

Reconciliation with Peoples!

THIS IS YOUR MINISTRY

2 Samuel 21:1-6; Nehemiah 1:1-11

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Wesley J. Gabel

Two hundred twenty-five years ago this past Wednesday, fifty-six men signed a document pledging their lives, fortunes and sacred honor in establishing this nation. They did so at great risk. Five of them were captured as traitors by the British and tortured before dying. One not captured was John Hart. When the British came for him, he left his wife's bedside where she lay sick and spent a year living in forests and caves. Returning home, he found his wife dead, his 13 children missing, and his fields and business in ruins. Many of the signers suffered like John Hart, and a number died in the war. None of us can imagine the pain suffered in giving birth to this nation. It's difficult to grasp how many of our blessings rest upon the shoulders of those who suffered; but be assured of this, we are the recipients of costly blessings. Aren't you grateful for their choice and sacrifice?

However, there are "blessings" we taste not because of the sacrifice of others, but because of their exploitation. Some suffered not because of their choice, but because of the color of their skin; and to this day, their descendants thirst for justice. Even as the Civil War did not end the exploitation of black Americans, the Civil Rights movement did not allay the bitterness in their hearts. The anger continues. News reports reveal that college campuses are again becoming segregated, that one fifth of black men spend time in jail, and that two thirds of American black families are fatherless. Isn't that anger? Bitterness is a poison that erects walls, sears consciences, incites violence and causes self-destruction. We Americans must learn that neither equal opportunity nor affirmative action reconcile peoples. Racial wounds are not healed with midnight basketball, gun control or generous welfare benefits. We cannot quiet the crying hearts of Native Americans who saw their ancestors cheated and deceived with a program or special benefit. Neither do reconciliation and peace come with the march of time. Has it in the Middle East? Has it in Ireland, Kosovo or the Balkan nations?

For a long time I thought people were beating a dead horse when they talked of sins generations ago. I thought, "*Why should I be concerned? I didn't enslave blacks. I didn't cheat Indians. I'm not a racist. Why should I concern myself with a lot of water that has long since passed under the bridge?*" I shook my head in disgust and persuaded myself that people who dwell on such things are trying to make something of nothing. They're people who need an issue to validate their importance. However, in the past decade God has opened my eyes to the faulty and truncated vision I had. I've watched continually the past haunt many of my parishioners, and I've observed some become free of its prison. Moreover, God has directed my eyes to Scriptures that demonstrate God's wider perspective on our lives, and how God heals people from the sins of their ancestors.

Did you know that King David nearly lost his kingdom because of a sin that happened in a previous generation? King Saul, David's predecessor, broke a treaty with the Gibeonite community. They cursed Israel, and God listened to their curse. Famine and chaos followed. King David admitted the wrongdoing of his predecessor, offered restitution and sought forgiveness and blessing. The result was reconciliation and renewal.

What does all this mean in view of our history with Black Americans and Native Americans? Two years ago the Ojibwa tribe won a court battle over fishing rights in northern Minnesota. Soon after, it became apparent that fishing wasn't the central issue for the tribe. No huge fish harvest nor any major effort to exercise their legal rights followed the decision. Instead, the main thing was the value of 150-year-old promises. If they are valuable to people, how much more so are they to God who lives in all time? There are no statutes of limitations with sin. Even when the sinners die, the sin continues its destructive work until its dealt with. Whether its broken treaties or the practice of slavery, neither sin loses its power until its addressed.

In the last decade we witnessed the fall of apartheid in South Africa. Do you think its fall and the election of Nelson Mandela ended racial bitterness? Not at all. The country had a new government but not a new people. Desmond Tutu, the Anglican bishop from South Africa, immediately began working with a reconciliation commission endorsed by the government. The **two principles for reconciliation** were *telling the whole truth* and *offering complete forgiveness*. Although bitterness and deception continue in South Africa, truth telling and forgiveness have defused explosive emotions and averted much bloodshed so that South Africa is now the most stable and hopeful country on that continent.

Some time ago, I was reintroduced to Nehemiah's prayer in the first chapter of his book. Nehemiah heard about the ruins of Jerusalem and the suffering of his people. He wept and fasted for his people because he knew that God was the key to healing. He realized that they all were suffering because of the sins of their ancestors. Likewise, we suffer racial tension and curses because of the sins of our ancestors. Nehemiah, however, prayed a prayer that addressed their curses. He prayed a prayer that changed the world for him and his people.

We don't have time today to examine in depth his prayer, but we at least can take a glimpse. Nehemiah's prayer recognized that God was the solution to his people's plight. He recognized that God is great and awesome. That is true for us. God is the key to our fortunes in America: not the Democrats, not the Republicans nor any other political or military force on this planet. God is the key. Do you believe that? Then pray to Him.

Nehemiah recognized that his suffering people were the people of God and that God cared about their plight. I want you to know that God brought forth this nation. Our citizens may not be part of the special Jewish covenant. They might not all participate in the new covenant made by our Lord Jesus; but they all were made in God's image. They, therefore, are God's children and the object of God's affection and pursuit. Pray for them. You please God when you pray for them.

The prayer in the book of Nehemiah reveals that Nehemiah continually prayed for his people. Day and night he prayed. It revealed that others were praying too. Pray and pray and pray. Enlist others as well.

Nehemiah confessed the sins of his ancestors and his own attitudes and actions that warranted judgment. He reminded God of his promise to forgive and restore. He sought specific help in his effort to bring redemption.

God's response to Nehemiah's prayer shaped history and restored a nation. Nehemiah was sent by a Persian king to rebuild Israel. Imagine that.

If we pray like Nehemiah, we will see God lift this nation from racial bitterness and its consequences. God founded this nation to be a window to the diversity of heaven. Our racial sins violate the divine purpose for our nationhood. Will you pray?