

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
by the Rev. Capt Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

Be the Wind Beneath Someone's Wings

Nehemiah 5:1-16

October 16, 2022

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rOg4WfNDfM>

Samuel Johnson once said, "Kindness is within our powers, fondness is not." That could be a liberating sentence for some of us. We sometimes feel we have an obligation to like everybody and, when we can't manage it, we grow discouraged and feel guilty. But fondness is not within our powers. Kindness is, however, and we know that we can be kind even to people we don't like. And then the surprise! What begins in kindness often leads to fondness. When we treat people right, we begin to feel right about them. As Christians we are to be benedictions to one another--you to me, and me to you. We know all too well how Christians can be maledictions--there are some Christians that make it hard to be a Christian aren't there, but there are some that make it easier--these are the benedictions.

Whenever I'm disappointed with things, I sometimes think about little Jamie Scott. Jamie was trying out for a part in a school play. His mother had told a friend that he had his heart set on being in it, though she feared he would not be chosen. On the day the parts were announced, she went with the mother to collect him after school. Jamie rushed up to her, eyes shining with pride and excitement. "Guess what, Mum," he shouted, and "What? Did you get the part!" "Nope. Better! I've been chosen to clap and cheer!" He had been chosen to be a benediction. We all need people to be for us those who would clap and cheer. We all need cheerleaders.

In chapter four Nehemiah faced pressure from outsiders, but now in chapter five a more subtle danger awaited him. Exploitation, resentment and quarrels were rampant within. How do you handle quarrels from within.

I

Be willing to **confide in one another**. *5:1 Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. 2 Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." 3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." 4 Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. 5 Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." 6 When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. (Neh 5:1-6)*

One of the best-loved hymns of the faith, "It Is Well with My Soul," was written by

Horatio Spafford. Mr. Spafford, a wealthy businessman in Chicago, lost much of his real estate holdings in the Great Chicago Fire. After the fire, he sent his wife and four daughters on a ship to Europe, intending to join them later, for a time of rest as well as to assist Moody and Sankey with a revival in Great Britain. But the voyage was struck by disaster, and Spafford received a cable from his wife with the painful message, "Saved alone."

Spafford quickly made arrangements to join his wife. When they reached the spot where his daughters had drowned, Spafford marked that sad event with words of hope: "When peace like a river attendeth my way; when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'"

These powerful words written in the midst of such pain are a reminder to us today that, even though we may be enduring great suffering and hardship, it is not the end of God's plan for us. Sometimes God's children get discouraged because it appears that life is going better for those who are doing wrong. Yet the end result of both paths is already settled. Those who fear God will be able to say, "It is well." Those who oppose God will quickly find that the end of their path is death and destruction. Keeping the end result in mind helps us keep doing right.

This study may not be unique to North America, but a survey of 1,467 North Americans reveal a third fewer have close friends and confidants than just two decades ago, a sign that people may be living lonelier, more isolated lives than in the past.

In 1985, the average North American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them, says a study in *American Sociological Review*. In 2004, that number dropped to two, and one in four had no close confidants at all. The study finds fewer contacts are from clubs and neighbors; people are relying more on family, a phenomenon documented in the 2000 book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam, a Harvard public policy professor. The percentage of people who confide only in family increased from 57% to 80%, and the number who depend totally on a spouse is up from 5% to 9%, the study found. The study is based on surveys of 1,531 people in 1985 and 1,467 in 2004, part of the General Social Survey by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The chief suspects: More people live in the suburbs and spend more time at work, Putnam says, leaving less time to socialize or join groups. ("Study: 25% of Americans Have No One to Confide In," *USA Today* 6/23/06)

The Jews were in a crisis but they were able to confide in Nehemiah about the serious problem they were facing when hunger struck. Basic necessities such as food and shelter were in jeopardy (v 3). Further, their fields, family and freedom (5:5) were threatened. The future was bleak, the mood was somber and the diagnosis was unflattering. The latest slave-owners, moguls and opportunists were not Gentiles but fellow Jews, people of the same flesh and blood. They were probably loan sharks who offered to help their famine-stricken countrymen to pay off the king's tax on the condition if they were willing to sign over their children as collateral in the event of lapsed payments. The sons and daughters of the have-nots in the society were in danger of being bought, sold and moved like cattle by the haves.

It's been said, "Everybody needs somebody." In the church family, the community of believers, brothers and sister in Christ, we have a safety net – shoulders to lean on, ears to listen to and people to run to. A safe place is a place where you can tell your story, your life, your dreams, no matter if those dreams were complete success, have been shattered, or currently in suspension.

