I’m encouraging you to read through the Book of Nehemiah at least once this month and some of you have already done so which is great. It’s good to read the Bible, especially if the scriptures or particular books are new to us. Reading different books of the Bible, you’ll naturally find some of them more interesting, engaging, or challenging. You can look at a chapter like Nehemiah 3 and think, “It’s just a bunch of names I can’t pronounce, of people I know nothing about, what can this possibly say to me? I’ll just skim it or skip it.” I’m guessing at least one person had that thought while reading Nehemiah. But if we look a little closer and read a little slower we might find something that’s insightful and has something to teach us, even in a chapter like Nehemiah 3 that on the surface looks like a boring list of names of people doing work.

Remember the goal of the work is to make the city of Jerusalem defensible. To successfully complete rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem is a large task requiring the help, work, and participation of a lot of people. Responsibility needs to be delegated and a division of labor needs to take place. Who’s going to do what where? While it’s not explicitly stated, it seems that Nehemiah organized the work. Chapter three makes it clear that responsibility has been delegated and a division of labor has taken place. For example, in Nehemiah 3:1-4, we hear

“Then the high priest Eliashib (el-i’uh-shib; Heb., ‘God restores’) set to work with his fellow priests and rebuilt the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set up its doors; they consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred and as far as the Tower of Hananel. 2 And the men of Jericho built next to him. And next to them Zaccur (zak’kuhr; Heb., ‘remembered’) son of Imri built.

3 The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars. 4 Next to them Meremoth (mair’uh-mo’th) son of Uriah son of Hakkoz made repairs. Next to them Meshullam (me-shō’ō-luhm; Heb., ‘reconciled, perfected’) son of Berechia son of Meshezabel made repairs. Next to them Zadok son of Baana made repairs.”
For thirty-two verses in Nehemiah 3 we hear about everyone who worked (or didn’t) and where they were working. At least thirty-nine different groups of workers are named including the daughters of Shallum (3:12). Organizing that effort and deciding who worked where was quite a job for Nehemiah. I’m sure there were a lot of factors involved in who did what where and why. It’s great the high priest with his fellow priests rebuilt the Sheep Gate. Of course, that would make it easier for folks to bring sheep to offer as sacrifices which obviously had some benefit for the priests both in terms of being able to fulfill their purpose and function as well as to help them have some good food to eat. One thing I know for sure is that not every part of the wall, not every gate that needed to be rebuilt or repaired would be viewed with the same level of prestige or honor. Clearly some were more desirable than others. I’m sure that working on “the wall of the Pool of Shelah of the king’s garden” was a great spot. However, what interests me is what we find in one brief verse, Nehemiah 3:14, “Malchijah son of Rechab, ruler of the district of Beth-haccherem, repaired the Dung Gate; he rebuilt it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars.”

I think it’s funny to talk about someone repairing the Dung Gate at the same time we’re renovating bathrooms here at BBC. Our Facilities Manager Tom Swaida shared with me this week some additional reasons why Nehemiah was able to get the work done so quickly including that he didn’t have to apply for a permit nor did it have to conform to any regulations.

While it’s easy to read right past a verse like Nehemiah 3:14 and to not even notice or take thought of it, I have a great deal of respect for Malchijah. I mean who wants to rebuild the Dung Gate which was the means of taking the city’s waste outside the walls for disposal? At the congregational meeting to assign jobs for rebuilding, who among us would have been clamoring to rebuild the Dung Gate? It’s hard to imagine people waving their hands saying to Nehemiah, “Pick me, pick me! I want to do that one!” It may not seem like a glorious assignment, but somebody had to do it and Malchijah humbly takes on this undesirable task for the common good.

To be humble is to be “Marked by modesty in behavior, attitude, or spirit; not arrogant or prideful.” While humility doesn’t seem to be virtue that is highly valued
today, the words “humble” and “humility” appear dozens of times in the Bible because it’s one of the most important personal virtues when it comes to our relationship with God. Augustine who was an important theologian in the 4th and early 5th centuries said, “Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion, I should reply that the first, second, and third thing therein is humility.” I want to be clear that (Tryon Edwards): "True humility is not an abject, groveling, self-despising spirit; it is a right estimate of ourselves as God sees us."

In the verses from Isaiah that began our service (Isaiah 57:15, 66:1-2), Isaiah contrasts the greatness of God who is beyond our comprehension yet promises to be with us when we’re humble, contrite, and take God’s word seriously. The Lord says through Isaiah, “This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.” Would anyone use those words to describe us? If we want to be great at humility then we’re wise to read, learn, and follow God’s word. The amazing thing is how accessible God’s word is today. If you have a smart phone you can download the Bible App for free (https://www.bible.com/app) and choose from a variety of translations. Like we need food, and plants need watering, our spirit also needs daily and weekly attention. James 1:21 urges us to “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” God leads the humble, teaches the humble (Psalm 25:9), and gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). Proverbs 22:4 says, “The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life.”

Even when we seek to learn God’s word and to be led and taught by the Lord, life can still humble us in other ways. Our health can change, our finances can take a turn, the future is never guaranteed and frequently we have to adjust to the unexpected. All these situations can be opportunities to learn humility and greater reliance on God.

