

Title: Look Who is Celebrating
Date: November 19, 2023
Subject: The importance of people and giving thanks
Scripture: Nehemiah 11 and 12

Names, names and more names. We thought there were a lot in chapter 10 with 84. Chapters 11 and 12 have 239 names of people by my quick count. There are people groups: provincial leaders, priests and associates, gatekeepers, temple servants, Levites, descendants of Solomon's servants, and the king's agent. The names in the first half of chapter 11 are associated with the 3044 men who became new residents of Jerusalem.

Read 11:1 - 4

Why did the city need to be populated? It wasn't enough to have walls. All brag, no fact. A city without people isn't much of a city. A critical mass would provide status, better functioning and safety for the key city of Israel as it was the center of worship, commerce, everything. It was the city of David..

The new residents came from two groups. The leaders became settlers. They decided to lead by example. They showed they were behind repopulating the city by moving there.

The other group was selected by casting lots. Kind of like the NFL draft but only one team doing the picking. Pick Joel from Jericho, Malkijah from Bethlehem, Baruch from Bethany.

This brought in a tenth of the population from the surrounding area. V. 2 notes there were men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. It could mean they hadn't been selected but volunteered or those who had the lot cast for them were viewed as volunteering since they accepted the decision of the lot.

The list in chapter 12 records the priests and Levites who were with the first people to return from captivity in Babylon 80 years before Ezra and 90 plus before Nehemiah.

Many of the names trace their ancestry back several generations by saying "the son of." It shows their concern for family history, how they were anchored to it.

Some may wonder why this list and those throughout Scripture are comprised of almost 100% men. It comes down to God's design which is evident from the beginning. God created male and female but made man first. As such he is in the position of leadership and primary responsibility. God dealt with Adam first and placed the blame on him after the couple sinned though Eve ate the forbidden fruit first. The emphasis continues throughout the Bible whether by illustration - the lists or the makeup of the 12 disciples.

It's also shown through teaching. Christ is declared to be the head of every man and the head of woman is man and the head of Christ is God (1 Corinthians 11: 3). This points to relationship and function. The Trinity needs it for carrying out its desires. It's necessary for human relationships for better functioning. There can only be one head. God chose that to be men. In the church, it's through men who serve in the role of elders and pastors who have the primary responsibility for leadership and teaching (1 Timothy 2:11-15). They're to demonstrate Christlike servant leadership and nowhere is a domineering attitude accepted by God.

As followers of Christ, we not only have our physical family history, but also have a spiritual family history. We carry on the long line of our ancestors. Some of you may be able to trace your roots back to the Mayflower. Mine go back to the early 1900s on my mom's side and back to the 1840s on my dad's.

When it comes to our Christian history, we trace our ancestors and roots back to the days of Christ and the first people who became his followers. They passed on the truth and the message of Jesus to their spiritual children who passed it on and so on and so on and on to us. We are to pass it on to those who are our blood relatives and spiritual children.

According to v. 12, 822 of the male residents were priests and their associates who carried on the work of the temple. V. 18 informs us there are another 284 Levites. Some of the people in between these two groups may have helped serve in the temple. They were at least 1106 men who performed some sort of service connected with worship at the temple. One out of every three were somehow directly connected to the temple. It shows the importance of God's house.

We know very few of the names of the 3044. They may have felt insignificant and anonymous. However, they weren't as they were part of a team and had vital responsibilities.

A United States aircraft carrier can have a crew of over 6000 sailors. This includes the captain, pilots, medical personnel, weapons specialists, engineers, cooks, nuclear electronics technicians and the guys who swab the decks or take care of the garbage. Each has a duty and each is important to the functioning of the carrier.

The people in Nehemiah 11 and 12 held various positions and jobs. Some were Levites and priests. Others were singers, those who led worship, gatekeepers, those who did the outside work of the house of God. It doesn't say what that included. It was more than landscaping. It probably included administrative duties and ensuring the necessary items were provided for the upkeep of the temple.

