

“Be Nice to the Rice”
Different Week 8: Don’t Slack Off, Shine
Nehemiah 4
Martha Stringer

I like rice. I mean – what’s not to like? There’s such variety! According the Rice Association (yes the Rice Association actually does exist) there are over 90,000 varieties including both wild and cultivated. It’s an international food staple. It can be cooked in a variety of ways and served with just about everything. It will absorb the flavor of whatever it’s cooked in and is the ultimate accompaniment to the main dish. I like rice. But am I *nice* to it? It turns out we should be – because rice has feelings too. Yes! I’m not kidding. Dr. Emoto, a Japanese researcher invented the rice experiment. He was an “alternative-science” researcher who believed in the literal power of thought. The goal of the experiment is to show that a person’s attitude towards anything, even rice, affects what happens to it. So he placed equal amounts of rice and water in jars or beakers. Each day for thirty days, he approached the jars. To the first one, he said positive things like “Great Job” or “You’re the Best” or “Thank you.” To the second, he yelled things like, “You idiot!” Or “You’re stupid!” or “You’re Useless!”

At the end of the thirty days, Dr. Emoto found that the beaker he spoke positively too every day was fermenting nicely. The second beaker, which Emoto assaulted verbally every day, was covered with black mold.

I found that Dr. Emoto had his naysayers and critics...but I also found a lot of people who duplicated this experiment and documented their results and came to the same conclusion. Positive words had a positive effect on the rice. Negative words positively didn’t.

We are in week 8 of our different series and our theme today is “Don’t slack off, shine.” What does trash-talking your rice have to do with that theme? Well, it’s hard to shine when you feel you’re under attack isn’t it? How do you shine when:

- You were a valued employee until you got sick. When it came time for your review instead of a raise you are asked to resign.
- ‘Family gatherings,’ seem like a good idea - until everyone actually gets together. All the tension, all the arguments lead you toward one conclusion: we’d get along better if we didn’t get together.
- You and your spouse promised for better or for worse but when things got worse your spouse found solace in someone else?
- Schools, churches, neighborhood eateries are supposed to be safe spaces. Until suddenly shots ring out.

How do we handle the attack? Do we bury our heads, run for cover, maybe rashly fight back? Or do raise our heads and walk straight towards the challenge? We have a choice to make. One involves reacting with our own power. One involve relying on God’s power.

That's what Nehemiah does.

Nehemiah was a layman, not seminary trained, not a priest, not a prophet. But he had a good job. He was in the King's inner circle. It was also a dangerous job.

He served the Persian king as the cupbearer– the cupbearer had the job of pre-screening the king's wine for poison. If the drink passed the test Nehemiah would present the cup to the king as an offering. If it didn't well....sayonara Nehemiah! You had to be considered a trusted and loyal servant to have that job.

I think it's helpful to give some historical context about where Nehemiah is in history:

About 100 years prior to this time the Babylonians swept down upon the city of Jerusalem and burned it to ash. Their temple is leveled to the ground and the citizens are killed or carried into exile. A tiny remnant of Jews was left behind in the empty scarred land until a new ruler, Cyrus the Persian, defeated the Babylonians. His new policy was to send all the captive peoples back home and let them rebuild their cities and temples. Now move forward nearly a hundred years to 446 BC. The House of the Lord is complete.

The people worship God on His holy mountain in Jerusalem. But the city itself is defenseless. All around them are tribes and nations which could easily sweep in and once again reduce everything they've built to rubble because they do not have the security of walls and gates.

Nehemiah's brother Hanani pays him a visit and Nehemiah is anxious to hear what's happening in Judah And Hannani delivers the bad news:

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” Nehemiah 1:3

When Nehemiah learns that the walls had not been rebuilt and the city is vulnerable to attack and destruction, he is devastated. We read he sat down, wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. He sits, shoulders shaking, head in hands, tears flowing. What is your reaction when you get bad news? My gut reaction is to speed up – panic! In fact, growing up in my house we had this motto: “When in danger when in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout!” But not Nehemiah – he goes still...he sits down. He mourned and wept. Crying can make us uncomfortable. Usually our aim is to get the person to stop. But tears can be a powerful agent in helping relieve pressure.

Did you know there is actually a chemical component to emotional tears? Dr. William H. Frey II, a biochemist, analyzed two types of tears: the emotional ones (crying when emotionally upset and/or under duress) and the ones arising from irritants (such as crying from onions). They found that emotional tears contained more of the protein-based hormones which are produced by our body when under stress. So tears can

actually reduce stress. I guess that's how we explain the oxymoron of a "good cry." Weeping and mourning also have a spiritual component – as we release the tears and the toxins we make room for God to come in and comfort us. Jesus assures us in his sermon on the mount in Matthew 5 that "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted". But here's something else about weeping and mourning – they take time. They don't turn on and off like a switch. Has anybody ever told you to stop crying? Or just get over it already? Doesn't happen like that.

