

## SERMON- Proper 25 (C)

Charles R. Cowherd

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10

Psalms 84:1-6

2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18

Luke 18:9-14

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2025

### OPENING:

They did it!

After the destruction of their homeland  
and after decades in exile,  
after “having their hearts break,”

Nehemiah, the bureaucrat, and Ezra, the priest, and the Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem. They had heard the call to action: “Let Us Rise Up and Build” and they had rebuilt. They had come home to God and to their community

In other words, they had gone from here (the beautiful old Church on Grace Street on the front of your bulletin where we had worshipped since 1881) to here (the “new church” on the back which was just a rather naked looking St. Timothy’s).

According to the Book of Nehemiah, it only took them a few months to finish the wall. It took us about 10 years, from purchasing this land in 1960 to consecrating the new worship space in 1969, what is now Henry Hall.

Anne Crocker told me that the man whom the church bought property land from was a World War I vet; he had a scar across his face from being gassed in combat. He wanted a church here, so he sold it for less than it was valued.

We still had to raise the money and mortgaged our other properties to pay for it, \$25,000.

That’s a relatively small amount, \$25k, from today’s perspective. I keep mentioning that figure, of course, to help us think about the future in this way: what amount can I give to the church now, which might seem small, but will be an investment that will last for the ages.

For example, Henry Hall was constructed in 1968 for \$164,000.

It might cost us around that amount to replace our HVAC system alone!

But enough “history”—let’s return to the living Word, this story of Nehemiah which, like all Scripture, is sharper than a two-edged sword, it is Living Water that nourishes us week after week as we continue our Stewardship Campaign for 2026.

## CELEBRATION

In our Nehemiah reading, having finished the job of rebuilding, the people gather for this ceremony to hear Scripture.

Everyone was there—men and women young and old—and Ezra starts to read the Law, the Torah, what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament.

But something interesting happens near the end of this public ritual and ceremony. The people start to weep and they start to cry.

And they have to be reminded that what they are hearing is Good News.

That the Law is God's great gift to God's people.

That this is a day of celebration full of fellowship and food where they are to "eat the fat, drink the sweet" and give to those who don't have any of either.

It's interesting that they need reminding that, because you would think that it would be teed up rather nicely as this remarkable celebratory occasion.

But there is something about human nature, where we do the exact same thing, where we retreat into a fear response, into a belief that God is angry at us, that we are not God's children, beloved by our Creator.

Frederick Nietzsche, of all people, said it best about what he saw in Christians and Christianity:

"I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed."

The idea is that we should, through all the pain and the difficulties and challenges that we face, we should on some level be a reflection of God's light in a dark world. We have an acute sense of the troubles and tribulations of this world.

Church is a place to cry, to lament, to be challenged, and for your heart to be broken. But from that, you should be fed, nourished, supported such that you know joy.

I am proud to say that I think this is something that St. Tim's actually does really well. This instinct of Praise and Thanksgiving and Joy (not Happiness, exactly) are reflexive and entrenched and ready to be demonstrated at every Spooktacular and every Coffee Hour and every Passing of the Peace, and you name it, that we have. I did not know this when I got here. But It/ you/ we follow this parish motto: "We don't take ourselves too seriously; we take the Gospel Seriously."

Now, Nehemiah was a bureaucrat (a word that does not immediately bring to mind the notion of "joy"),

he was a Eunuch also (cupbearer of the King...),

and he is sometimes even depicted as stern and uncompromising because he is so persistent about all the cubits and the walls that he was focused on.<sup>1</sup>

But in our reading you see him letting loose and saying:

“Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

## **STEWARDSHIP:**

Now Stewardship, as a concept and as a process, is very few people’s idea of a joyous celebration. I get that. These are always my wife’s least favorite sermons, the ones where I talk about money.

Our Gospel lesson, meanwhile, has Jesus making the unhelpful point (from a Stewardship perspective) that he would rather have the guy proclaiming his sins as a part of his church than the loyal pledger who gives 10%.

Henri Nouwen, the famous writer and theologian, said this about the subject. He said he began his ministry by thinking of fundraising as “a necessary but unpleasant activity to support spiritual things.”

But he slowly began to understand:

“Fundraising is first and foremost a form of ministry.”

“Fundraising is as spiritual as giving a sermon, (or) entering a time of prayer, (or) visiting the sick, or feeding the hungry.”

“Fundraising is proclaiming what we believe in such a way that we offer other people an opportunity to participate with us in our vision and mission.”

“Fundraising is always a call to conversion.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe those things fervently and it brings me joy, in some weird way, to talk about it..

Nehemiah talks about giving. He talk about the context of tithing, about giving 1/10 of what you earn to God.

And, as you might imagine, it sounds pretty harsh and black and white.

In addition, when things got tight and testy in the rebuilding process, Nehemiah announces that he has refused to take the portion of wealth granted to him by virtue of his position as Governor of Judea. In his context, the rich were taking advantage of the poor, Jews were oppressing Jews, much to his anger and frustration.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers, Jacob M. 1965. *Ezra. Nehemiah*. (Anchor Bible Commentary.) Garden City, NY: Doubleday, lxxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Nouwen, Henri J. M. 2010. *A Spirituality of Fundraising*. (The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series, edited by John S. Mogabgab.) Nashville: Upper Room, vii-vii.

So he makes this dramatic gesture, Nehemiah assembles the people, stands up and gives a speech and then takes out his sash (the King James Version has him “unloosing his girdle”!) and he pours the contents on the floor, showing he has nothing.

I am not going to do that. I take a salary. I don't tithe though. I pledge myself based on what the average pledge is at St. Timothy's, which is about \$4000.

If you don't give enough you can't give reverently, if you give too much, you can't give joyfully. There are folks who give 5 figures, and there are folks who give \$100, they are all beloved by God. Beloved by this church.

Very few people tithe. I don't know what people's finances are, but my guess is that no one does. So it's not really helpful because I think people say: “well I cannot tithe, give 10% of our income, and that's what God wants me to do, so I will just not. Because God is going to be angry at me so I will just not.”

There that is again, that reflex towards a God that is judging us always, that is not showing mercy and care and delight in what we do.

## **CONCLUSION**

In 1966, in the midst of their building project, St. Timothy's had something called a “Loyalty Dinner.”

There was a Loyalty Sunday and then a Dinner during the week that had to be held at Herndon Elementary School.

It all sounds very Cold War.

There were Hostesses. They were the women of the church who had these aggressive instructions about canvassing and getting people to come. They called it a “sales meeting” and they were tightening the screws on doing all of this.

It worked! Just like Nehemiah and Ezra, who spent so much time gnashing teeth and tearing their clothes

I hope that I am gentle in my approach, knowing that we come here for solace and for peace and for joy, that we can then share with the world around us.

**AMEN**