

You Can't Rebuild What You Won't Grieve

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Preacher: Tonetta Landis-Aina

[0 : 00] So when I was in high school, one of my favorite, actually hands down my favorite, to teach was Tim O'Brien's 1990 work of fiction entitled *The Things They Carried*.

In it O'Brien, a veteran of the Vietnam War, blends autobiography and imagination as a way to reflect on the nature of war and trauma and storytelling.

He opens the novel with a catalog, this kind of list of what the soldiers carried. And it starts off pretty practically. Rations, weapons, photographs, letters from home.

But then the list, it quickly becomes something else. It becomes this meditation on the invisible weight that human beings share.

O'Brien writes poignantly that soldiers carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing. These were the intangibles, he says.

[1 : 15] But these intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity. They had tangible weight. He says they carried shameful memories. They carried the common secret of cowardice, barely restrained. The instinct to run or hide or freeze.

And in many respects, they carried the common secret of cowardice. And in many respects, that was the heaviest burden of all, the one that could not be put down. It required perfect balance and perfect posture.

He writes that they carried the soldier's greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed and died because they were embarrassed not to.

Then Tim O'Brien writes something that I think irrevocably ties the world of these soldiers to our own. By and large, he explains, they carried these things inside.

Main to mass of composure. Y'all, I think that that sentence describes most of us most of the time. We carry so much inside and we maintain our mass most of the time.

[2 : 29] We carry joys and losses, disappointments, questions, shame about money, ambivalence about power. We carry unspoken hopes and quietly held wounds.

And we walk through the doors of this auditorium or we open up the live stream and we put on our composure. Because that is what we have been taught to believe is acceptable.

Yet, being honest that the things we carry have weight, that our souls are not immune to the mass and the volume and the gravity, is one of the most essential elements of remaining human in a world that constantly edges us toward dehumanization.

Now, two weeks ago, Pastor Anthony started this current sermon series we're in called *Everything We Carry, A Stewardship of Everything*. During the season of Easter, we're exploring what it means to live as resurrection people in the world that we actually have.

We spent the beginning of the year sitting together in the difficult territory of exile. If you weren't here for that series, it was amazing. I love the Hebrew Bible. We were in Jeremiah for a long time, y'all, and it was a blessing.

[3 : 52] Hopefully to most of y'all. Okay. So we were sitting in this difficult territory of exile, of disorientation and displacement and disaster. We spent time in the book of Jeremiah, this witness to devastation and lament, and we asked what it means to move from hearts of stone to hearts of flesh.

We have been learning slowly how to survive our Saturdays. Those long in-between days when the stone is still sealed and the morning hasn't come.

But now we come to this new question. Not just survival, but stewardship. Not just endurance, but activation.

We have named our wounds. Now we ask what it is that we do with our hands. We ask what it is. Now before we move forward, I do want to say one thing.

I want to say one thing about a particular word you're going to hear a lot in the sermon series. That word is stewardship. The word stewardship carries its own weight.

[5 : 07] Pastor Anthony and I spent some time discussing whether we could reclaim that word for our community. For many of us, it's been weaponized as a way of extracting from people who already have too little.

It's been used as a way to bolster church projects that are ego-driven. A jet here. Vacation home here on the beach.

I'm not saying, you know, I'm not going to name no names. But you know, some of y'all know what I'm talking about. Basically, for some of us, the word has been connected with like, how do I say this?

Pure shenanigans, okay? But as we've been talking, I realize that I actually find the word really gorgeous. Literally, to be a steward means to be a keeper of the house.

To be a steward is to already assume that everything in your hands is gift and grace. It is to assume that the house came before you and that you did not earn it.

[6 : 19] You're tending it. You're tending it for somebody else. And for Jesus' followers, the world is the house. And we're tending it for God who longs to draw us into a shalom community and shalom relationships of flourishing.

So in this series, we're talking about the things that we carry. And, you know, as we've been moving through topics, Pastor Anthony preached on the ordinary, preached on time.

I realize that so many of these things feel simultaneously like blessings and burdens. Like time for me feels like both of those things. We're going to talk about privilege.

We're going to talk about power. We're going to talk about gifts and money and sexuality in the next few weeks. The full range of what it means to be a human being holding things that were never entirely ours to begin with.

And with that, we're asking what it means to make the commitments we need to be faithful carriers. Today, I want to take us to the book of Nehemiah.

[7 : 35] I've been wanting to preach on this book for a while. It's this book that's often used by Christian organizers to think about community building. And it provides some really interesting direction when it comes to stewarding the things we carry.

So this morning, we're going to go to Nehemiah 1, right at the beginning of the book. So feel free, if you have a Bible, you can take out your phone. There are a couple of things I'll refer to that won't be on the screen, so you may want to have a phone or a Bible out.

