

## Introduction at Opening of Service

In our current series we're exploring the story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah lived in a time of great change. He was among the families of Jewish exiles. They'd been uprooted from their homeland many years passed. Now finally some have returned to Jerusalem. But Nehemiah finds out his people are floundering in ruins of the past and leads his people practically and powerfully to rebuild the walls of their city.

Isn't it remarkable how God's story speaks into our lives, stories that happened thousands of years ago, recorded in the Bible, are speaking into our own experience right here, right now?

Like Nehemiah's world, ours is also a time of great change and upheaval. And this story of Exiles rebuilding is a helpful image for us and the church today.

Our world is changing and our country is changing - complex forces at play in our society are bringing about major shifts. The church has had a privileged place in society since the first Europeans settled here - unifying the nation with Christian values for better and sadly sometimes for worse.

But now this Christian heritage of our nation is being eroded. Amidst this, the church finds itself, partly due to its own failures and abuses of power - being sidelined and being increasingly considered out of date - a relic. We can feel like exiles in our own home.

In this series we're asking ourselves how to respond to this? What would it look like for us to rebuild a thriving local church and neighbourhood?

While exile is disorienting and distressing, it can also be an opportunity to return to our roots of what it means to be the people of God and reimagine church for our day and time.

2 prophetic words spoken to the exiles have been speaking to us in this series so far:

Isaiah 43:19      For I am about to do something new.  
                            See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?  
                            I will make a pathway through the wilderness.  
                            I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.

Jer 29:4 & 7      This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem..."work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for

it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

### **Bible Reading: Nehemiah 2:11 - 20**

**So I arrived in Jerusalem.** Three days later, I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. **I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem.** We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding. After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble. So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate.

**The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans.** I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration. But now I said to them, **“You know very well** what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. **Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!”** Then **I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king.**

They replied at once, **“Yes, let's rebuild the wall!”** So they began the good work.

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab heard of our plan, they scoffed contemptuously. “What are you doing? Are you rebelling against the king?” they asked.

I replied, “The God of heaven will help us succeed. We, his servants, will start rebuilding this wall. But you have no share, legal right, or historic claim in Jerusalem.”

## **SERMON**

### **Relationships in Neighbourhood Matter**

Recently I was watching a BBC documentary called South Pacific - takes a look at the vastness and wonders of the South Pacific and its many islands. One episode explored an amazing little place that reminds us how much the interconnected relationships within the places we live matter.

The little island of Anuta is part of the Solomon Islands. Anuta is only 750 m in diameter and is one of the world's smallest permanently inhabited islands. In fact it has a population of 300 people, which may seem small but that's enough to make Anuta's population density, among the highest in the world, equal with

Bangladesh. Because Anuta's high population density has not had a severely negative impact on the island's delicate ecosystem, it has attracted interest from scientists interested in sustainability.

An important value in Anutan society is called 'aropa', which emphasizes collaboration, sharing and compassion for others. The concept of aropa encourages islanders to share their finite resources equitably. They have all sorts of interesting skills and methods for managing their island, including 15 different fishing methods, each one catching different types of fish. They restrict themselves on when to fish and in what way so as to maintain a plentiful resource for future years.

Anuta highlights to us the interconnectedness of our neighbourhoods.

While our neighbourhoods in Melbourne are a lot more complex and in many ways completely different from Anuta's, I am reminded that **God sustains life in the places we live in as we learn to interact with each other and care for the place around us.**

You might say, oh but those folks on Anuta care deeply about all their local relationships because their wellbeing depends on it. I want to suggest that the same goes for us. Our well being as a society depends on our faithful presence in our neighbourhoods.

### **Living Above Place**

Many of us in western societies have lost that sense of deep responsibility to our neighbourhoods. While most people have some sense of how our actions affect others, we tend to feel disconnected in our communities.

When I lived in Mitcham...not engaged much.

If we're not careful, we can live a way of life completely unaware of how our lives affect each other and the world at large. Unless we are really intentional about it, its too easy to imagine that if you just pay your taxes, everything and everybody will be looked after. Sadly Christians and churches have often fallen into the same trap, just the same as everyone else.

Getting intentional about engaging in our neighbourhood helps bring many cause and effect relationships back together again. We become more aware of the place around us and the people we share it with. It awakens us to the effects of our actions both on people and the place itself.

Local neighbourhood, then, becomes the testing ground, where we can relearn how to be the church by committing ourselves to seeing our local area thrive.

This morning I want to get us thinking about our neighbourhoods, the places that you dwell in and move amongst. Not all of us live locally to church neighbourhood, but most of us have a sense of care for it. Lets also consider the neighbourhoods we live in and the neighbourhoods we work in.

## **Nehemiah enters the Neighbourhood**

I reckon Nehemiah has a few things to teach us on this topic in our story today. Before we have a look at that story, let me give you a super quick summary of who Nehemiah is and the context of his situation:

God's hand was on Nehemiah. He was in a trusted position with the most powerful man in the world at the time, in Susa, capital of Persia, 1500 km from his homeland. He was cup bearer to king.

