

“Our Story”

January 9, 2011

As Shannon said, we are taking a little trip down memory lane this morning and the reason we're doing so is because *before you go forward, sometimes it's a good idea to look back at where you've been*. And in 2011 we are going to go forward. We're going to take some major steps towards fulfilling a significant part of the vision that God gave us at the very beginning of this church back in 1994. And so, this morning I want to spend some time remembering our story.

And, as I was thinking about the best way to present this to you, another story came to mind – that of an Old Testament leader by the name of Nehemiah. Because, in many ways, our story is a reflection of his.

Nehemiah was guy who lived in the 5th century B.C. about 120 years after the nation of Israel had been invaded by King Nebuchadnezzar and most of its people carried off into captivity in Babylon.

About 70 years after that event (or about 50 years before the time of Nehemiah's story), Babylon was overthrown by Cyrus, the King of Persia, who then decreed that all Jews who had been brought into captivity were free to return to their homeland and to rebuild it.

Of course, at that point, almost all the people who had been deported were dead and their children and grandchildren had settled and become pretty comfortable in Babylon, so relatively few of them made the journey back to the land of Judah.

And because there were few, the rebuilding ... well, let's just say it didn't go very well. In fact, it never happened. For many years, the little community that had resettled Jerusalem struggled. And it was a shell of its former glory right up to the time of Nehemiah, a young Jewish man who was a servant in the court of the Persian King, Artaxerxes.

And that's where the story begins.

The Good

While I was in the citadel of Susa (which was the capital of Persia) one of my brothers came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

Nehemiah 1:1-4, 10-11 (NIV)

And “this man” to whom he was referring was the King, Artaxerxes.

“A few months after this season of prayer that he had,” Nehemiah writes, “when wine was brought to the King ...”

“I took the wine and gave it to the king. [Nehemiah was the cupbearer.] I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. Nehemiah 2:1-6 (NIV)

And the rest of the book of Nehemiah is the story of what happened as he attempted to fulfill the vision that God had given him.

We’ll get back to that in a few minutes, but first I want to make the point that this is almost always how it begins whenever God invites people to accomplish something for His Kingdom. There’s a burden on your heart about which you have to do something or you will shrivel up and die spiritually and emotionally, if not physically. Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, calls this “holy discontent.”

Nehemiah’s holy discontent was the sorry condition of the city of Jerusalem, the city of his ancestors. For those of us who got together in January of 1994 and formed the core of what would be launched as North Heartland Community Church in October of 1994, *our* holy discontent was ... well ... let me just tell you the story.

In 1987, Jetta and I and our two oldest daughters moved here from New Jersey where I had been a software engineer. We had been very active in our little Baptist church there – leading the youth ministry – and it had gotten to the point where we felt that was what God wanted us to devote our lives to, so moved here so that I could attend Midwestern Baptist Seminary over on North Oak.

Less than two weeks after we got here and I had started classes, I got a part-time job as the youth pastor over at Park Hill Baptist church on Hwy 9 outside of Parkville. And I stayed there after graduation as a full-time associate pastor. All in all, we ended up being there for almost 6 years.

But something quite unexpected happened while we were there: Kevin and Diane moved in next door to us. They were about 5 or 6 years younger than us – in their mid-late 20s. They didn’t have kids, they were very friendly and they didn’t go to church.

Now, my daughters were adorable at that age (and still are). (And, I'm a very proud papa). But Kevin and Diane just loved them, especially Katie – who never met a stranger. So, because of our kids, we began to spend more time with them and, as you might expect, the conversation would turn to a spiritual nature every once in awhile. Kevin, especially, had a lot of questions and we would sit out on his porch some nights talking about God.

One day, I finally felt brave enough to invite them to come to church with us. And they came ... they saw ... they were not impressed.

That's probably not the best way to put it. It's not that they weren't *impressed*. *They just didn't get it*. They just didn't get it.

And I could go into all of what they didn't "get" but it would take too much time. Come to the *Introduction to NHCC* class sometime and I'll explain what I mean by that. Let's just say they are a big reason why NHCC is different from traditional churches.