But yes, Nehemiah 1. The words of Nehemiah, son of Hakaliah, in the month of Kislev, in the 20th year, while I was in the citadel of Susa.

One of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah, and I asked them about the Jews who escaped, those who had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They replied, The remnant there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame.

The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

[8 : 50] And I said, Oh, Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the Israelites, confessing the sin of the Israelites, which we have sinned against you, both I and my family have sinned.

We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded Moses, your servant. Remember the word that you commanded Moses, your servant.

If you are faithful, I will scatter you. If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the furthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I have chosen to establish my name.

So the book of Nehemiah is this book that was written in the aftermath of the exile. By this point, the Babylonian Empire had done its worst. Jerusalem was in rubble.

The people had been scattered, uprooted. Everything that constituted their identity had been destroyed. And then in what must have felt like this almost impossible turn of history, the Persian Empire rises and the Babylonian Empire is essentially defeated by them and falls.

[10:27] And all the policies of displacement are reversed. And people are able to return home. Nehemiah is not in Jerusalem when we meet him.

He's in Susa, the Persian winter capital, serving as cupbearer to the king, this position of intimacy and trust. His job is to choose the king's wine, taste it before the king.

And I love this part. If he doesn't die when he does that, he gets to have this relative life of privilege and power. He has a lot of power.

And if you read Nehemiah closely, which I hope you will in the next week or so, he uses that power really strategically. But when we meet Nehemiah, something has interrupted his comfortable life.

His brother and several other men have returned from their ancestral home, Judah, and they share the news of what is happening there. And what Nehemiah hears breaks him down, breaks him open.

[11:30] The walls of Jerusalem are broken down. The gates have been burned. They're reduced to rubble. The people in the city live in shame and fear. They are making do among the ruins. They're exposed.

They're vulnerable. Their identity has been hollowed out from the inside. Nehemiah seems to sense that something far beyond the destruction of the walls has taken place.

The pastor and community organizer Robert Lindhikom describes this so well when he says that Nehemiah must have realized this. He writes, The vulnerability the Israelites so desperately felt they had attributed to their broken down walls.

But that vulnerability was actually a manifestation of their deepest problem, a profound spiritual problem. And then elsewhere, the same author writes, Nehemiah realizes that the essential problem of Israel is far greater than broken down walls.

It is their broken down corporate life. They no longer know what it means to be Jews. They have lost their cultural and spiritual identity. And until they reclaim it, they can never become what they were created by God to be, builders of the shalom community.

[12:50] And then in the story, I love the story, what Nehemiah does next is, yeah, it's pretty amazing. He doesn't immediately make a plan, which is often our temptation.

He doesn't convene a task force or post a thread. He sits down, he stops, he weeps, he fasts. And he prays not for himself, but for his community. He mourns for days. He lets the weight of it land. The community that he loves, which was meant to provide the subversive witness in a world of violence and domination, which was meant to embody the beloved community has not been stewarded well.

See, the recognition that the countercultural community has broken down provokes Nehemiah to a cultural response. We live in this world where we like a quick pivot, we like a bounce back, we want, you know, to remain kind of like stoic in a crisis and to know what to do, but Nehemiah weeps. And rather than this weeping being like a display of pronounced weakness, it's actually this act of profound wisdom.

[14:09] Because you cannot repair what you will not grieve. You cannot rebuild what you are unable to admit has been shattered.

Later, after he's wept and he's prayed, Nehemiah inspects the walls. He goes by night really quietly. He doesn't want people to know what he's doing.

And then he confirms that what his brother said is true, that the walls are broken down. And he leverages his power. He talks to the king. He gets permission to rebuild the wall. And then he gathers the people and says to them, you see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.

Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we may no longer suffer disgrace. I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me and also the words the king had spoken to me.

Then they said, let us start building. So they committed themselves to the common good. Notice the pronouns, not you, not them, we, us, we are in this together.

[15:29] We will do this together. They all commit, all of them, let us start building. And the text says that they strengthen their hands. They strengthen their hands.

They strengthen their hands for the common good. I want to be really clear here. After and while we are enduring our Saturdays of exile, after and while our hearts of stone are becoming hearts of flesh, we have to commit ourselves to rebuilding the walls of our community.

Reconstruction cannot be only individual. Rather, if it is not communal, it can easily be little more than the recycled and slightly refreshed narrative of things as they have always been.

A narrative that tells us that individual optimization is the highest good. It's all too easy to build our own little kingdom just with new labels instead of being drawn into a communal rebuilding and care. And I want to be as honest here as I am clear. While reading Nehemiah and especially Nehemiah's prayer, I have, I felt, wow, this is hard to say than I thought it would be.