II

Be willing to confide in one another and secondly, **confront one another.** 7 *I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!" So I called together a large meeting to deal with them 8 and said: "As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!" They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. 9 So I continued, "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? 10 I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! 11 Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them-the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil." 12 "We will give it back," they said. "And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say." Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. 13 I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, "In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!" At this the whole assembly said, "Amen," and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised. (Neh 5: 7-13)*

Gertrude and Mildred were driving to their Sunday school party. The two elderly sisters were thankful they could still drive and took turns driving the Buick they shared. Gertrude became very nervous after Mildred ran through two red lights. As they approached the next light, Mildred was talking nonstop and gave no indication that she would stop. Gertrude shouted, "Mildred, the light is red!" Mildred immediately slammed on the brakes. As she stared at the red light she said, "I'm sorry, I thought you were driving."

The story is told of a woman who was bitten by a mad dog. It looked as if she was going to die of rabies, so the doctor told her she should make her will. Taking her pen and paper she began to write; in fact she wrote and wrote. Finally the doctor said, "That is surely a long will you're making."

She snorted, "Will nothing! I'm making a list of all the people I'm going to bite!"

That's the difference between confronting and being in conflict. One seeks to resolve the situation with the least amount of damage, and the other seeks to create further damage.

Confronting, however, is a thankless task. Someone said: "Confrontation is caring enough about another person to get the conflict on the table and talk about it" (quoted by James C. Hefley on Connors).

Nehemiah was displeased that things had deteriorated to such a new low, right under his nose, without earlier intervention. However, confrontation has its dangers. Confrontation gone wrong can be very painful. Do you know the chance of getting hurt by guns from a stranger compared to a friend? A friend's chance of harming you is 46%, while a stranger's is 29%.

I've often said to people the truth will make you free; but first it will make you miserable. And sometimes people don't want to hear it. Someone once said, "True friends stab you in the front." Why, because they tell you the truth. Friends don't let friends drive drunk. Friends risk rejection, by telling you the truth.

There was a conductor who had a habit of throwing things when the orchestra got things wrong. I would often say at rehearsals, "Beethoven got it right! And You YOU got it wrong. He would then through things.

At the end of the concert year, the orchestra gathered to give a gift to their conductor who have told them the truth and helped them attain it. When he opened it, he found two watches one very expensive, and the other one very cheap. Engraved on it were the words. "For rehearsals only!"

Nehemiah accused the nobles and officials with the facts (5:7), pointing out he himself had loaned money and grain, but without interest (5:10), convincing them with talk of the obligation of brotherhood (5:8), the fear of God (5:9a) and the scorn of their enemies (5:9b).

III

Be willing to confide in one another, confront one another, and finally, **contribute to one another** *14 Moreover, from the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, until his thirty-second year-twelve years- neither I nor my brothers ate the food allotted to the governor. 15 But the earlier governors-those preceding me-placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. 16 Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land. 17 Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table, as well as those who came to us from the surrounding nations. 18 Each day one ox, six choice sheep and some poultry were prepared for me, and every ten days an abundant supply of wine of all kinds. In spite of all this, I never demanded the food allotted to the governor, because the demands were heavy on these people. 19 Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people. (Neh 5:14-19)*

The story is told of two men riding a tandem bicycle up a steep hill. After much effort, they finally made it to the top of the hill. The front rider said, "That was a tough ride." To which the second rider replied, "Sure was, and if I hadn't kept the brake on we might have slipped backwards."

Nehemiah was a generous and sacrificial man. For twelve years (v 14) he did not live in style, pocket any money or take his share. Instead, he gave out of his pocket, put food on the table and lived like one of them. He was more than a governor to them: he was a friend, brother and mentor. The previous governors and their assistants lived in luxury, cooked the books and pushed people around, but Nehemiah would have none of that. On top of feeding 150 Jews and officials, he also entertained visitors from surrounding nations (v 17) – all from his hard-earned savings, penny-pinching ways and fast-dwindling nest egg.

Nehemiah contributed an ox, six sheep, and some chickens each day (v 18). An average cow on the internet sells for \$2,000, and a sheep of about 150-200 lbs at \$2 a lb is \$300-400 each. Chickens do not weigh or cost much. The hefty bill is about \$4,000 a day. Talk about costing an arm and a leg, burning a hole in the pocket and eating your way out of a fortune. what Nehemiah had done for the people after more than a decade of sacrifice, or 12 years multiply by 365 days a year times and by the minimal of three thousand dollars a day. That's over \$13 million!

His desire, was to not only be the governor, but brother, friend and mentor to his people, to lead them in the way that they should live among each other. Caring for, and contributing to the well fair of others

After an accident in which she lost her arm, a girl named Jamie refused to go to school or church for an entire year. Finally the young teen thought she could face her peers. In preparation, her mother called her Sunday school teacher and asked that he not call attention to Jamie. The teacher promised, but when he got sick on Sunday and had to call a substitute, he forgot to tell the second teacher. At the conclusion of the lesson that day, which was about inviting friends to church, the sub led the class in doing the hand motions to the familiar children's poem: Here's the church. Here's the steeple. Open the doors. See all the people. Jamie's eyes filled with tears. A 13-year-old boy realized how she must be feeling. He knelt beside her. With one hand apiece, they supported each other, making the church, steeple, and people.

George Eliot said, "In life our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds. You think about that." Amen.