strengthen you in every way.

Amen.