As he processes this grief Nehemiah understands he has a big task ahead of him – he's going to tackle the challenge of rebuilding the walls. But does he spring into action and take matters into his own hands? No, He waits. Scripture says he fasts and prays. For days, weeks, perhaps as long as four months, he fasts and prays before the God of heaven. There is no doubt Nehemiah is a man of action. The entire book will prove that. But he understands what we sometimes fail to: we must allow ourselves to grieve, and after that the next and most important action is prayer. It's only then we open our hearts to God that he will help strengthen us. He will help build us back up to face the task at hand. In Nehemiah's case – the walls.

Nehemiah begins with a that honors God with praise and adoration.

"Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel." **Nehemiah 1:5-6a**

He doesn't open with a to-do list or complaints, he pauses and lets his mind take in the majesty, the tenderness, the love of God. Honoring and praising God not only lets the Lord know how much we love Him. It also helps us remember he is not some handmade idol or powerful earthly king. The Lord is greater than our nation, our world, our universe. And He is greater than any problem we bring to Him. He can handle it.

Second, he confesses his own sins and that of his people. He doesn't deny responsibility for the state of affairs - He actually accepts personal responsibility for the sins of his parents, grandparents and nation.

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses."

Nehemiah 1:6b-7

Only after honoring God and being honest with God, comes the moment when Nehemiah asks God for help. This time of prayer was preparing Nehemiah for what he had to do next – petition his earthly boss, the king for help.

“Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” **Nehemiah 1:11**

Take note of what he does first, before he even asks the king?

“Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

He prays again!

It's only then he feels prepared enough to ask for not only a leave of absence, but he also asks for the king's protection for a safe journey and supplies to rebuild the palace gates, the wall and for a house for himself. I love that he asks not only for the wall supplies but supplies for his own house! Of course – an effective leader has to take care of his own needs too – not just spiritually through prayer but physical comforts as well. And he's going to need to be well rested to tackle not only the construction project and rally the support he needs to get it done, but also to handle the push back he's going to get from nay-sayers as well as threats of physical violence. Nehemiah lived in a violent and dangerous time. We live in violent dangerous time. When we are faced with unspeakable tragedies like mass shootings, when fires surge, when addiction, divorce death or disease tear down our physical, emotional and spiritual walls our response can be the same as Nehemiah's. We turn to God and we rebuild.

So here's what we learn from Nehemiah about rebuilding: Rebuilding is rooted in prayer and preparation

Rebuilding also requires team work.

After he arrives in Jerusalem Nehemiah spends 3 days on a reconnaissance mission with a few trusted leaders. They inspect the walls, the gates the pool and together assess the situation. When they return to the city he gives the officials a victory charge to gain their support:

“Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace. “I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.” **Nehemiah 2:17-18**

So he brings all his team players on board to work.

And work they do – together, side by side. Goldsmiths, perfume makers, sons and daughters. Nehemiah sets them to work on the palace and city gates, and he also has them focus especially on areas of the wall right across the street from their own houses! Why? I think this mirrors the premise of the sweat equity policy of Habitat for Humanity -

the future home owner is required to invest so many hours of labor on their home and/or another Habitat house. Maybe because people are most invested in the overall completion of a project when they can appreciate directly the fruits of their labor. And having the eyesore of the broken down wall in front of their house resurrected was good incentive in addition to the overall protection the wall will bring Jerusalem.

So Nehemiah, the cup bearer (not the architect, remember) is seeing progress. The job is getting done. And what happens when we start to succeed? We can become a threat to others and they start to plant seeds of doubt.

Which is why Rebuilding Invites Opposition.

Sanballat and Tobiah are governors of surrounding area. Perhaps they fear that rebuilding the city would mean Jerusalem could become a new center of influence and decrease their power. Perhaps they are threatened by Nehemiah's leadership. Whatever their reasons, they start a smear campaign to undermine Nehemiah, his leadership and his team of workers by hurling insults.

“When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, What are those feeble Jews doing?” Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?”

Nehemiah 4:1-2

What is Sanballat really saying?