And I'm not saying that traditional churches are "bad" but for me, after having quit a high-paying, high-prestige job so that I could devote myself to full-time vocational ministry, Kevin's reaction, especially, was like a lightning bolt. For days after this experience, I could not stop thinking: *how could something that had been so meaningful and formative in my life be so irrelevant to the guy next door who, in many ways, was just like me?*

And that was the beginning of the holy discontent that gave life to this church. And I'll phrase it like this:

There ought to be more churches intentionally designed to connect with people who aren't church-people!

... people who, like Kevin, are not already convinced that God is real, that the Bible is true and that Jesus not only wants to be part of their life but wants *them* to be part of *his life* in these little communities we call "the church."

Of course, to be honest, I should say that my discontent at the time wasn't all that holy because the more I stewed over that bolt of lightning, the more critical and condescending I became towards the pastor (my boss) and the people of Park Hill Baptist – which was and still is a very good church.

By the way ... over the years here at NHCC, I've seen a lot of other people fall into the same trap. They look at what *we're* doing and they get frustrated because they see some need out there that "some church somewhere ought to meet" and we're not meeting it and really don't have any intention to. And they become critical and condescending instead of thinking that "maybe this discontent *is from God* and it's a sign *I personally* am supposed to take a risk and do something about it."

That's why I have said so many times – and people always take this the wrong way – "if you're unhappy with what we're doing, do yourself and God's Kingdom a favor and find some place where you *are* happy." I'm not trying to kick people out of the church whenever I say that. I'm just saying if you believe strongly that there is a "better way"ⁱ like we did back when we started NHCC, then quit griping and start praying for God to give you favor with the powers that be (like Nehemiah did) so they would be willing to help you do what you are

passionate about.

Amazingly, that's what happened to me. After I finally repented of my terrible attitude towards the church where I was an associate pastor, God made it very clear to me and to several others that I was to plant a church here in the Northland. And ...

God led Park Hill Baptist Church to favor us in an incredible way, which is the next part of our story. (Part 2)

The Bible says that King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah lumber and supplies and money to help with *his* project. In *our* case, Park Hill Baptist Church sold a piece of property for \$125K and donated \$100K to the local association of churches to which we belong for the sole purpose of starting this church.

That was *huge*. It enabled me and a small staff we had in the very beginning to work full-time on strategy and planning and recruiting before we had anyone else giving a nickel to support the ministry. And that was a real difference-maker because I've seen so many other guys go out and try to plant churches while they're trying to work another part-time or full-time job, and it's almost impossible. Very few of those churches survive, or if they do survive, have a long-term significant impact. Thankfully, because God gave us favor with the powers that be (Park Hill Baptist Church), we didn't have that problem.

Now, I'm going to come back to this point later because it's important to our future, but let's move on to the next thing that happened to Nehemiah (and also to NHCC).

Nehemiah writes ...

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few others ...

... to check out the condition of the city and assess the work that needed to be done.

The officials (of the city) did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work. Nehemiah 2:11 (NIV)

Then [the next day] I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire." Nehemiah 2:16 (NIV)

"Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. Nehemiah 2:17 (NIV)

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work. Nehemiah 2:18 (NIV)

And chapter three of Nehemiah lists out all the craftsmen and tradesmen and just the regular people in Jerusalem who got involved in the project, right down to the specific part of the wall they rebuilt. It's pretty impressive when you read it.

But the point is that not only did God give Nehemiah favor with the king (and everything that implied), *God also gave him people* because what he had in mind he could not do on his own.

See, Nehemiah needed help. He needed other people who had the same burden and who were waiting for someone to come along and say not just “let’s do it” but to say, “God has called me to do this and for some reason He has allowed me to find favor in such a way that we already have some resources to throw at this. Do you want to get in on this with me?”

And, again, this is almost always the way God does things. God typically gives a person a vision and a goal, gives them favor, but then ...

He builds a *community* around that vision and that goal. (That would be part 3 of our story).

I can remember in 1994 praying over and over, several times a day, for months on end, “God you have other followers of Jesus here in the Northland who feel the same burden I do; people who are bothered by the fact that their friends don’t connect with their church (even though their church might be a great church) and those friends probably never will connect with that church. You have already put this burden in their hearts. God, help me to find some of those people.”