[17:00] I have definitely felt my own need to repent. To put it simply, rebuilding the walls of this church matters. After the departure of the original founding pastor years ago, after the disruption of the pandemic, after the shock of the 2024 election, and clearly all the shocks that just keep coming, there is a rebuilding that feels essential.

And as one of your pastors, I've been too shy in calling you to commitment. And aware that if you're in this room, you're probably some of the highest committed people you have. But how do we talk about a commitment that all of our community, all 300 or so of us, can feel called and invited to?

A radical prayer, commitment to dedicated church attendance, commitment to church membership, and the necessity of the local church. Commitment to discover and use our gifts so that we can serve others.

Love what you did, Jess. That is such a gift. And most of all, yeah, I think the hardest thing for me to say is I need to repent because I haven't talked that much about money.

That gift of money that we maybe do two sermons a year about money here. We allude to it. But really, I've just named the systems and the structures of domination without naming the thing that holds the system in place.

[18:35] And I've done that because money carries so much trauma and so much shame for all of us. We are trapped in the system that overvalues wealth and so encourages hoarding. So many of us have been manipulated by religious communities that use financial pressure as a form of control.

Basically, I've let the boogeymen of the prosperity gospel scare me into silence. But here is what I am realizing.

Not talking about money is not a neutral act. When progressive communities stay silent about money instead of being able to hire the staff we need, we burn people out who hold our communities together.

We don't talk about money. We make the dominant system, the one that tells us wealth is private, that accumulation is virtue, that giving is optional. We make that system more successful by never challenging it.

And to put a point on it, I've been reading Malcolm Foley's *The Anti-Greed Gospel*, which is an amazing book. And I've realized that the table cannot call itself anti-racist unless we are much more willing to talk about money and its redistribution.

[19:56] Here's how Foley puts that. An anti-racist community is an anti-greed community. An anti-racist community is a community in which the desire for more is excised and replaced with the robust embrace of the communion of saints.

Such a community follows the logic of the kingdom of God. Authority and resources are to be shared rather than hoarded. So we can't be serious about racial justice without talking about money.

We can't be serious about the common good without talking about what we're willing to share. See, neoliberalism has this very effective trick. It shrinks our imagination of the common good and makes it into something purely personal.

It tells us that what we do with our money is our business full stop. And many of us, even those of us who are deeply committed to justice in every other area, we've absorbed that story more deeply than we know.

But Nehemiah doesn't keep quiet. Nehemiah names the problem. He weeps. He shows the people the ruins. And so throughout this sermon series, we're going to talk about stewardship and commitment from all different angles.

[21:24] And we're going to talk about specific commitment to financial giving. You may have guessed that from the card that you have in your chair. And I'm going to talk about that in a little bit.

But before I do, I want to say one more thing about Nehemiah. And this is what is not going to be on the screen. So again, take some time to look at this next week. chapter 3 of Nehemiah is one of those chapters that feels like really tedious at first glance.

It's like page after page of names of families of sections and groups and it's just this listing. It's like a kind of like the credits at the end of a long film.

But it has this theological richness to it because it tells us that the common good is only found in the particular.

Every person is building their specific part of the wall. Everybody knows their specific piece.

Everyone works where they are. There is no generic wall being built by these like faceless people.

[22 : 29] These are specific people with specific names and skills and histories like you get to learn that they're talented at this or they're good at that. And they rebuild the wall section by section by section and I'm really interested.

I find it fascinating that some of it is self-interest. They build the wall for the most part that is closest to their own home because they want to be protected. But in this story basic self-interest and the common good are actually not opposites.

They're woven together into something bigger. And the term for this in theology is the scandal of the particular. the idea that God doesn't work in generalities that God works in specifics.

Like in a specific child born and a specific stable in a specific town. The universal is always arrived at through a commitment to the particular never instead of it.

And I know my own struggles in terms of commitment. Years ago I went to this conference actually Anthony and I went to this conference and I was gifted this free session with an Enneagram therapist.

[23 : 43] And I had never you know I read about the Enneagram I had never done it. And I will never forget how shell shocked I came out of this free session. I was like it's free it's going to be light hearted. No.

I came out of that session I didn't know what had happened. The therapist told me casual as the day is long y'all that my work is an Enneagram for a romantic and individualist was to spend no less than one dedicated hour a week doing all the mundane things I'm pointing to my wife because she knows doing all the mundane things that my romantic heart so diligently avoids.

Getting the inbox zero. Oh God deliver us deliver us Lord. Actually book in the flight we would never go anywhere if it was up to me. Go over the finances of the house my math is not that good y'all.

I basically felt like this woman had cursed me out. Like I went downstairs and found my wife and was like the Lord is not with her. And all she said was take one hour a week and I was like no.

Because I like ideas I like basking in the possibilities of the ultimate. I do. But there is no pathway to the ultimate without a commitment to the particular.

