

Sunday September 13th, 2020

Nehemiah 6:1-9
“I Heard it From a Friend of a Friend”

Sarah, the church gossip and self-appointed arbiter of the congregation’s morals, kept sticking her nose into other people’s business. Several members were unappreciative of her activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused George, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town’s only bar one afternoon.

She commented to George and others that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing. George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just walked away. He didn’t explain, defend or deny; he said nothing. Later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Sarah’s house and left it there ... all night. I say, “Way to go George!”

How many lives have been ruined or irreparably harmed by unfounded rumours floating around? “I heard someone say?” “My friend’s second cousin, once removed said.” “Your reputation proceeds you.” Rumours, innuendo, all of it plays out every day, in every community, and out of every mouth; mine included. In legal terms we call it “hearsay” and it is inadmissible in court, but it seems admissible everywhere else.

All of us have been hurt by hearsay, and let’s be honest; all of us have hurt others with hearsay. We just love to pass along juicy news, whether it is legitimate or not. Recently, I received an email from a pastor colleague who had heard I had died from somebody else. I thought immediately of Samuel Clemmons or Mark Twain as he more popularly known, who responded to a news report of his death in a 1897 New York Journal. “Reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

For a long time, I have wondered, why do we do it? What drives us to share hearsay to all the itchy ears we encounter? We love it so much that we even have entire genres of media dedicated to rumour. Entertainment Tonight, the National Enquirer, People Magazine, and the ridiculous occupation called paparazzi. All of it fueled with our fascination with juicy tidbits that in all reality have very little to do with us most of the time. Why?

Recently, I completed a very interesting exploration of why homo-sapiens emerged as the predominant, and only surviving human species on the planet. At one time there were other humanoid species around, like Neanderthals for example. Yuval Noah Harari in his book “Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind”, suggests that that our spreading of rumours is what gave sapiens an edge over other humanoids.

Unlike other living things, humans communicate with great flexibility and detail. And this gave us an edge above all other species. We are also very social beings, and to maintain our connections to each other, we needed to not only pass along information about food sources and dangers but also about social developments in relationships. Things like, who is sleeping with who, who hates who etc. were critical to maintaining social order and connection.

If this is so, it explains why we still gossip so easily.

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It is part of our make-up, passed down for countless eons. (pg. 27ff of Sapiens) The problem arises when this engrained ability to gossip is manipulated to further an agenda that can be harmful or selfishly motivated by the dispenser of the gossip. I cannot help but think of a current sitting US president and how he uses falsehood and half-truths to keep in power.

Today I want us to consider how rumour played a role in the story of Nehemiah, and the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem. We will focus on what is perhaps the most vital question of all in using rumours. What is your motivation? For every action that we undertake, there is always a motivation. Motivation is the keystone of every project we undertake.

One of the things I have learned from reading a mystery novel, or watching a crime drama on television, is that the key to figuring out who did the crime, is an understanding of the motive. Why did the suspect murder that person? I have also figured out that a great deal of the morality, of any action, usually comes down to motive. Did I do such and such a thing, for selfish reasons like greed or power, or were my motives selfless in caring for another?

Furthermore, if we haven't got a handle on our motivation, then our: thinking, planning and even relationships can get all muddled up. Just think of what is the first question that comes out of our mouths, when someone does something that hurts us or disappoints us, like one of our children. The first question is always, "why?" It may also be, "What were you thinking", but that means essentially the same thing.

The question "why" goes right to a person's motive. As Nehemiah chapter 6 opens, we discover that the wall is nearly complete, although the gates have yet to be hung. It has been about six months since King Artaxerxes permitted Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. In just 52 days, the wall was finished, on what appears to be October the second. The enemies of Nehemiah, such as Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem, have failed to stop the construction, or even slow it down.

The wall is now out of their influence, so these enemies try a different approach. Chapter six becomes a report, of a series of manipulative attempts by rumour to discredit or harm Nehemiah. The thinking was, at least for Sanballat and friends, that if they got rid of Nehemiah, they could still control the city of Jerusalem, even with a wall. Like the old idiom, "Cut off the head of the snake and the snake dies." Kill the leader and the population is vulnerable.

The first attempt to harm Nehemiah that they make is relatively simple. Sanballat and Geshem, send a message desiring a meeting with Nehemiah. The meeting was to take place in an outlying village, perhaps near the border with Samaria. The actual location of this village has unfortunately been lost to history.