And He did. God led me to people like Mike and Sandy Haley, who we heard from earlier on the video; people who were willing to “begin this good work.” From January 1994 through September 1994 we were able to gather about 40-50 adults plus maybe 20 kids to become the core of NHCC. And they were committed. They gave, they served, they prayed, and they invited. Just like in Nehemiah 3, everybody took responsibility for part of the wall we were building. And as the church grew, other people started to join with them.

Every Sunday morning – and sometimes in the middle of the week if we had special services, regardless of the weather, the people of NHCC would haul sound equipment, musical instrument, children’s ministry equipment, coffee makers and all other kinds of supplies stuffed in little blue tubs like the one Mike and Sandy were holding in the video. We would haul it all in, set it all up, have a service – including Adventureland and nursery – then tear it all down, pack it all up and we’d go home. For *eight years* we did that, five years of them at New Mark Middle School and then three at Park Hill South High School.

And the church grew from 60 to about 350 people. And many of the new people who came were just like my neighbor Kevin, who actually did come to church along with his wife and accepted Christ. I got to baptize him at Smithville Lake along with dozens of others over the years. (In case you’re wondering Kevin moved away but is still following Christ).

But, many of the people who joined us were like Norma and Ladell and Gordon and Amy; people who were already believers who understood and embraced our holy discontent – our desire to do church in a non-churchy way so that non-church people could “get it.”

By the way, many of you don’t know this but Ladell hasn’t always been with us as a staff member. When he and Norma joined up with us, they were just “regular church people.” He had a really good job at Hallmark which he later left to come work for us. A couple years before that Shannon Horn did a similar thing. A couple years after Ladell, Matt Ridpath did a similar thing.

Right now, as we speak, Brad Bolling, who you see up here every once in awhile, has reduced his time commitment to the business he owns so he can work on our staff *for free* 20 hrs a week. Jason Lathan, who we heard from at the end of the video, is committing time outside of his job to work with our youth ministry as a staff-level intern for the next two years.

The point is ... it takes a community of dedicated people to “do this good work” ... and over the years God has sent us people – staff people and many more hundreds of volunteers whose names I don’t even know. And that’s a huge part of our story.

The Not So Good

I have to tell you, though, that in spite of all the people God sent to help, especially in those early days, eight years of doing mobile-church almost killed us. There was a time right before we found this building in 2002 that I seriously thought about not just quitting for *myself*, but shutting the whole thing down. I had visions about standing in front of the congregation and saying “hey everyone, it was a nice run – good things happened – but maybe this church isn’t meant to be here forever.” I was that discouraged.

And that would be part four of our story: opposition and discouragement.

I’ll explain why I was discouraged in just a minute but, again, that’s usually what happens whenever God invites you to pursue your holy discontent.

In fact, in the story of Nehemiah, in *the very next verse* after that happy-sounding “so they began this good work” it says ...

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it (the rebuilding project) they mocked and ridiculed us. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?” Nehemiah 2:19 (NIV)

Before so much as one stone is moved there is opposition and discouragement.

In *fact*, once you get past the list of the people who “do this good work” in chapter three, *all of chapters four and six* are devoted to Nehemiah’s dealings with these three guys – outsiders to the community who were against him and the rest of the Jews; men who, on at least one occasion, went so far as to try and sabotage the work they were doing.

And if you’re wondering what chapter five is about – that’s devoted to how Nehemiah had to handle *insiders* – members of the Jewish community – who didn’t show up to do what they said they would do or who didn’t get along well with others!

Rebuilding the wall – though it was a glorious cause and God gave favor and God gave people – wasn’t easy.

By the way, this is one of the things that Christians sometimes don’t get ...

... and I’m going to talk about this next week when we begin a new series called “Toxic Faith: Beliefs That

Will Poison Your Soul” but I’ll just mention it now.

Sometimes people think that because God is working in your life like he was in Nehemiah’s, it’s going to be smooth sailing. And when it’s *not* smooth sailing, they worry that something must be wrong with them – maybe they don’t have enough faith, or the right kind of faith. Or maybe something is wrong with God – He’s not really there or he doesn’t really care.

But neither of those are true. Opposition and discouragement are often part of the deal simply *because* God is working in your life.

And that was a lesson we learned early on and continue to learn.

Not more than a month after I left the staff of Park Hill to begin working on this project ... back when there were only three other couples involved (who I had asked for permission to invite to come with us from Park Hill Baptist), a guy who worked for the national mission board came to town and took me to lunch. I don’t remember all the details, but the gist of the conversation went something like this.

