

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Deo Volente

Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church

By the Rev. Dr. John S. Niles MSM

September 4, 2022

“The Power of One”

Series: Nehemiah: Reclaiming, Restoring and Rebuilding
NEHEMIAH 1:1-10

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wuSaNCIde4> or
https://stouffvilleuc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/final_63112b4166aa850a74f66f94_54998-1.mp4

before the sermon

“For want of a nail, a shoe was lost,
For want of a shoe, a horse was lost,
For want of a horse, a battle was lost,
For want of a battle, a kingdom was lost,
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail!”
(Adapted, *The Book of Virtues* 198-200, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1993)

It’s been said, “One is the magic number” as well as “One is the loneliest number.”

“About 145 years after Jerusalem’s captivity in 586 B.C., midway through King Artaxerxes’ reign (464-423 B.C.) and four and a half centuries before Jesus was born, a promising civil servant in the king’s court caught the vision of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. He was not the first man to lead the exiles back to Jerusalem; Zerubbabel the prince led the first group after seventy years of exile (Ezra 3:8) and Ezra the priest (Ezra 7:1) the next group.

What was unique about Nehemiah was that he was not a prince or a priest; he was a professional, a volunteer and a regular guy, in the loose sense of the word. He was an official in the king’s court, so he did not have the luxury to leave work, drop everything and travel abroad do what he wanted. Further, life outside of Babylon was a blur to him; he was born and raised in Persia”

Yet, he was being led to make a difference in the lives of his people. He longed to help them and protect them. Yet, what can one person do?

I

What can one person do? One person can **replace indifference with compassion**. *They said to me, “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.”* 4

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. (Neh 1:1-4)

Frank Layden, who coached Utah Jazz for eight seasons in the eighties, had his hands full with a talented basketball player he had difficulty motivating. Finally, in exasperation with the player's performance, attitude and progress, he summoned the unmotivated player to his office for a heart to heart talk. The coach looked the player in the eye, and asked, "Son, what is it with you? Is it ignorance or apathy?" The listless player replied, "Coach, I don't know and I don't care." (Sports Illustrated "They Said it!" 1990 Oxmoor House 26)

What is indifference? To be indifferent is to feel nothing, to value nothing and to heed nothing. In England, a graffiti question scrawled on a wall poses this question: "What is apathy?" Next to it was the graffiti answer: "Who cares?"

Compassion is from the words: com + passion, or joint feelings. Nehemiah had compassion on his people. Compassion makes a person uneasy when others around are uncomfortable, ache when others agonize, torn when they are troubled.

Nehemiah was distressed, and anxious about their situation and in compassion he responded.

II

What can one person do? One person can replace indifference with genuine compassion and secondly, one person can **replace ignorance with confession**. *5 Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 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. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. (Neh 1:5-10)*

Nehemiah knew that he couldn't do it alone. He confessed his need for God's wisdom and his own powerlessness.

A mother of a teenager once complained to me about the five possible answers her teenage son would say to her in their version of conversation. He was saying less and was sparing with his words. The teenager's answers were: (1) "I don't know," (2) "I guess," (3) "It's OK," (4) "Maybe," and (5) "Huh?" One time in frustration she countered, "Son, are those five words the extent of your vocabulary?" To her dismay, she discovered one more as the boy replied, "No."

An Arab proverb tells of four groups of people:

He who knows and knows that he knows; he is a wise man- follow him!

He who knows and knows not that he knows; he is asleep - wake him!

He who knows not and knows that he knows not; he is simple - teach him.

He who knows not and knows not that he knows not; he is a fool - shun him! (7,700 Illustration #

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In his early teens, Frank O'Dea's life went off the rails into a downward spiral. Within a few years, he was living in 50-cent-a-night flop houses in Toronto's bowery district where just surviving was about all one could do in a day.

At 23 years of age, with the courage to hope for a better life, and the spirit to forge ahead, Frank began the long road back. Fighting all of those obstacles that hold back the homeless, the impoverished and the destitute, he overcame and rejoined society.

Then, if that were not enough, he turned that same determination to the obstacles of life that challenges all of us. Within a few short years, he co-founded The Second Cup, which soon became the largest chain of gourmet coffees and teas in the country. Building on that success, he went on to co-found Proshred Security, a company that pioneered the entire industry of on-site document destruction. This company soon became an international organization with franchised operations in Canada, Europe and the United States.

As a successful businessperson, Frank took steps to give back to the community. He began by serving on the boards of directors of charities and not-for-profit organizations. But the entrepreneur's desire to innovate and build was not to be denied. In 1985 he co-founded Street Kids International, an organization developed to help homeless children in third world countries, through education and self-reliance programs. A few years later, he became the founding Chair of War Child (Canada), an organization that provides assistance against suffering and abuse of children in war affected countries. In the same year, Frank co-founded the Canadian Landmine Foundation, an organization that raises funds for the dismantling of minefields around the world. He went on to initiate that organization's most successful fund raising program, "Night of a Thousand Dinners", with participation of some 30,000 people in 29 countries.

In the business world, Frank's success, along with his service to NGOs and his international exposure created a demand for his services in the boardrooms of organizations across the country. He now serves on the boards of private companies, public companies and not-for-profit organizations. In this capacity, he has become an authority on the transitions of boards to the much-talked-about good governance model.

Frank's achievements are, of course, a work in progress. Recently, amid the pageantry of a state occasion, Frank attended Government House in Ottawa to be invested as an Officer of the Order of Canada by the Governor General.

O'Dea achieved all this only after he confessed that he had to change.

St Augustine said, pray as if everything depends of God. And work like everything depends of you. You think about that. Amen.