

"ATTITUDE! ATTITUDE! ATTITUDE!"

(Nehemiah 4:1-6)

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[PROP NEEDED: Clear Glass, filled halfway with dark liquid]

[Cornerstone U.M.C., 7-10-22]

--I--

1. Let me begin by saying thank you for the warm welcome Trish and I have received. From the emails, greeting cards, meals, and more that we've received, you've already made us feel special and "at home" here at Cornerstone. Thank you!

A--And I want to offer special appreciation to Pastor Scott for the good way he paved the way for this transition.

B--As many of you already know since we in the Methodist Christian tradition build our churches around God's people rather than a single pastor, it means that our role as UM pastors is merely to build upon the work of our predecessor -- just as you wouldn't want your house built by plumbers, electricians, roofers, or carpenters alone, but by *all* of these, so the building of God's Church requires the skill and expertise of a variety of pastors over a span of time who each bring their own *unique* skills and gifts to the building of that church.

C--So, my hope and desire is merely to take the hard work that Scott accomplished for the past 6 years and simply to build on it.

2. **[9am ONLY]** With that said, let me begin by acknowledging that...
[11am ONLY] So with that said, let me read today's text: Nehemiah 4:1-6 (CEB) & pray
3. In all things in life that we face -- including a pastoral transition -- perspective and attitude play an important role in our ultimate success in getting through it, don't they?

A--For example,... If you can see it, I have here a glass filled with liquid... **[SHOW GLASS & ASK...** But is it half-full? or is it half-empty?

B--Some people wake up each day saying, "*Good morning, Lord!*" And then there's other "non-morning" people (like myself!) who wake up saying, "*Good Lord, it's morning!*"

C--In one sense, we could say that *our attitude* is like a set of glasses that we put on which "color" (or filter) everything that we take in or give out, whether for life, in general, or for ministry in and through God's church, in particular. ¹

4. Well, in today's scripture, we find several attitudes which very often "color" the outcome of our lives and the very circumstances that surround them.

[9am ONLY] A--Let me read that scripture from Nehemiah 4:1-6... "*1 When Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he became angry and raged. He mocked the Jews, 2 saying in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria: "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will*

they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the piles of rubble, even though they are burned?" 3 Tobiah the Ammonite, who was beside him, added: "If even a fox climbs on whatever they build, their wall of stones will crumble." 4 Listen, God; we are despised! Turn their insults to us back on their heads and make them like plunder in a captive land. 5 Don't forgive their iniquity or blot out their sins from your sight. They have thrown insults at the builders! 6 We continued to build the wall. All of it was joined together, & it reached half of its intended height because the people were eager to work."

[BOTH services...] B--Now, I realize that Nehemiah may not be among our top-ten list of favorite books of the Bible, so let me remind us of the context of this story.

C--The year was 446 B.C., in the once-great city of Jerusalem, in the Persian Empire's province of Judah.

1--80 years earlier, the leaders and key people of Judah had been taken captive and carted off into exile by the great Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar.

2--But the Babylonians themselves had fallen to a new military power: the Persians, led by King Cyrus II.

3--And Cyrus, in his legendary tolerance for religions besides his own, allowed the exiled people of Judah to return to their homeland led by the prophet Ezra.

D--One of those who returned was a man named Nehemiah, a servant in Cyrus' own court

1--But when Nehemiah returned home to Jerusalem, he found it devastated: the Temple destroyed; the city walls in ruins; the social & religious life non-existent

2--And so God gave Nehemiah a vision -- a vision of a *renewed and restored Jerusalem* -- a Jerusalem with walls standing strong and firm.

E--Now, we've got to understand that in ancient times, a wall around a city was considered absolutely essential in order to claim any greatness whatsoever.

1--You see, walls provided protection and boundaries for political rule.

2--And without a wall, an ancient city was a political "non-entity" (perhaps today kind of like not having a Wal-Mart, or when Atlanta got the 1996 Olympics)

5. And so, God gives Nehemiah a vision of a Jerusalem with rebuilt city walls.

A--Now, let me pause here & remind us that God is still in the vision-giving business.

1--Whether it's a vision for us as individuals to have a relationship with someone who we feel God has directed us towards.

2--Or a vision for a new home, a new job, way of doing business, or school.

3--Or maybe it's a new vision for our Sunday School class, small group, or even for our church.

B--Whatever it is, my experience is that whenever we're trying to follow God's will about about something, like Nehemiah, inevitably we're likely to face **at least three attitudes** that challenge us as we seek to carry out that vision and work:

--II--

6. The **First Attitude** is that of a man named **Sanballat**, described in Verses 1-2:

A--*"When Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he became angry and raged. He mocked the Jews, 2 saying in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria: "What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the piles of rubble, even though they are burned?"*

1--You see, this is the attitude which says:

"You'll NEVER be able to do that! Look at your past -- look at how you've been defeated and decimated time and time again. You're a loser -- why even try?!"

2--It's the attitude of the **eternal pessimist** -- that says "I Can't" (or perhaps even "You can't") -- it says, *"we've never done things that way before."*

B--We all know that there's lot of people in the world (& in the church too, unfortunately) that are like this -- you know the type:

1--*"Oh, that person or church will never change!"*

2--*"They're all just a bunch of hypocrites down there!"*

3--Over and over and over with the same pessimism.

4-- These are people who seem to choose to nearly always be part of the **problem**, rather than part of the **solution**.²

C--And yet, the 17th-century Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza once wrote, *"So long as a [person] imagines that [they] cannot do a certain thing, it [will be] impossible for [them] to do it."*³

D--In other words, people who wear the "glasses" of an eternal pessimist the very thing they fear often ends up happening *simply because* they expect it to!

