

“Deep Calls to Deep”  
August 8, 2021

Nehemiah 1:1-11

We continue to move toward reopening and returning to this place. And the readings from Ezra and Nehemiah continue to strengthen and support us in these days. The return of the exiles to Jerusalem and their rebuilding of the city happened in stages, with the first part of the book of Nehemiah telling of the third of four stages of reconstruction.

This book begins with a prayer. And it can show us much about prayer, especially prayer in these changing days.

Such prayer arises from the depths of our hearts, from the depths of our lives and calls to the deep love of God.

Such prayer involves deep grounding, deep feeling, deep connection, and deep trust.

Prayer grows from the deep grounding of where we are.

We’ll start at the end.

After we hear Nehemiah’s prayer, we hear this brief note: “At the time I was the cupbearer to the king.” It seems like a throw-away line and kind of a strange way to end the account of the prayer. If anything, those words help move the narrative of the story forward. In the second chapter we hear of Nehemiah going to the king and asking that he be allowed to go to Jerusalem to help with the rebuilding.

Perhaps unintentionally, however, that short biographical note tells us much about prayer.

Prayer is grounded in our present life. We do not pray from what we once were. We do not pray from what we might become. We pray as we are: cupbearer to the king; stressed out business owner wondering how the new surge will affect business; anxious parent of children or teens as the school year approaches; pastor in a pandemic.

“At the time I was...” You fill in the blank as you start to pray.

Prayer asks us “Who are you?”

And then waits for an answer before moving forward.

So the first question of prayer is not “What do I need,” but “Who am I?” This is to say that prayer requires an honesty about ourselves that we might want to avoid.

Imprisoned in Nazi Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem titled, “Who Am I?” In it he explored the difference between how other people saw him—calm, cheerful, friendly, like one accustomed to win—and how he understood himself—restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, trembling with anger. “Who am I” he asked. “This or the other?” And he concluded: “Whoever I am, you know, O God, I am yours.”

Whoever you are, above all else, you are a child of God. Can you be still for a moment and let that sink in? Above all else, you are a child of God.

If this was once an exclusive title, we can now only understand it in an inclusive way. While there are so many who would draw a line to mark who's in and who's out, as the sisters and brothers of Jesus we know that our status before God is the same as all other human beings.

In the Talmud we read those wonderful words of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: "A procession of angels passes before a human being wherever he or she goes, proclaiming, "Make way for the image of God." Think of the changes in our politics, our economics, our teaching and learning, our providing care, our creative work, our businesses, our family life—and our prayer—if we held such a vision close to our hearts.

Who are you?

Our identity changes but we are always those who belong to God, even the children of God.

We begin to pray when we say, "At this time, I am..."

If we are going before God in prayer, would we want to bring anything less than our complete selves, our real selves, with all of our brokenness and strength.

Prayer finds its deep grounding in our deepest selves.

Prayer grows out of deep feeling.

From that final line about who Nehemiah is, let us go back to his description of his response to hearing about Jerusalem and its destruction: "I sat down and wept, and mourned for days..."

We know what this is like. Congregationalists have often been called "God's frozen chosen." But I know few, if any, congregations or individual members for whom that is an apt description. We are a people of deep passion. Our feelings run deep and we know that they are gifts from God, part of our created being.

This congregation, in particular, is known for its great compassion toward the world and toward those who are suffering. And while "compassion fatigue" is real, especially in these days, and can hamper creative action, we show little evidence of it here. Time and again during this pandemic, we would see a need and sought to address it in a meaningful way—and then we would look up and around to discover what new situations are asking of us.

We weep and we mourn—and certainly have done a lot of this over the past seventeen months. We weep and mourn for others. We weep and mourn because we are not together.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a book called *The Summer of the Great Grandmother*, about her mother's 90th and last summer. L'Engle was very angry about what was happening to her mother. She wrote about walking down the dirt road in front of the house at night shouting "God, don't do this to my mother. You take her!"

Readers sent her letters saying: "I didn't know I was allowed to be angry." L'Engle responded, of course we're allowed to be angry, but we are also called not to stay stuck in our anger.<sup>1</sup>

We bring all our feelings—sorrow and anger, joy and delight—needing to hide nor keep anything from God.

Deep selves. Deep feeling.

We begin to pray, out of deep connection.

Nehemiah prays out of a connection with God and with other people.

These relationships are best described as covenants—a word important to Jewish people, both ancient and modern, and to Congregationalists. A covenant recognizes the connections that we choose to have with others and describes how we will live with one another in ways that will strengthen those connections.

If you are a member of this congregation, you have experienced this. We don't ask that members of this congregation all believe the same thing. There is no affirmation of faith required to join Congregational UCC.

What we do require—and what Congregational churches have required since the 17<sup>th</sup> century—is that each member “owns the covenant.” Each of us takes on our common agreement about how we will live with one another—most notably, that we will “walk together in the ways of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us.” Our covenant connects us with each other as we move into a future that is unknown along a way that is only in time being revealed to us. This means, among other things, that we don't always get everything right, that new realities, new *truths* are showing themselves to us—and so we need each other as we go forward.

Such a covenant is the gift of this congregation to us—and the gift each of us gives *to* this congregation. It is especially important as we continue to move toward returning and reopening.

At the same time, covenant also expresses the relationship between the people and God. This relationship is based, not on the goodness of the people, but on the faithfulness of God. Nehemiah prays to a God who keeps covenant, who maintains the connection with God's people. This is a God whose steadfast love endures forever, regardless of the people's success or failure in keeping commandments and loving God.

Now, Nehemiah seems to feel the need to *remind* God of this covenant faithfulness—and we might understand this need. After all, our own faithfulness is slight and we often suspect that God's faithfulness is capricious as well. But these reminders are more for Nehemiah's benefit—and ours—more than they help to jog God's memory.

With these words of covenant faithfulness, we see once more that prayer grows out of a deep connection.

Out of deep grounding, deep feeling, and deep connection we find ourselves growing deep trust.

Nehemiah's words are strong: “I pray...confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply...”

Who can pray like this?

Those who bring their entire selves before the God of covenant faithfulness. Out of deep trust in God's compassion we are able to be ourselves in relation to God: broken, hurting, weary, *sinful*. In prayer we are honest to God, trusting that we are accepted and valued in God's sight, not because we are good or because we have it all together, but because God is full of mercy and love.

Prayer leads us into a deeper trust with the Ground of our being, even after—or in the midst of—all that would take away such trust. So Nehemiah could end his prayer with the bold affirmation that

the same people who had deeply offended God were also those whom God had redeemed by God's great power and strong hand.

This, then, is how we might pray as well—as broken yet healed, as wanting yet filled, as disappointed yet knowing the hope that does not disappoint.

We long to return.

We will return.

We are simply given a little more time prepare, a little more time to pray.

And that can never be a bad thing.

Our deep grounding, deep feeling, deep connection, and deep trust calls out to the deep that is God.

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<sup>i</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, interview in Cokesbury's *Good Books Catalogue*, Fall/Winter 1994.