1. “What are those feeble Jews doing?” Or “Who do you think you are?” Notice: he begins by attacking their self-image. He calls them “feeble” He plays upon their feelings of humiliation and inferiority. They’ve been kicked around by foreigners for the last 150 years. Now as they start to rise up, Sanballat wants to kick them back into their place.
2. “Will they restore their wall?” Or “You’re Incapable!” He turns from challenging their self-image to challenging their ability. They don’t know the first thing about construction! Tobiah adds, “If a tiny fox jumped up on their wall it would collapse.”
3. “Will they offer sacrifices again?” Or will they remain faithful "Do they expect their God to do this for them'? Next he casts doubt on the strongest resource they have: their faith in God. All along Nehemiah has stressed that God is with them, that God will defend them, that God will give them success. Sanballat wants to cut their connection with the Lord.
4. “Will they finish in a day?” Or, he asks, ‘Why bother?’ ‘This is a waste of time and effort. You are never going to finish and our forces will descend on you and wipe you out before you even know what hit you. All your work will amount to nothing. Give it up.’

5. “Can they bring these burned stones and heaps of rubble back to life? Or “Who are you Kidding – It’s Impossible!?” Finally, Sanballat challenges their hopes, dreams, and visions. They can’t raise a city up from the dead.’

How can we as Christians, avoid these attacks from naysayers and nitpickers? How do you keep the devil off your back? Don’t take on projects for God. Seriously, because if the devil is not opposing you, maybe you’re not doing anything to oppose. Do you know that almost every Christmas and Easter or often when we are planning for some big church-wide event the copier in the church office goes on the fritz, or the duplicator goes down or the internet goes off-line? Tension starts to rise and we are tempted to take our eyes off the big picture and get bogged down in the details. Which is where the devil is – in the details. When we change our mindset we can consider opposition good news, because we are doing something to build God’s Kingdom.

For Nehemiah, the more obvious it became that his work was effective, the more intense the pressure mounted against him.

Sanballat and Tobias made plans. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it

Nehemiah remain focused and undeterred. How? He went back to rule #1.

He prayed.

“But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.”

Nehemiah 4:9

Then rule #2. Preparation: He gave direction to the people to calm their fears. He tactically prepared them for the possibility of attack.

“Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows.”

Nehemiah 4:13-14

Then He referred to rule #3 and rallied his team and reminded them to put their faith in God:

“Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes. When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.”

Nehemiah 4:14-15

On they worked and in a total of 52 days the job was complete.

A little bit of Rice goes a long way. And two weeks ago it was the foundation for a Nehemiah-sized miracle. Right here in the Vineyard, all ages gathered to assemble 30,000 meals for Rise Against Hunger. Every child, teen and adult did their part to give nourishing meals to hungry neighbors around the world. What an amazing example of the miracles God performs when members of the Body of Christ work in harmony. Watch this: Rise Against Hunger Video

Remember this Date: January 1 – it should be easy as it's one that already sticks out in our minds– January 1 is 52 days from today. In that time I challenge you to do one or more of these tasks.

- Fill an Operation Christmas Child Shoebox by next Wednesday, November 14. Send the gift of joy and the Good News of Jesus to a child in another country
- Take an Angel from the Angel Tree when it goes up next Sunday. Help a needy family celebrate the birth of our Savior.
- Have your Growth Group adopt a Mission. Imagine the blessings God will bring to the Delaware Valley if every one of our 40+ Growth Groups serve a mission beyond these walls. Write your Mission on your Group's tag on the Banner in the lobby.
- Donate supplies for Welcome Kits for women coming out of abuse, addiction and trafficking. There will be a supplies list in the bulletin in the coming weeks. We'll assemble these kits and hygiene kits on Advent Night, December 9. Remember Mary the Mother of Jesus was, for a time, an unwed homeless mother. Let's care for women who, like Mary, are in a difficult and desperate situation.
- Finish or go beyond your Share the Story Pledge. Like Nehemiah, Woodside witnessed walls rise around us in 2008. Now ten years later we have almost paid off the mortgage. December 31 will be the end of the Share the Story Campaign and we are so close to completing it. If you complete or go beyond your pledge we can also give more to a house that Habitat for Humanity is building in Morrisville. Currently we have put aside \$15,000 from Share the Story for this house but can raise it to \$25,000 if everyone completes their pledge. What's more, we are planning a real Nehemiah wall raising. On the first weekend of June 2019 we'll invest our own sweat equity and raise walls of that house right here in our parking lot. Like Nehemiah we invite every child, teen and adult from Woodside and beyond to join us. Let's ask God to do another Nehemiah-sized miracle through us!

Each of us has a gift or gifts God wants us to share with one another, with the community right outside the walls of this temple and around the world. How do we build ourselves up - not with physical walls but with spiritual walls to empower us to do his work?

You don't have to decide right this very minute. Wait, pray, prepare but then follow Nehemiah's example take action.

Don't let January 1st come and find you have done nothing to help build God's walls.