I wonder what was going through his mind while Malchijah was repairing the Dung Gate, rebuilding it and setting up its doors, bolts, and bars. I suspect that it never occurred to him that anyone would remember him thousands of years later, thousands of miles away. I think he’d be humbled and surprised.
Where do you find yourself today when it comes to humility? Augustine gave the following advice to people who wanted to get ahead, “Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.” I think most of us find genuine humility appealing in other people. The Flemish mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293-1381) wrote the following about a humble person (from The Adornment of Spiritual Marriage): “he is humble in his devotions, both outwardly and inwardly, before God and before all men, so that none are offended because of him. And so he overcomes and casts out Pride, which is the source and origin of all other sins. By humility the snares of the devil, and of sin, and of the world, are broken, and man is set in order, and established in the very condition of virtue. And heaven is opened to him, and God stoops to hear his prayers, and he is fulfilled with grace. And Christ, that strong rock, is his foundation. Whosoever therefore grounds his virtues in humility, he shall never err.”

Christ is the ultimate example of humility. The middle scripture today from Luke 14:7-11 is one of his many teachings about humility and Jesus concludes the story by saying, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” This may not always seem to be the case in the world in which we live, but it’s true in the eyes and judgment of God. Jesus not only talked about humility, nobody embodied it more. In the familiar words of Philippians 2:5-8 we’re told, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.” The great 16th century reformer of the church Martin Luther said, “God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us.”

Humility is a virtue that is praised in in virtually every spiritual tradition. A philosopher in another tradition wrote 2,500 years ago: "I have three precious things which I hold fast and prize. The first is gentleness; the second frugality; the third is humility, which keeps me from putting myself before others." Lau Tzu (604-531 BC).
Pride, the opposite of humility, is a universal human problem. Everyone suffers from it to some degree. When we have exalted ourselves in pride, God doesn’t want to punish us and bring us low but rather to forgive and restore us. Again and again in Scripture, the Lord says, humble yourselves, and I will exalt you. This gives us hope and encouragement. God takes pleasure in our efforts to humble ourselves, and loves to bless and exalt the humble. For just as pride is the root of all sin, so “humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation, and bond of all virtue,” as John Chrysostom once said.

Humility is out of fashion in today’s world and seems unappealing to most of us. However, as the great preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) said, “We must view humility as one of the most essential things that characterizes true Christianity.” Our perspective on humility can be radically changed if we will ponder and meditate on the greatest example of humility in history: Jesus Christ. By the very act of leaving heaven, coming to earth, and taking the form of man, he demonstrated an incomprehensible humbling of himself. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus demonstrated a spirit of profound humility, saying that he came “not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). On his last night with the disciples, he took a towel and basin and washed their dirty feet (John 13:1–11), instructing them to follow his example of humble servanthood with one another (John 13:12–17). Andrew Murray captures it well, “Christ is the humility of God embodied in human nature; the Eternal Love humbling itself, clothing itself in the garb of meekness and gentleness, to win and serve and save us.”

Someone like Malchijah who’s willing to take on an unglamorous, unwanted task, is what is called a Team Player. In his book, The Ideal Team Player, Patrick Lencioni, identifies three qualities. The ideal team player is Humble, Hungry, and Smart. I like to imagine Malchijah that way. When I began I shared that in Nehemiah chapter 3, 39 different individuals and groups are identified who worked on the wall. There is one group of people who refused to work, help, or cooperate, and that’s the nobles of Tekoa (Nehemiah 3:5). They want the benefit of the project without being willing to contribute or help to make it happen. That kind of attitude: being uncooperative, selfish, and unwilling to do one’s part to make things better is the opposite of how we want to live
our lives. We don't want to be like the nobles of Tekoa, we want to be like Malchijah. Don't expect to be carried. Offer to carry. Don't expect to be served. Offer to serve. Give more than you take. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who dedicated and gave his life working for justice said, **“Life’s most persistent and urgent question is: “What are you doing for others?”**

As we seek to live as humble followers of Jesus this year, let’s remember the words of Saint Benedict, **“The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.”**

**Prayer:** High and lofty God who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy help us to have the mind of Christ and to humble ourselves. Inspire us to make a firm decision to ponder, understand, and adopt Jesus’ way of thinking; make his values and attitudes our own. May Christ’s strong emphasis on humility and meekness and his example of it take hold of our thinking, our desires and our conduct. May we admire his humility and want it for ourselves. We earnestly pray for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts, for it’s impossible to do that in our own strength. Give us a right and realistic view of ourselves before God and others so that we do not think too highly (or too lowly) of ourselves. Help us to turn from the path of pride and vanity and instead respond gratefully to Jesus’ invitation (Matthew 11:29) to **“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”** Amen

**Blessing:** Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves. Ephesians 4:2, Philippians 2:3

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection:**

1. Why do you think so many passages in the Bible speak about God being with the humble in spirit rather than with the proud?
2. What is it about being humble or having humility that is an advantage spiritually when it comes to our relationship with God?
3. Discuss or reflect on the difference between the nobles (Nehemiah 3:5) “who would not put their shoulders to the work,” and Malchijah (3:14) who was willing to take on the very unglamorous task of rebuilding the Dung gate?

4. Are there any ways you are actively seeking to become more humble? Are there strategies, approaches, or attitudes that have helped you in the past?

5. If you were to read all of Nehemiah 3 what attitudes and actions from Nehemiah’s team of wall builders would we want to emulate as Christians seeking to build up the church and our community? What attitudes and actions do we want to avoid?

6. What is at least one way you can practice humility or cooperation in the coming week?

Isaiah 57:15, 66:1-2. “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” “Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.”


7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”