What can we conclude about all the names in Nehemiah and Scripture? From oldest to youngest, smallest to tallest, richest and poorest, least educated to most educated, every person is important to God.

I found a moving story that has been told as if it were a true account. It's not but is loosely based on the author's life (Elizabeth Silance Ballard 1974. HomeLife Magazine) and things like it have happened.

There's a story from many years ago that tells of an elementary school teacher whose name was Mrs. Thompson. As she stood in front of her fifth-grade class on the first day of school, she told her children a lie. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and told them that she loved them all the same. But that simply was not true, because there in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a little boy named Teddy Stoddard.

Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children. His clothes were messy and he constantly needed a bath. Teddy could be unpleasant at times. It got to the point where Mrs. Thompson would take delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen and making bold X's and finally putting a Big "F" on the top of his papers.

At the school where Mrs. Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records. She put Teddy's off till last. When she finally reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise. Teddy's first-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a

ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners. He's a joy to be around." His second-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student and well-liked by his classmates. But he's troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle." His third-grade teacher wrote, "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best but his father doesn't show much interest. His home life will soon affect him if steps aren't taken." Teddy's fourth-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and sometimes he even sleeps in class."

By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy's. His present was clumsily wrapped in heavy brown paper that he got from a grocery bag. Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was one-quarter full of perfume. But she stifled the children's laughter when she explained how pretty the bracelet was while putting it on and then dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist. Teddy Stoddard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smell just like my mom used to." After the children left, she cried for at least an hour.

On this very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic and instead she began to teach children. Mrs. Thompson began to pay close attention to Teddy as she worked with him. As time went on, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class. Despite her lie, he had become one of her teacher's pets. A year later she found a note under the door from Teddy telling her that she was the best teacher he had ever had in his whole life.

Six years passed by and to her surprise, another note came from Teddy. He wrote that he had finished high school third in his class and that she was still the best teacher that he had ever had in his whole life. Four years later, another letter came, saying that while things had been tough at times, he stayed in school and stuck with it and that he had graduated from college with the highest of honors. He assured Mrs. Thompson that she was still the very best and favorite teacher he had ever had in his whole life.

Four more years passed by and yet another letter came. This time, he explained that after he got his bachelor's degree, he had decided to go a little further. Again, assuring her that she was still the best and favorite teacher he ever had. The letter was signed Theodore F. Stoddard MD.

The story doesn't end there. There was one final letter that spring. Teddy said that he had met this girl and that he was going to be married. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago and he was wondering if Mrs. Thompson might agree to sit in the place, at his wedding, that was usually reserved for the mother of the groom. Of course, Mrs. Thompson did. She wore that bracelet, the one with the several rhinestones missing. She also made sure she was wearing the perfume that Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together. After the wedding, they hugged each other as Dr. Stoddard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference." Mrs. Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back, "Teddy you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

Every single solitary person is important to God. We don't know the impact we can have on a person if we don't try. We don't know what that person can and will become. We don't know what we can and will become when we reach out. Every person can contribute something of value to the kingdom of God.

Bobby was a poor boy from a committed Christian family in Scotland in the early 1800s. When he came to Christ as his Savior it was little noticed and shortly forgotten by the church leaders of the small village church. Later, a missions meeting was held in that church. An offering was taken. When the basket came to Bobby, he asked the usher to put it on the floor. "I have nothing to give to God but myself." He stepped into it with his bare feet.

Bobby was sincere but had little opportunity for education. He apprenticed as a gardener in his early teens. He grew to love it and later in life was called "God's Gardener." In his late teens he began to think more seriously about missions.

He volunteered to be a missionary and received brief training. At age 20 he left England in October 1816 for Cape Town, South Africa. Three years later Mary, the daughter of his former employer, traveled to South Africa and they were married. They served together for 50 years, taking one furlough during that time.

Though he used his gardening skills to benefit people, his focus was proclaiming salvation through Jesus. Seven years went by before one person came to Christ and the work progressed slowly. Bobby went on to master the language, translate the Bible into it and eventually print the whole Bible. It was a lifetime effort.