7. And there's a **Second Attitude** found here, too -- that of **Tobiah, the Ammonite**:

A--In Verse 3, we find him saying, *"If even a fox climbs on whatever they build, their wall of stones will crumble."*

1--In other words, *"Even if you accomplish what you set out to do, it won't amount to much -- it'll be flimsy and useless, and nobody will want to bother with it!"*

2--It's *not* the attitude which says, *"I can't/You can't."* Instead, it's the attitude which says *"I Won't, even if I could"* (or maybe *"You shouldn't, even if you could"*).

3--It's *not* the the attitude which says, *"we never done things that way before,"* but *"We've done things that way before and it didn't work."*

B--I'm sure we all know a few of these types in our work place, school, church, or perhaps even in our own families:

1--It's the type of person that says they have to "*see it to believe it*," and then when they *do* see, they *still* don't believe it!

2--When Robert Fulton gave the first public demonstration of the steamboat in the early 1800s, one man stood up in the grandstands and began shouting "*He'll never start it*" [Repeat over and over]. And then, when Fulton *did* get it started, the man simply changed his pitch, "*He'll never stop it*" [Repeat].

C--This is the type of person that sees a **problem** in every **answer...and sees trouble** in every **solution**. They don't say "*I can't*"-- but instead, like Tobiah, they say, "*I won't, even if I could!*"

8. Thank goodness, though, that there's a **Final Attitude** present in this story -- that of **Nehemiah**.

A--Back in Chapter 2, Nehemiah had answered the taunts of these pessimists by saying...

1--... "*The God of heaven will give us success!... [so] as God's servants, we will start building*" (Vs.20) -- ...

2--And then in Verse 6 of today's reading from Chapter 4, Nehemiah says, "[So] *we continued to build the wall. All of it was joined together, and it reached half of its intended height because the people were eager to work*" (the NRSV translation says "*...for the people had a mind to work*").

B--This is basically the attitude which says, "*by the grace of God, I can and I will, in spite of the obstacles!*"

1--It's the attitude which says, "*we've tried it this way before, but we'll try it again, or we'll try it a different way, but we'll keep on trying until we get something done!*"

2--You see, *this* is the attitude that gets things accomplished, and makes a difference in the world in which we live.

C--Rather than getting discouraged by looking at all the negative obstacles that stand in the way of success, people that have the attitude of Nehemiah are able to concentrate on the power and strength *of God* in helping to accomplish their goals.

1--Instead of saying, "*God, I have a big problem*," Nehemiah-people are able to learn to say, "*Hey, problem, I have a big God!*"

2--Remember the story of Jesus calling to Peter to walk on the water: he was able to do it as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus (the solution to his problems). But as soon as he started focusing upon the problem (the waves), he began to sink.

3--Or consider that when the *soldiers of Israel* saw Goliath, they may have perhaps thought to themselves, "**He's so big, we'll never kill him!**" But when *David* saw Goliath, *he* may have instead thought to himself, "**He's so big, I can't miss him!**"

4--Do you hear the difference? While the soldiers may have concentrated on the *problem*, David concentrated on God's *solution*.⁴

--III--

9. The bottom line, you see, is that the people of Jerusalem achieved their goal of rebuilding the walls because they had the attitude of Nehemiah that believed that GOD (not them) would give success.

A--You know, all around us today, there are Sanballets and Tobiahs who in so many words and so many ways very often share the same taunts and resistance when you and I try to follow the will and the ways of God.

B--Sometimes they're well-intended family members, work-mates, community folks, or even fellow church members who, like Sanballet, try to tell us "*You can't.*"

C--Sometimes they're people who simply don't understand our faith in Christ, and at other times they're even our *own* feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, who like Tobiah, try to say, "*You shouldn't, even if you could.*"

10. Well, as I begin my new role as your Senior Pastor, I may not yet know all the challenges and obstacles we'll face as a church, and I won't deny that we *will* face some of these, both corporately (as a body of Christ) & individually (which some of you are facing *now*)

A--But I *can* assure us of this: GOD is bigger than our challenges & obstacles (whatever they might be)! He's bigger than that challenges that *you* are facing personally today!

B--It may take time, persistence and effort, and it *will* certainly take a lot of *prayer*. But I believe we **WILL** be able to face them and have victory over them *together* if we'll but learn to practice the attitude of Nehemiah -- the attitude that believes "*By the grace of God, we CAN, and we WILL, in spite of the obstacles!*"

11. [PRAYER]

ENDNOTES:

¹ The poet Emerson said, "*A [person] is [precisely] what [they] think about all day long.*" Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius once said that, "*[One's] life is what [their] thoughts make of it.*"

² Several years ago, the former Bishop of North GA Methodism Lindsey Davis talked about the "C.A.V.E." dwellers of life and the church -- people who are "*Constantly Against Virtually Everything*" (and we all know folks like this!)

³ The full quote is: "*So long as a man imagines that he cannot do this or that, so long as he is determined not to do it; and consequently so long as it is impossible to him that he should do it.*" (Benedict, formerly Baruch, Spinoza, cited at <https://kidadl.com/quotes/baruch-spinoza-quotes-from-the-dutch-enlightenment-philosopher>).

⁴ It's important to note here that this NOT advocating the "power of positive thinking" or the "American Work Ethic" which leads us to believe that if we simply think or work hard enough, success will automatically happen. No. Here, Nehemiah recognizes that in his own strength and striving he will fail. He recognizes that success in the end comes only by the power & grace of God.