However, the motivation of Sanballat and Geshem is quite clear. Nehemiah sees this invitation for what it is; a plot to harm him. However, rather than enflame the situation further, Nehemiah simply responds back that he is too busy in completing a great project, namely the wall. It is simply a diplomatic excuse Nehemiah gives, as time wise, a trip to Ono would not really have harmed the progress of the wall.

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Nehemiah knew however, that no good thing would come from such a meeting. I don't know why, but this excuse of Nehemiah reminds me of a young lady who refuses a date by saying she has to "wash her hair". It is a kind way of saying, "I don't want to go out with you."

Having failed in their first attempt and four other times to secure a meeting, Sanballat "ups the ante", and resorts to blackmail. Sanballat, reports to Nehemiah, that Geshem has heard disturbing rumours, albeit unfounded, that Nehemiah is seeking to be named king. The rumour indicates that Nehemiah's ambition is the motivation behind the building of the wall. Notice please, the focus on motivation.

The false rumours also indicate that Nehemiah has appointed prophets to prophesy that Nehemiah is the king. This harkens back to the Old Testament practice of prophets anointing and declaring who was king. Such was the case of Samuel anointing Saul and then David. The blackmail arises, when Sanballat states he will send a letter to Artaxerxes retelling these rumours.

Nehemiah has no ambition to be king, and he sees right through the blackmail. The motivation is clear that they are trying to intimidate Nehemiah, to control him. The third attempt to discredit Nehemiah is much more elaborate, but also much more sinister. Nehemiah goes to visit Shemaiah who was confined to his house. Why he is in his house is unclear. It could be due to age, illness, or maybe even house arrest.

From what little is known about Shemaiah, it seems that he was seen as an influential person and perhaps as a prophet by the people. It may be that Nehemiah was sent a report from Shemaiah that he had a "Word from the Lord" to pass along to him. This would explain Nehemiah's willingness to go and see him, as any word from God was important to Nehemiah.

Shemaiah reports, that Nehemiah should join him in the temple, where they could bolt the door shut to protect themselves against their enemies. There were two problems with this suggestion in Nehemiah's mind. The first is his revulsion at running scared from his enemies. As governor, it would be demeaning of a man of his stature, to run with his tail between his legs, and go and barricade himself in the temple.

Essentially, this would also mean turning the temple compound into a fortress. This suggestion however, was a two-prong attack. Notice that Shemaiah suggests the temple to hide in; not a house, or an armory, or military barracks. Besides the possible security benefits of the temple, why did Shemaiah suggest going there? I'll give you a clue; Nehemiah was not a priest.

The most secure part of the temple complex was the inner sanctum, or what is referred to as the "Holies of Holies". It was the place in the temple where God was believed to actually dwell. Perhaps you remember the story of Zechariah from the Gospel of Luke, who was struck speechless at having encountered an angel in the Holies of Holies. They actually tied a rope to his ankle in case he offended God and was struck dead.

Needless to say, the "Holies of Holies" was the most sacred place in all of Judaism. In the Law of Moses, only priests were allowed inside the Holies of Holies.

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If Nehemiah, therefore, had entered the inner sanctum, he would have caused a scandal, and driven a wedge between himself and the priests. Nehemiah says, “I realized that God had not spoken to him, but that he had uttered this prophecy against me, because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him.”

They were hoping to intimidate me and make me sin by following his suggestion. Then they would be able to accuse and discredit me.” Sanballat and company knew that if the priests turned against Nehemiah, surely the rest of the population would follow. In Nehemiah chapter 13, the situation becomes even more serious in regards to the temple, but Nehemiah defends the priests and their rights, and this clearly demonstrates the powerful support the priests had given Nehemiah.

I should also point out that a violation of the Holies of Holies was, according to Mosaic Law, punishable by death. Therefore, Nehemiah would not only be discredited, but also possibly stoned to death. This call to enter the temple was a clue that Shemaiah was not a true prophet of God. No prophet would call on anyone to violate the temple. Nehemiah realized that Shemaiah’s motivation was that Sanballat and Tobiah had paid him to give this false prophecy. There that word again, motivation.

At the end of the chapter, and through the rest of the book of Nehemiah, Tobiah takes on greater significance, as it becomes clear that through the marriage of his children, Tobiah had made alliances with significant nobles in Jerusalem, and even the Chief Priest. These nobles, in turn, reported back to Tobiah all that was going on in Jerusalem. At the same time the nobles spoke to Nehemiah about how wonderful a man Tobiah was.

