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What Are You Bringing? *Nehemiah 10:32-39 (NIV)*
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Since May, we've been on a journey in worship so let's recap where we've been. In May we talked about the three key words that sum up what a life of discipleship and our church are about: **Love, Grow, Share**. In June, we focused on **Love** and specifically loving God and our neighbors as we shared about the **Art of Neighboring**. (How are you doing filling in your chart? I met new neighbors Al and Allison who moved into our neighborhood on Friday.) For the summer, we spent nine weeks on **the Fruit of the Spirit** and our need to **grow** all of them and practice them in our daily life.

Now we turn to the third aspect of a meaningful life of discipleship which is **Share**. The importance of learning to share is something we're hopefully taught and understand when we're quite young although some people never seem to learn the lesson. We'll be talking about different ways of sharing in September and October in our series "**You Can Make a Difference**." There are a variety of ways we can contribute and make a difference to God's work in the church, the community and the world.

We're going to start with a passage from the *Book of Nehemiah* that tells the story of a man named Nehemiah who lived during the reign of Artaxerxes I who was the king of Persia (464-423 BC). Nehemiah returned from Persia to be governor over the land of Judah. Nehemiah was an excellent leader who was prayerful, relied on God, and displayed courage and vision. Under his leadership the walls and gates of the city of Jerusalem were rebuilt. There was a severe economic crisis due to the poverty of the people who had been through war and exile and were coming home with what little they had, and because of the excess charging of interest, which sought to exploit the need of the people. When the wall was completed, Ezra, assisted by thirteen laypeople, read the law to the people. This is the first public recognition of the first five books in our *Bible* (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, & Deuteronomy*). These five books, also known as the *Torah*, include the story of Israel and its ancestors and God's instructions or laws that make for a wholesome and joyful community. They read the law and they pledged to support God's house. Today's scripture from *Nehemiah 10:32-39* expresses the commitment of the people to the worship and glory of God. Having confessed their sins, especially of abandoning God and with fresh and painful memories of their prolonged captivity away from their homes and place of worship, they pledge with devotion and gratitude for their return that they'll never forget their vow to be the Lord's and to put God first. Listen to what they pledge to do to support worship at the house of God.

"We assume the responsibility for carrying out the commands **to give a third of a shekel** each year for the service of **the house of our God**: for the bread set out on the table; for the regular grain offerings and burnt offerings; for the offerings on the Sabbaths, at the New Moon feasts and at the appointed festivals; for the holy offerings; for sin offerings to make atonement for Israel; and for all the duties of **the house of our God**. "We—the priests, the Levites and the people—have cast lots to determine when each of our families is **to bring to the house of**

our God at set times each year **a contribution of wood to burn on the altar of the LORD our God**, as it is written in the Law. “We also assume responsibility **for bringing to the house of the LORD** each year **the firstfruits** of our crops and of every fruit tree. “As it is also written in the Law, **we will bring the firstborn** of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks to **the house of our God**, to the priests ministering there.

“Moreover, **we will bring** to the storerooms of **the house of our God**, to the priests, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil. And **we will bring** a tithe of our crops to the Levites, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all the towns where we work. A priest descended from Aaron is to accompany the Levites when they receive the tithes, and the Levites **are to bring** a tenth of the tithes up to **the house of our God**, to the storerooms of the treasury. The people of Israel, including the Levites, **are to bring** their contributions of grain, new wine and olive oil to the storerooms, where the articles for the sanctuary and for the ministering priests, the gatekeepers and the musicians are also kept. **We will not neglect the house of our God.**”

The first thing we notice is the repetition of “Bring, are to bring, will bring.” People were expected to bring an awful lot (a third of shekel, wood to burn on the altar, the firstfruits of crops and of every fruit tree, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, of our herds and of our flocks, the first of our ground meal, of our grain offerings, of the fruit of all our trees and of our new wine and olive oil. And **we will bring a tithe of our crops, **bring** their contributions of grain, new wine and olive oil.).** As I’ve thought about this passage for a while, it’s humbling to me and it makes me think: **they brought so much—What do we bring to the house of our God?** Do we bring the first fruits of our lives—the best of our devotion, energy, serving, and giving? Do we bring a good attitude? I wonder how much we think about what we’re bringing to worship when we come here on Sunday? Or do we come instead thinking of what we can get? Don’t misunderstand me, God-focused worship should impact us, but it’s God who should be the focus, not us. This passage challenges us to bring our best in every way—materially, of fruit of the spirit, of our spiritual gifts. What do we lay on the altar?

In *Nehemiah*, everyone had to contribute wood for the altar fires. What does wood provide? Literally energy. Do we bring energy to fuel the fire of God in the house of God we serve? “The house of our God” is the other phrase that’s repeated a lot. It’s the place where people are reminded of the covenant they have with the Lord.

Many of us who have spent time in church are familiar with “pot luck” suppers. Those are meals where you don’t know what you’re going to get or what folks will bring. There’s a level of trust involved because if no one brought anything it wouldn’t be a pot luck supper, it would be a time of fasting and prayer! Tomorrow evening I’ll be with our Deacons Team for dinner and a meeting, and there’s an email chain going around so everyone can share what they’re bringing. It’s better if everyone doesn’t bring the same thing. A dinner with only 8 appetizers, or 8 salads, or 8 desserts wouldn’t be the most balanced or satisfying meal.

