

Nehemiah 1.1-10

Psalm 37:1-10

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:5-10

**1** The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, <sup>2</sup> Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> 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.”

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> Then I said:

“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, <sup>6</sup> 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 family, have committed against you. <sup>7</sup> We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup> 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.’

<sup>10</sup> “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

**17** Jesus<sup>[a]</sup> said to his disciples, “Occasions for sin<sup>[b]</sup> are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come! <sup>2</sup> It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to sin.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>3</sup> Be on your guard! If a brother or sister sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. <sup>4</sup> And if the same person sins against you seven times a day and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive.”

<sup>5</sup> The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!” <sup>6</sup> The Lord replied, “If you had faith the size of a<sup>[a]</sup> mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

<sup>7</sup> “Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here at once and take your place at the table’? <sup>8</sup> Would you not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me; put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink’? <sup>9</sup> Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? <sup>10</sup> So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’ ”

- We will be reading through Nehemiah together throughout Stewardship season, so I'll dive into that reading in just a moment. But first, I need to acknowledge what we just heard in Luke. It's a pretty jarring lesson from Jesus if you read it quickly - is he telling us slavery is okay? I don't think so. Remember, Jesus told us the Greatest Commandment is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. There is no room for slavery, no room for humans holding one another in bondage, in the Kingdom of God. So what's going on? Hold on to that question. I promise you, we will return to Luke.
- Start with Nehemiah: a book you might never have looked at. Filled with numbers and specifications for construction - a bit like this St. Timothy's campaign to build the place we are worshipping in today.
  - Story of God's people returning from long exile
    - It has been 160 years since their people were forcibly removed from their home. God has remained faithful to his people and his promises in Jeremiah. They've returned, group by group, to do the hard work of rebuilding.

- Complicated timeline - check out the Bible Project posters and video we shared on social media for more. Of course, reading the Bible directly is fantastic!
- In Ezra, God's people return from exile and find there is work to do: they rebuild the Temple. They rejoice and a few of them cry - because they remember the old temple, and it just isn't the same. Years pass.
- Nehemiah is still in exile; he reaches out to his friends in Jerusalem. How are things going? They report back, "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"
- The temple might be rebuilt, but there is still more work to do.
  - Nehemiah is a story of returning and rebuilding, brick by brick; story of heartbreak, hope, and hard work.
- I promised we would return to Luke. Here we are.

- Luke: Like Nehemiah needs Ezra, the passage from Luke we heard today needs its prologue. Here's the full conversation in Luke chapter

17:

- Jesus warns the disciples that there are many opportunities to sin, they must be on guard
- He explains how to deal with sin in the community: if your sibling sins, confront them. Difficult! Even more difficult: if they repent, you must forgive them. No matter how many times: if they repent, Jesus says, you must forgive.
- THEN we reach today's Gospel lesson. The apostles, struggling with Jesus' words, ask for more faith.
- Jesus responds to their request: faith the size of a tiny mustard seed could do ridiculous, impossible things. If I were an apostle, I'd be thinking, "great, give me some mustard seed faith and I'll get to moving trees!"
- But Jesus always turns our human expectations upside down.
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- Instead, he instructs his apostles. He uses a metaphor that we should find repugnant: slavery. Remember that Jesus is teaching. We have plenty of excellent teachers in the room here today. Y'all know so well that a good teacher meets students in their world, using examples from their lives. That's what Jesus does by becoming incarnate: God speaks, in human ways, using human examples, to teach us divine things.
- Slavery was part of the apostles' world; Jesus uses it as an example - an example that takes the world the apostles are used to and turns it upside down.
- Here is the story, from the perspective of the slave - from the perspective of the apostles.
- After a full day of work for their master (the Lord), the apostles come inside. They are tired and hungry; but the Lord tells them there is still work to do inside before they can rest. They need to cook the food; they need to set the table.
- Following Jesus takes a lot of work. It isn't a task we can set down; every day, in the world, at church, at home, Christ has no hands on earth but our own. You know this well:

- over the past year I've had the privilege of hearing so many St. Tim's stories of faith and service. When the Lord calls, you answer - in the neighborhood, at work, at school, at home, and yes, even at church.
- This is the lesson I am taking from Luke this week: doing the Lord's work can be overwhelming, exhausting.
  - Even at the end of a long day, we cannot set down God's mission.
  - There is still work to do for the Lord.
- This is the lesson I'm taking from Nehemiah:
  - Even after rebuilding the Temple, even after journeying back home, there is still rebuilding to do. Bricks need laying if we're going to build a city.
  - There is still work to do for the Lord.
- And this is the Gospel hope I'm resting in: all this work is possible with faith even the size of a mustard seed. And I trust that between all of us at St. Timothy's - those of us here, those of us online, those of us about in the world - I trust that our community can band together to do the work God has given us to do. Our faith combined is a powerful thing!

- We are embarking upon a season called Stewardship where we talk about our ministry together. We're going to talk about money - and more than that, we're going to talk about the work we do together to build Christ's Kingdom here on earth. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.
- Nehemiah: There is more work to do. We're building something wonderful together. What will you bring to the community?