He deeply influenced his family. Son John served as a missionary in Africa. Daughter Mary married David Livingstone, the medical missionary who is credited with opening central Africa to the Gospel. Bobby influenced many others to go into the world with the Good News of Jesus. This was some of the life, work and influence of the young lad who'd been forgotten – Bobby - who grew up to be Dr. Robert Moffat.

Celebration time

The dedication of the wall is covered in the last part of chapter 12 beginning at v. 27. We aren't told when it took place. It could have been soon after the wall was completed and therefore this part of the book is out of chronological order or it could have taken place sometime after the new residents of Jerusalem had moved in and gotten settled.

Read 12:27 - 30.

The theme of the dedication was thanksgiving. The word used for choir means thanks so it was a bunch of thankers giving thanks. Thanksgiving is a constant theme running through the book -- the feasts, the day people repented of their sins, the temple worship and now at the dedication. It wasn't just thanksgiving because it's good thing to give thanks and makes us feel good and has health benefits. It was thanksgiving because God had given them great joy.

There was preparation for the special celebration. The priests and Levites ceremonially purified themselves, the people, gates and wall. We're not told exactly what they did but likely it involved a prayer designating all of them and the wall were for God's purposes. They wanted the occasion to be special.

It was quite the celebration. Singers and players of instruments were brought in. Music is prominent throughout these chapters. The leaders and two large choirs assembled on top of the wall. They went in two directions and met at the temple. There the choirs let loose and sang their hearts out. Sacrifices were offered.

Read 12:43

It was a joyful celebration. Trumpets were blaring, choirs were singing, symbols were crashing, and men, women and children were rejoicing. The sound of rejoicing could be heard far away -- throughout the city and the surrounding hills. It'd be like arriving late at a football game. As you get closer to the stadium, you begin to hear the sounds of the crowd - the cheers and roars as the home team scores a touchdown.

The words to the songs by the choir and people may not have been able to be distinguished by others but all who heard could tell it was a joyful time. Who heard it? The Jews who hadn't come to celebrate but remained in their homes or outside the walls of the city? Why weren't they there?

What effect would the celebration have on Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and other enemies who heard the sound of singing and rejoicing? They had said the rebuilding of the walls couldn't and wouldn't be done. "A fox would break down their wall." It had to be confusing as they knew the people of Jerusalem still lived in some deplorable conditions with little political freedom and were essentially captives in their own country surrounded by their enemies. Yet, though their circumstances remained basically the same, they were able to rejoice because they had changed. The enemies of Israel lost hope of taking over the Israelites.

The celebration also included everybody bringing offerings. They brought firstfruits from the harvest and monetary tithes for the support of the temple, it's work, and the people who did the work. Some brought a lot and some brought a little. It didn't make any difference how much each brought as they all participated.

Our lives, our joy and happiness will prove our detractors wrong. We can show that joy doesn't depend on our circumstances but on being connected to the One who rules over all circumstances. Our joy, whether it's communicated through smiles and laughter or not, comes from what we have within.

Where do we look for our joy? From a bank account? Family situation? That things are going pretty well? Or is it in the truth we're connected with Christ and have our names in the Book of Life guaranteeing us residency in the city of the New Jerusalem in heaven where we'll join with the choir comprised of every tribe, every tongue, every language, every people to sing praises of Jesus Christ and God the Father?

Brandon Lake in his song Praise You Anywhere gives places where we can praise God. The song draws on biblical stories David and Goliath, Daniel, Paul and Silas and others. "Sometimes you've gotta dance through the darkness, Sing through the fire, Praise when it don't make sense. Sometimes you've gotta stare down the giant, Worship from the lion's den. Sometimes you've gotta shout it from the mountain, Louder in the valley...Sometimes you've gotta praise in the prison, Cry out to heaven, Shout it 'til the doors swing wide. Sometimes you've gotta stand on your shackles, Brave in the battle...I'll praise You anywhere. Praise, give Him praise... He is worthy of all of the praise."