He was fully aware of his identity as a Jew, living in God's story. When he heard news that the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after Babylonian exile were still living in squalor and ruins, he was deeply upset. Being prayerful and attentive, strategic and courageous, Nehemiah brought the problem before God, received a sense of God-given purpose and vision, then he courageously brought his concerns to the king asking to go and organise rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Not only does the king allow it but he sends Nehemiah on his way with resources and the protection of the king's men.

This morning our story begins with Nehemiah arriving in Jerusalem. We're going to look at this story particularly with a view to how we can engage with our neighbourhood better.

What was the first thing Nehemiah did when he arrived?

### **He familiarises himself with the neighbourhood:**

But he doesn't come in as if he's some super hero. He doesn't announce his arrival and take charge.

He goes out by night on a donkey - low profile and discrete to get a feel for the place. Notice that there is no fanfare - there seems to be no knowledge of

Nehemiah yet among the locals. It's all very incognito, humble and sensitive to the fact that 'I'm new here'.

'When it comes to neighbouring well, one of the biggest temptations is to turn neighbours into projects. We put on the "super-neighbour cape" and rush out to serve our neighbours and make a difference on our block. This really isn't a bad thing, but if this is all we ever do, then our relationships will be empty. If we don't allow people to meet any of our needs, we limit what God wants to do in our neighbourhood and our life. Allowing ourselves to be on the receiving end can be harder than it looks. Our tendency is to put ourselves in positions of power- in this case always being the one to give.~ The Art of Neighbouring (Jay Pathak & Dave Runyan)

### **How to do a Prayer Walk:**

This exercise requires you to listen to what God is saying in a neighbourhood in a similar way a Christian seeks to hear from God through the Bible. The same spirit is at work in both. Its like our neighbourhood has a voice and if we listen it can tell us what love and faithfulness look like in that particular place, we need to listen carefully to hear it. It can be done alone but can be more insightful if done as a group.

We could describe Nehemiah's survey as a prayer walk...describe what he does... *"We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding. After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble. So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate."*

Take some time to be quiet before God in your neighbourhood. You can be in your house, in a cafe, a church building, anywhere you can get the space to be quiet and sense the Spirit of Christ.

Go for a prayer walk. Walk around the neighbourhood asking God to identify where God is already at work and where God might be being resisted. Look for symbols and sign of this. Where's the rubble and ruins? Where are there signs of life?

Come back to the group and share insights about where you thought God's kingdom was being resisted or extended. Consider what further research could be done to better understand what God is doing in this neighbourhood.

Finish by spending some time asking God what he is asking the group to do to love the neighbours here. Listen for some possible responses and then choose to do at least one.

## **Nehemiah commits to working with the locals to clear Rubble**

*But now I said to them, "You know very well what trouble **we** are in...let **us** rebuild!"*

In any neighbourhood God's Spirit is already working - bringing life, sustaining, renewing, forgiving, drawing together. Its not all up to us - God is at work. Its up to us to find where God is at work and get involved.

Are there people who have found a way to share a life of love here?

Are there people working towards reconciliation here?

Are there people living to support the marginalised and poor here?

Are there business owners and public servants who really care about their neighbourhood here?

When local church is part of the neighbourhood, connected to the joys and struggles of people, land and all life, the good news of God's love, becomes so much more tangible and compelling.

Northern partnering with other organisations:

Croxton Special School

DIVRS - planting and innovation and support for people in emergency support

Are they Christian organisations, no. Are they contributing to God's kingdom? Y

So what the church's role?

Lesslie Newbiggin: "The church in each place is to be a **sign, instrument and foretaste** of God's Kingdom present in Christ for that place; a **sign**, planted in the midst of the present realities of the place but pointing beyond them to the future which God has promised; an **instrument** available for God's use in the doing of his will for that place; a **foretaste** - enjoying already in the midst of the challenges a genuine foretaste of the peace and joy of God's reign."

*They replied at once, "**Yes, let's rebuild the wall!**" So they began the good work.*

## **Faithful Presence**

I am convinced that we are not in need of some new evangelistic technique to thrive as a church, only this, faithful presence in our neighbourhoods.

CareWorks is one way for us as a church to be there for our neighbours. Some of you are actively involved in connecting with the CareWorks community and supporting what happens here. But let's not leave it there.

Getting intentional about engaging in our neighbourhood helps bring many cause and effect relationships back together again.

Whether you are working as a lawyer or a youth worker or a hair dresser or living in a retirement village, we all have neighbourhoods that support us and that need our active and faithful engagement.

You will know your neighbourhood is experiencing the reign of God when:

- people will celebrate together
- people will commiserate and mourn together
- common meals will be shared together
- conflict will be resolved together
- people will be there in times of change and crisis
- sharing will happen
- people will pray together
- a common identity will be shared