

The question was: “Where do we begin?” We were looking at a room above the garage where 70+ years of memories had been stored. Nothing, it seemed, had ever been thrown out. We discovered cards, letters and magazines among many other things—some kept for family members long departed but maybe another family member would want them!! The room was musty and hot; there was only one window providing very little ventilation. Decisions had to be made; the house was being sold and our time was limited. Now, after watching episodes of the Antique Road Show I wondered if we kept what we should have thrown away and threw away what we should have kept. Decisions were made, none easy; but in the end we got rid of the trash.

Nehemiah has come to the city. His first few moves are smart ones. He does not reveal why he is there. Certainly a representative from the King could not come into the city unnoticed. But, he kept the primary reason for his visit to himself (v. 16). Why let them know what his plans are before he knows the extent of the damage and what he is up against? And, if he wanders around the city during the day inspecting the walls and gates people will make assumptions. Thus, one night (I picture a moonlit one) he examines the city, its gates and walls. After seeing the damage for himself he formulates a plan. This work can be divided up among clans and households. It can be done. Any plan is always better when it is broken into doable units. Remember the old joke: How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time! How do you repair a wall? One stone at a time!

The people respond. It is a good plan. Let’s go to work. Let’s rebuild the gates and walls.

Nehemiah also shares his story. Why he is now here, ready to undertake such a task. He tells how God has led and he has done his homework. He already has the building permits – the king’s permission. He has also anticipated some of the resistance—we can’t afford it. We don’t have the materials—the king has given permission for royal timber to be used. When he shares his plan with the people he has done all the necessary pre-planning and secured the materials.

Now, it is time to throw out the trash. If you have ever tried to rebuild or restore something you know that you cannot effectively work among the rubble. It has to be cleared away. It is the first step in restoration and rebuilding. A couple of weeks ago Harold, Jim and I went down to Fremont to join in their painting party. We could not begin the painting process until it was decided where we would paint and then the area prepared. (If you need help in taping see Jim – he spent the entire day taping around doors, windows and ceilings.) Once all this was done the painting part was fast and easy. Once

the trash and rubble had been removed, so to speak, the job was easy – and it was divided up as various other volunteers did other parts of the building.

Jesus is at the beginning of his ministry in our New Testament text. It is Passover and he and the disciples are in Jerusalem in the Temple. Jesus sees this as an opportunity to take out the trash. Passover is a time of worship, celebration and praise. It is a time to remember how God has moved in the past, how God is moving the present and to look forward to God's continuing movement in the future. At the Passover meal the door is left open for Elijah to return. Emphasis is on God and the people in worship. It is a time for reflection, praise and worship.

The Temple, though, has been turned from a house of prayer to a market place. When you are traveling it is difficult to bring your sacrifice along, just wait and buy one once you are there. (Some commentators point out that even those who brought sacrifices may have them disqualified because of blemishes—you must buy one of ours. Imagine the discussions over this.) In a society where one haggles over everything, can you imagine the voices bartering for the best price? Also, only Temple coins were acceptable for use in Temple business. People had traveled from all over the known world and they would not have Temple coins. There were money-changers, ready to change your foreign coins into acceptable Temple ones—for a price. The Holy days had become a money-maker for the Temple. Can you imagine trying to pray or worship amid all the bartering and haggling going on in the Temple area—the noise of the animals, etc.? Where one was supposed to hear the sounds of prayer one only heard the noise of the marketplace. The place of worship has been turned into a place of commerce.

As Jesus begins his ministry he is setting the scene for that which is to come. He is demonstrating for us what God expects. Do you hear again the words of Micah?

***“With what shall I come before the Lord, and how bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.”***

God's house is to be a house of prayer for all people. What hinders this needs to be thrown out...the rubbish discarded. Jesus cleanses the Temple of that which hinders a relationship with God.

What trash do we need to throw out? Chose the two passages because they indicate two different types of rubbish. Nehemiah, to me, is talking of the

practical trash – the stuff we need to get rid of. You all, we all have stuff that is in the way. It is just taking up space, etc. If you go around this building you will find some. Old S.S. material that we will never use, it is outdated, but we keep it because we might – but we know we never will. Things we haven't used or needed in years but who knows we may some day. Thus, it takes space that could be used better. Or, someone gave it to us and we can't throw it away because...know of camp in the New England area that has about five or six Communion sets. Now these are not really good sets – they are ones churches had and they replaced them and you don't throw out Communion sets – you give them to the camp. The camp seldom uses them but has to keep them because someone gave them—we need to throw out the rubbish.

Jesus, for me, on the other hand is talking about those things that hinder our relationship with God—those things that keep us from having a full relationship with God. Now, I cannot answer what that might be for you. But are there things (trash) we need to get rid of in our lives to improve our relationship with God? Items that keep us from worshipping, praying, and enjoying our relationship with God the way it was first intended.

We need to do what both Nehemiah and Jesus did: assess the situation, make a plan and then follow through with the plan. To successfully rebuild we need to throw out the rubbish. Both Jesus and Nehemiah impress upon us the need to discard the rubbish—physical and spiritual.

A small town in New England has two American Baptist Churches and both are struggling to exist. They are located less than a mile apart and once shared a pastor. Together they would make one fine congregation but something happened more than 50 years ago and the hurt of that still rests in the minds of a few. Fifty years have passed and they have still not dealt with the trash. Some have tried and failed. When will we learn to throw out the trash?