“So, I hear you want to start a seeker-targeted Willow Creek style church.”

And because I had discovered that Willow Creek was reaching upwards of 10,000 people every weekend, the majority of whom had once been “non church people” I said, “Yes, that’s right.”

“Well,” he said, “in case you haven’t noticed ... Willow is in suburban Chicago and the pastor is Bill Hybels. *You are not there and you are not him.* You can’t do that here in Kansas City. You need to try a more traditional model.”

Now, he wasn’t being mean or critical. He was trying to “save” me, I think, but it was very discouraging, before we even had anyone involved.

About 10 months later, on the night of our very first public service, I stood in front of the annual meeting of the association to which NHCC belongs to give a report about our launch earlier that morning (which was incredible – 367 people showed up on the first Sunday. About three months later it was down to about 150 because I was a terrible preacher). But as I was speaking at that meeting, several people in the auditorium stood up and started heckling me, waving the publicity piece we had sent out all over the Northland, accusing me of trying to make existing churches look bad. Talk about feeling opposition – right after the opening!

Fast forward to 2002 – eight years in – and, as I said, I was ready to quit. Not because it had been eight years of opposition and discouragement, great things had happened, but because, at that point, it was so bizarre, we had been trying to buy land for two years and every deal had fallen through for some ridiculous reason or another. We had over \$600K in the bank and we couldn’t get anyone to take it from us! And we were getting discouraged and tired. We had been doing this mobile church for *eight* years and our congregation was starting to dwindle instead of grow ... until one day, when one of our staff members drove by this property and saw the “for sale” sign and the rest, as they say, is history.

Of course, just because we got a building didn’t mean that our trials ended. After we doubled the size of this auditorium and had a grand opening, our congregation doubled in size. Many new people came to Christ and to

NHCC, but some of the people who had been here for a long while became disillusioned and left because it just wasn't the same. That was painful too.

And then, of course, there was the “great staff train wreck of 2007” when, for various reasons, we came to the end of the line with *four* staff members in the period of about two months. Talk about discouraging. And then it got ugly with a few of them. That was no fun either. It took almost two years to get back to some kind of normal not just in our staff but emotionally.

And I could go on and on about some of the other challenges, but I think you get the point: *our story, just like that of Nehemiah, has more than a few dark moments in it.*

More Than a “Project”

But there's one more part of our story that I want to present and, to do so, let's go back, again, to Nehemiah.

In spite of the opposition and in spite of the discouragement, in 52 days the rebuilding of the wall is finally completed. So Nehemiah tells the people to starting building homes within the city and in the neighboring towns. And for seven months, they put all their energy and effort into that, until one day, the Bible says ...

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. Nehemiah 8:1 (NIV)

He (Ezra) read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. Nehemiah 8:3 (NIV)

When he was finished ...

Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Nehemiah 8:6 (NIV)

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all,

“This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah 8:9 (NIV)

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” Nehemiah 8:10 (NIV)

The point I want to make here is that not only did Nehemiah use the people to build the wall; *he also used building the wall to build the people*. Now, that doesn't mean they became perfect. If you read the rest of Nehemiah, you see they still struggled with the sin nature that is in all of us.

But because of what they went through together during that seven month period to rebuild the wall and the city, they had come to know and love God in a way they had never known and loved God before.

And I think any telling of the story of NHCC has to include that as well.

Part 5: People have been drawn closer to God and have been changed ...

... whether we came as seekers of truth like my neighbor Kevin or as believers who wanted to see a church like this make it and make a difference. Not only has God used *us* to build his *church*, he's also used building the church to build us. We're still far from perfect, but we have come to know and love God in a way we have never known and loved Him before.

Conclusion

Now, as I said at the very beginning of this message, the point of looking back like this is so that we can better move forward.

How so?

Because the story of the future is going to look a lot like the story of the past.

For instance ...

1. We're still going to be driven by a holy discontent because the situation hasn't changed that much in the 17 years that we've been a church: *There still ought to be more churches in the Northland intentionally designed to connect with people who aren't church-people!*

There are still thousands and thousands of men and women right here in our local community – your neighbors and mine – who have no clue that Christ or the church has any relevancy to their lives whatsoever. Did you know that this morning, only 17% of the people in the Northland are in church somewhere this morning. That means, for every 10 homes you drove past to get here this morning, in less than two of them was anyone getting ready to go to a church of any kind, any where.