We all have different capacities for giving and sharing, but one of the things I find motivating to think about for myself, not just in terms of church and the house of God, but in life, in families, friendships, where you work, on a team you're a part of, is this rather direct yet important question: *If everyone else was giving like me, working like me, serving like me, had an attitude like mine, would my family, my workplace, my church, my team be better or worse?* That requires being honest with oneself and you can ask this question of your involvement in any group. At church, for example, if everyone served like I did, cared like I do, greeted and spoke to people like I do, gave to the church like I do, would the church be healthier and stronger or weaker and not quite as healthy? This is not to make anyone feel overly proud or complacent on the one hand, or guilty or badly on the other. I also don't expect that we can do in our 90's what we did in our 70's, or 50's, or 30's, or teens, but it does speak to the question—**am I bringing God the best I can at this point in my life, whatever that may be?**

Yesterday, I spent the day in Framingham with Doreen Mayer and other participants in The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts' School of Ministry. I preached a sermon to them, answered questions, talked about preaching, and gave them a handout to take home. I stayed and listened to six sermons and tried to provide some feedback on what went well and what might have made a message even better. It was a really fun day for me with committed and dedicated people who are trying to learn, grow and serve in their local churches, and I hope I was able to provide a little help and inspiration for them. One of the points I made to them was about preparing diligently and giving our best. I mentioned that the NFL season opened this week, and how much time and effort coaches and players invest just trying to win a game. Those of us who are believers are working for something with eternal consequences, and that should inspire in us a level of urgency to do and give our best to God. That's what we see in *Nehemiah 10*. There's no holding back, and it's clear what's most important to people who are expected to bring and share a lot. It's not just the priests and the Levites, it's everyone bringing and sharing what they can.

We may hold back from sharing for a variety of reasons, but when we do, the church, our family, our work place, and our team is diminished. We may have a scarcity mindset. We may be fearful. We may think we don't have much to offer, but if everyone brings and shares and gives and does what she or he can, the impact is far greater than we may imagine. It's like a story many of us learned when we were kids.

Once upon a time, there was a great famine and there wasn't enough food to go around. The people in one small village didn't have enough to eat, and definitely not enough to store away for the winter. People were afraid their families would go hungry, so they hid the small amounts of food they did have. They even hid their food from their friends and neighbors. One day a wandering soldier came into the village. He asked the different people he met about finding a place to eat and sleep for the night. "There's not a bite to eat in the whole county," they told him. "You better keep moving on." "Oh, I have everything I need," he said. "In fact, I would like to make some stone soup to share with all of you." He pulled a big black cooking pot from his wagon. He filled it with water and built a fire under it. Then, he reached

slowly into his knapsack and, while several villagers watched, he pulled a plain gray stone from a cloth bag and dropped it into the water. Hearing about the magic stone, soon most of the villagers were surrounding the soldier and his cooking pot. The soldier sniffed the stone soup and licked his lips. "Ahh," the soldier said, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with cabbage is even better." Soon a villager ran to his house and returned bringing a cabbage. "I have this cabbage from my garden." he said and he gave it to the soldier. "Fantastic!" cried the soldier. The soldier cut up the cabbage and added it to the pot. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of beef, and it was delicious." The butcher said he thought he could find some beef scraps. As he ran to his shop, other villagers went to their homes and returned bringing vegetables from their gardens: potatoes, onions, carrots, celery. Soon the big black pot was bubbling and steaming, and the aroma was making everyone's mouth water. When the soup was ready, everyone in the village ate a good and hearty bowl of soup. It was delicious, and everyone talked and visited with their neighbors and it was the best time they had shared in a long time. The villagers offered the soldier money and other treasures for the magic stone, but he refused to sell it. He had many offers for a cot to sleep on that night. The next day he traveled on his way.

Stone Soup is a great way to teach children and to remind ourselves that by working together, a greater good can be achieved. Hopefully, in addition to a good meal, the villagers gained an appreciation of the value of bringing, offering and sharing what they could because together they had something better than any one of them could have had on their own. The same is true here at BBC. There's a reason why Jesus tells us not to hide our light under a bushel basket, but to let our light shine.

In Nehemiah much of what everyone was to bring was related to sacrifices that were being offered in the house of God throughout the weeks and months of the year. Reading about it all made me think what a logistical headache it must have been with all the grain, wine, olive oil, cattle, fruit, wood, etc. that had to be brought and stored. That was nothing compared with the emotional anguish of surrendering your first-born son so he could become a priest. How blessed we are as Christians to be a part of the new covenant that doesn't require those kinds of sacrifices. In the New Testament Letter to the *Hebrews 10:16-25* (NRSV), **"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,"** he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." **Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.** Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.** And let us **consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,** not neglecting to meet together, as is the

habit of some, but **encouraging one another**, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

The people of Nehemiah’s time vowed “**We will not neglect or forsake the house of our God.**” May that also be true of each of us.

Blessing

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV) “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Have you ever been in a stressful situation that caused you to make a promise to God such as, “God, if you get me out of this, if you heal me, if... then I promise I’ll....” What was going on that led you to call on God this way and how well have you done following up on your promise?
2. In *Nehemiah 10:32-39*, the people have come out of their prolonged time of exile and captivity in Babylon and have finally been able to return to Jerusalem and the surrounding area. What are they commanded to do and what do they promise to do?
3. Notice the repetition of the words, “Bring, are to bring,” and “will bring.” How much are people expected to bring to the house of their God? Is there anything in the passage that surprises you as far as what people are expected to bring?
4. What do we bring to the house of our God? How much do you think about what to bring with you to worship? Or do you more often tend to think about what you get out of worship? Do we bring the first fruits of our lives—the best of our devotion, energy, attention, habits? Do we give sacrificially with God as our focus as the people do in *Nehemiah 10*?
5. How does this passage from *Nehemiah 10* challenge us to bring our best to God in every way—materially, our spiritual gifts, and our practice of growing in the fruit of the spirit?
6. *Hebrews 10* exhorts us, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” How can you be doing this more intentionally?