[25 : 06] in the most important areas of our lives we like Alice have to pick our own odd and imperfect rabbit to follow down the hole.

That's the only way we get to wonderland. Commitment is not the death of possibility. No matter what our society tells us it's the door to depth.

faith. And this church requires commitment. There's a quote that I've often used in my time as a pastor by Angela Davis.

Somebody asked her you've been an activist for decades what keeps you going do you think we should remain optimistic about the future? And she says what has kept me going has been the development of new modes of community.

I don't know whether I would have survived had not movements survived, had not communities of resistance, communities of struggle, and I think that this is an era where we have to encourage that sense of community, particularly at a time when neoliberalism attempts to force people to think of themselves only in individual terms and not in collective terms.

[26 : 17] It is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism. And the primary collectivity that we have as followers of Jesus, is the church. It's not the calls, it's not the movement, it's not the online community or the podcast, it is the church.

Particular people gathering, carrying their particular things week after week, and building the wall nearest to where they live. Now, in a few minutes I'm going to talk about the commitment campaign, but before I do that, I was, what I was writing this I realized I was very, I was wondering a lot about, you know, how you all would respond to this and what you're thinking.

So we're going to do a little bit reverse, we're going to do the passing of the piece now instead of before the sermon. So here's the question, this is an opportunity to get up, to move a little bit, introduce yourself, use your name and pronouns, find some people maybe you don't know as well. Here's your question, how does it feel to you for us to so explicitly begin talking about commitment to the local church? Is it natural? Is it uncomfortable? What questions do you have?

In particular, what comes up in you when a church begins to talk explicitly about money? No one's recording what you say, okay? It's private. Let's take three or four minutes, all right?

[27 : 43] And they'll come back and I'll say something about the campaign and wrap up. I am so curious as to what you're talking about. Like I really want to know. All right.

So I'm going to spend a couple of minutes talking about this campaign and then I'm going to wrap up the sermon. So, take a deep breath.

I don't know what you said in this group about, you know, church is talking about money, but in your seat you have a commitment card that looks like this. You should or you should have one around you.

It's for this next six, what we're calling our next six campaign, which is designed to launch the table church into its next six years. And it's pretty simple.

It's pretty similar to what Natalie said. The table runs on the people who show up and commit to it. The pastors, the space, the things we do together, it's all sustained by the people in this room, the people watching, the people who cycle through week after week.

[28 : 48] And right now we need more people to be giving monthly. So here's what we're asking. If you're not currently giving on a recurring basis, we're inviting you to start giving at \$35 a month.

If you already give monthly, we're asking you to add \$35 to what you're already giving. And if you've got the capacity, if you've got the desire, there's an option on the card to cover someone else's commitment who can't give right now.

And there's even a space to reflect on if you want to proportionally give above that \$35. The card walks you through everything. It's also on table.center and you can sit with it there.

And yeah, if what I've said for you today, today or just right now, just resonated, feel free to go ahead and set it up. Set it up today, set it up this week. But I know that a lot of us might need time to think about this.

So over the next several weeks, we're going to talk about this on Sundays along with our sermon series. And then on May 31st and June 7th, we're going to have like a commitment Sunday.

[29 : 58] It's going to be an experiment. I've never done anything like this. But we're going to ask you to commit together to your piece of the wall. A QR code is on the card.

And we're going to keep talking. We're going to talk about the vision of the church. We're going to talk about stewardship from all these different angles. But for now, take the card with you.

Consider it. Pray about it radically. Consider your own relationship with money. I'm teaching the trauma of money workshop, which I think it's going to break me down. But just think about it.

And when you're ready, jump in. All right, here's where I want to close us today. Nehemiah and the people rebuild the wall in 52 days.

The walls had lain in ruins, not for months, but for years, possibly for a century and a half since the Babylonians had invaded. And yet, the people committed themselves to work.

[31 : 02] 147 years of ruin, 52 days days of committed work. We carry so much in this room. The weight of grief, the weight of cynicism about institutions, the exhaustion of trying to build anything in a world that kind of makes you feel like you just want to burn it all down.

And I think about these soldiers, and particularly because O'Brien doesn't only talk about the heaviness. He writes about something else. He writes that when the men exhausted from carrying everything would relax their minds at the end of the day.

In those moments, he said, they gave themselves over to lightness. There is a weight of hope. That is different from the weight of burden.

It's still weight. It's still something you can feel pressing down on your chest, making you feel vulnerable, making you feel exposed. But it moves you forward instead of pinning you down. It's the weight of committing to something that you actually believe in.

We're being asked to carry that weight in the season to rebuild what has been broken, to steward what has been given, to commit to this house, this community, these particular people building their particular section of the wall.

[32 : 23] Not 147 years, but 52 days. Amen.