And there are still far too few churches that have a vision and passion for those people who are in those other 8+ homes. And so we're going to get back to something that was very important to us in our beginning: *helping to start other churches like this one - churches with the same holy discontent*. And the reason we're going to do that is because statistics show that new churches are more effective at reaching non-church people than existing churches.

Now, I say, "get back to it" because *we used to plant churches*. There was a day when that was a big part of what we were doing, but we got distracted and lost sight of this part of the vision that God gave us at the beginning.

2. In the future, I think God is still going to grant favor with the powers that be, but instead of Him granting *us* favor, *we're* going to be the ones granting incredible favor to new churches.

In the same way that lots of money was put into us by Park Hill, we're going to be putting lots of money into new churches. And, actually, we used to do that, too.

Wellspring Church up in St. Joseph is having a great impact on their local community. Their pastor, Bob Miller was on staff with us here for a year as an intern and we put about \$50K into that project so Bob could go up there and start that church.

The Journey Fellowship over in St. Louis is multi-site mega-church now. Over 2000 people attend each weekend and their pastor, Darrin Patrick, who was on our staff for five years back in the 90s, has led them to plant a half-dozen churches in the St. Louis metropolitan area. We're kind of like great-grandparents now. And here's the deal, when we sent Darrin out, I think we sent \$125K, maybe \$150K, to St. Louis, and it's had a great impact.

And, our leadership team is convinced that God is telling us to get back to that - get back to what I put you here for.

3. But just as it was in the past ... we need people to make that happen.

We need about 300-400 more people involved in our congregation to be able to do it and that's why we need to expand this auditorium. You'll be hearing a lot more about that as we move into spring.

Right now, just to be honest with you, we don't have a lot of clarity on "the what" or "the how" just yet, but we are clear on "the why" ... and if you want to know what we know at this point, you're welcome to come to one of the information meetings this week, listed in the program. There's one today at 5pm, one tomorrow at 7pm and one Thursday at 7pm.

If you can't make any of those, don't fret this, because this is all going to come up again when we do a building campaign later this spring. But, I know some of you like to play with this stuff in your mind early on, so that's why we're doing that.

4. I'm also sure that in the future, there is going to be opposition and discouragement. It is not going to be easy to expand. We're going to have an idea, we're going to try it out, and then something happens and we can't do it. It's not going to go exactly like we hope or plan, and the leadership is going to look stupid - I guarantee it. Going to be discouraged. It's going to happen. And once we get to where we're supposed to be as a congregation and we start planting other churches, some of those churches are going to fail. And we're going to go "oh man, we spent \$100K and that church didn't make it." I guarantee you it's going to happen. But that's just how it is. That's how it's always been. That's how it will be.
5. But as sure as I am of that, I am also sure that as God uses us to build whatever future there is for this church, he will keep using building the future to build us as well.

Now, the way we want to end this service this morning (and I'm going to ask the band to come and get into place) ... the way we want to end is by doing something kind of like what the people did when Ezra read the law: they remembered the God who had been so gracious to them and they worshipped.

In the New Testament, Jesus told us to do that same thing on occasion. He took the bread and he took the cup

and blessed it and gave it to his disciples and he said, “Remember me.” And there’s all kinds of applications of that idea – of what it means to remember Jesus – and, certainly, the greatest is remembering what he did on the cross. That’s the point of the bread – it’s a symbol of his body – and the juice is a symbol of his blood.

But what I’d like us to focus on this morning as we receive the bread and the cup, especially if you’ve been around here for a while, is just worshipping and remembering what God has done for us and in us through this church. And I know some of you are new so that might not be meaningful to you, so maybe you could focus on whatever God leads you to focus on during this time.

But I think we just need to remember that this “church thing” is possible because of what Jesus did for us and to remember that he is the head of the church and the church is his body.

The band is going to do a song to set that thought in our mind and then after the song is finished, feel free to move to a communion station somewhere nearby.

Let’s pray.

Endnotes

ⁱ I’m referring to the Ben Harper song “Better Way” which the band did right before this message