He wasn’t that wonderful because Tobiah, himself, sent threatening letters to Nehemiah to intimidate him. The friends of Tobiah, who were numerous, were motivated by their own self-interest. The riff between Nehemiah and Tobiah, was threatening some nobles carefully arranged commercial and social interests. Sanballat, through Tobiah, was putting considerable pressure on the nobility to get rid of Nehemiah

It needs to be stressed that the dangers Nehemiah faced, are the same ones we all can face when we seek to serve God. Such was the case for Jesus himself in Mark chapter 14, when he was brought before the High Priest, and the whole of the leading priests and other leaders. Verse 55-56 is very telling, “Inside, the leading priests and the entire council were trying to find witnesses who would testify against Jesus, so they could put him to death. Many false witnesses spoke against him, but they contradicted each other.”

The experience of Nehemiah, Jesus, and many other servants of God, who are involved in a great project for God, reveals that others will try and sidetrack us. It is critical therefore that our motivations be clear and pure. It doesn’t matter that we finished a grand project, if we did so for selfish reasons. In serving God, we discover that other people may use all manner of manipulation to discredit, discourage and generally defeat us.

I am afraid to report that just like Nehemiah, I have seen in the church: rumours, false reports and even blackmail.

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The blackmail is often easy to spot, because it goes something like, “If you don’t do it my way, I will leave, and take my money with me.” Unfortunately, unlike Nehemiah, when confronted by blackmail and rumours, we often give up and quit the project. Rumours, therefore, wreck our confidence. What do we do in the face of hearsay and rumour?

Frank Tillapaugh writes that, “Life is a mission, rather than an accident; a mission with eternal significance.” What we forget or fail to understand is that God didn’t just throw us down here, and sit back and wait to see what happens. We are not some cosmic experiment. There is a plan, and there is a purpose. Can we, therefore, have faith enough to live like there is a plan and a purpose?

The point is well made by Roger Thompson in Leadership Magazine, “A sense of duty isn’t enough for long-haul motivation; a sense of purpose is.” Maybe that is the most important lesson from Nehemiah’s story; that purpose means power.

I mean, power to fuel our motivation to complete the task at hand. Knowing our purpose is the key to “running the race set before us” as the Apostle Paul states. That goes for everything from building a wall, to feeding the hungry, reaching out to our neighbours, or whatever purpose God has given us. The other thing I should point out to you is that when we focus on our purpose, we garner confidence.

Facing opposition from: within and outside the city, false rumours and plots against him, and all kinds of logistical problems, Nehemiah keeps going. He was confident, because he knew that if he stuck to God’s purpose for him, God would defend him against his enemies.

Wouldn’t it be great to have such confidence, especially when the Saballats and Tobiahs of this world come a calling? Can we join the Apostle Paul in stating categorically, “We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them?” (Rom. 8:28) Wouldn’t it be marvelous for people to remark that the First Baptist family is one marked with great confidence, and sure of its purpose?

God did not go to all this effort to place us here at this moment, among these people, at this place, to simply start some grand project. God’s call to us is to finish, or as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (Heb. 12:1) Sometimes the road will be rough. Sometimes we will stumble and get banged up a bit. Sometimes we will face opposition from the world and from even those close to us.

Yet, if we keep our eyes on God, and not on the rubble, we will persevere and we will finish well.

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PASTORAL PRAYER: Merciful God, In Christ Jesus you call believers to the new and living way of the gospel; we give thanks that we are numbered among those so chosen. We are thankful for Peter, who testified boldly that Jesus was the Messiah, even though he was confused about what discipleship meant. From him we learn how we too need to make our confession, although we may not be clear about what you intend us to do.

Give us confidence to step up to the brink of uncertainty and face the abyss of our own doubt. We give thanks for Jesus, who would cry out for you to save him, since we too are afraid of what the future might bring. Help us to feel his comforting Spirit surrounding us, giving us assurance that we are not alone. Help us hear anew the testimony of those who have gone before us, that you do not forsake those who put their trust in you. Turn our heads from gazing on what has been the security of the past, and help us accept the vision and promise of your glorious reign.

Give us courage, then, to take those leaps of faith which will transport us from the known to the unknown, from idolatry to obedience, from selfishness to service. We give thanks for Christ, who himself spanned the chasm from death to new life. From him we learn your will as he makes known your commandments. Through him we obey you, since he intercedes on our behalf. Because of him we shall henceforth serve you, for he calls us to repent and follow him. Forgetting what lies behind, we can press on to approach the portals of your kingdom and give you thanks for Jesus, who shows us forever more the new and living way.