

## **Attention to Detail**

Nehemiah 12:44-47

Today we continue with our series of sermons on biblical models of leadership. The underlying premise is that this congregation, while healthy financially and in mission, has begun to dwindle. To this observer this diminishment has two causes, one predictable and the other completely unforeseen. The predictable cause is demographics. Like virtually all mainline Protestant churches we have aged. In the five years I have served this church we have seen about ten households retire, with about half of them moving away from Terre Haute. We have seen more than twenty people die. Most of these folks—in both categories—used to attend worship here almost every Sunday. Some of those still living watch our videos or live stream, some do not. They remain generous in their giving, and we praise God for that. But their pews sit empty and we all feel the loss.

The unpredictable cause of our decline was COVID-19. Aside from the members we lost directly to the pandemic, the Bill and Joyce Cooks of our world, we have also seen an erosion of participation by the living. Many people have gotten comfortable staying home instead of going to church. I place no blame on specific people. I would never name names. Each person has specific situations and reasons for whether they keep going to church. I am simply documenting what has happened and why. And then I pivot to asking the central question facing every church: *what do*

*we intend to do about it?*

No matter what our answer may be, it will inevitably require making decisions that take us in new and possibly uncomfortable directions. The alternative is accepting decline. Accepting the diminishment of our work for justice and hope. Accepting the evaporation of our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am not willing to accept these things. So we must find those new directions. That will take leadership. And leadership, in turn, will mean taking seriously the biblical teachings about spiritual gifts *and then employing our gifts through the church.*

Christian author Leonard Sweet notes that in the New Testament, once you get past the Book of Acts, the most common theme in the text is building up the Body of Christ, the church, through the use of our spiritual gifts. As the Apostle Paul put it in I Corinthians, each person receives gifts that he or she must use for the common good. Many of those spiritual gifts do not involve taking leadership in the church, but many of them do. In this moment, as Central Presbyterian faces diminishment, we need for our gifted leaders to lead. We have already seen how Abram led by going where God sent him. He had *faith* that God's promised blessings would pan out and he took action based on that faith. We have seen also how Moses led by never giving up despite the daunting nature of the tasks God assigned him. Today, we look at how an under-appreciated leader—Nehemiah—used his ability to pay attention to detail to lead his people into a safe and successful reoccupation of the Promised Land.

But first, a major caveat. No one of us possesses all the leadership gifts required by the church. I certainly do not. And one gift I lack is the ability to pay attention to detail. Last Sunday, I followed my usual routine for getting robed. I clipped my microphone onto my belt, then wrapped the cord around my neck. I pulled my reading glasses out of my shirt pocket and laid them on my office table next to my bulletin, as I do every Sunday. I zipped up my robe and grabbed my things as I prepared to walk up the stairs to meet with the choir. *But I forgot to clip the microphone to my lapel.* I prayed with the choir, joked a little as we walked through the hall and through that door to enter the sanctuary, as we do every Sunday. I did not realize I had neglected to get my microphone into position until I stood before the church and tried to start the announcements.

This is the kind of thing I have done (or more accurately, *not* done) all my life. In fact, in every church I have served at least one or two people who *do* always pay attention to detail have gotten irritated with me. To them, my loosey-goosey nature can seem uncaring or even lazy. *This is precisely why we need each other.* I have a certain skill-set. Others have different skill-sets. The Bible teaches us that God has put us together in such a way that the church community has all the gifts it needs. When I came here in 2018 I quickly perceived that God had provided me with a staff that had complimentary gifts. I thanked God for that. And I will make a little prediction. Every Monday Sarah Kelsheimer watches our worship videos. It helps her know what is going on around here. I predict that tomorrow I will hear her chuckle when she hears me say this: Sarah, you are a great partner for me in the church office. You

keep track of details. Thank you.

According to the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Nehemiah, “was a successful man of action. Through his energy, unselfishness and cleverness he brought new life into the dying Jewish community in Jerusalem.” Jerusalem had fallen to Babylonian armies some 150 years before. For context, to us 150 years ago would have been 1873. When U.S. Grant was President of the United States. Virtually all the able-bodied Jews had been exiled into slavery. Those left behind dwindled in number. Many starved, others simply walked away to find work and food. Finally, the Persians under emperor Artaxerxes I won a three-way war with the Babylonians and the Egyptians. The Persians were no more enlightened than the others; they had thousands of slaves of their own. But they did not need the Jews, who were, after all, a minor people in the region. So the emperor ordered their release and even sent a substantial gift in coins to help them rebuild their lives in the Promised Land.

Nehemiah led that resettlement. Under his leadership his people rebuilt the Temple, which the Babylonians had razed. They rebuilt the approximately twenty miles of walls surrounding Jerusalem. They cleared out the water system, which collected rain and channeled it into massive storage cisterns. They replanted wheat and millet fields, and vineyards. They instituted a military draft and formed a small army. They established a court system based on their understanding of God's law as they read it in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. One thing they did not do was install a new king. But they attended to every other detail required

to rebuild their national life. And Nehemiah made it happen.

Our four verses from the Book of Nehemiah are jam-packed with details of how he led the restoration of worship in the newly rebuilt Jerusalem Temple. Following the Law of Moses they identified four separate kinds of offerings, for which they created four separate storage areas. They divided up these offerings—again following the Law of Moses—and parceled them out to two separate castes, “the priests and the Levites”. These latter were considered a higher order of priests because they could trace their ancestry back to Levi, one of Jacob's twelve sons and father of the tribe of Hebrew priests as we can find all the way back in Genesis. Our passage manages to make references to kings David and Solomon, and to Asaph, a Temple musician frequently mentioned in the Psalms. It speaks of two kinds of singing offered in the new Temple, and that Nehemiah directed the daily distribution of food to all those who led worship in any way.

The rest of the Book of Nehemiah contains numerous passages like this one. One gives great detail about who built the new walls and how they did it. It tells us which surrounding nations re-established international relations with the Jews and in what order they did so. Again and again it lists the names of various people belonging to groups as diverse as the wine pressers, the masons who hewed stone, farmers, coin-makers, and on and on. Biographer Winston Groom wrote the generally accepted definitive biography of General Douglas MacArthur, [The Old Soldier](#). MacArthur fought in the trenches of World War I, was a theater commander for the Army in the

South Pacific during World War II, and served as high commander for all U.N. forces during the Korean conflict. MacArthur was notorious for his attention to detail. Groom wrote, “It was as if nothing, not even the least little paper clip, could escape his attention.” Nehemiah comes across as being the same kind of man.

To return to the present and to Central Presbyterian, we have just started working to put the next strategic planning task force into operation. One type of leadership it will need to provide the whole church is careful attention to detail. If this group follows the pattern of previous task forces, it will need to take a detailed, honest look at every aspect of our church's life and work: worship, mission, education, how we use our facilities, everything. It will need also to examine the changing world in which we operate, and how those differences might need to cause us to make certain changes in our traditions and practices. And that task force will need at least one member who can pay strict attention to detail, chronicling its deliberations and decisions painstakingly. For eventually, the group will need to present a coherent report to the elders on the session.

If we do not alter our course this congregation will simply continue to slide. Churches are remarkably tough. Even tiny rural congregations can last a lot longer than anybody expects. But slide we will. And we do not have to. With the right leadership—not just from me, but from the task force and the session as well—we can chart a new and healthier course for all of us, and for the many, many people whom we have not yet met, but hope to through a greater ministry.