The last four Sundays, we have been learning from the book of Nehemiah how Amazing Things Can Happen. So far, we have explored how amazing things happen when we pray, when we plan, when we work together, and when we overcome antagonism. Today’s message is Amazing Things Can Happen When We Stop Strife.

Before we get into the subject, let’s quickly recap the context of the book of Nehemiah.

The historical context of this story is the fifth century B.C. About 100 years before, the Babylonians conquered and destroyed Jerusalem. The walls and the city were left in rubble, the Temple was sacked and burned, and many people were taken as slaves. However, over the years, some were allowed to return—only to discover the city was still destroyed and deserted. It was a terrible reality of sadness, loss, and anger.

Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, but when he heard reports of its condition, he requested the Persian king (who he served as cupbearer) to allow him to go back to the city of his ancestors to help rebuild it. Nehemiah prayed for months and put together a plan, so when he made his request, he was ready to go. Once he arrived at Jerusalem, he surveyed the land and city and called on the people to unite in the work. So, they organized, got to work, and overcame opposition and discouragement.

Now we are on chapter 5, where the threat has morphed into ugly internal strife. Here is the story,

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.” There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

Chapter four ended with a promising picture of people working together to finish the wall of the city by remembering their faith and looking after one another. The wall was finished or close to being finished by this time. But now, there was severe strife among them.

What was it? “With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.”

People were starving because they did not have money to buy food. As they spent time rebuilding the wall, they did not generate profits for themselves. Still, the government taxed them as if they did, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax.” No money was coming in but that did not stop the government from taking from whatever little they had.

On top of that, there was famine, which made food even less accessible. The inflation was so high that people had to mortgage their lands and homes to buy food and provide for their families. They even enslaved themselves and their children to pay the debts they had acquired to provide for their families, “Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves.”

This paints the picture that while many had been working to rebuild the walls of the city, others were taking advantage of the crisis to make money off them. They explained, “we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

The issue was not paying taxes or charging a fair interest for a loan, but acting in harmful and abusive ways against others. Those still benefiting from taxes and charging interest knew why people were struggling with money. They knew the suffering their people were experiencing. They knew many had forsaken their homes and lands to pay them back or just to feed their families and survive. But, perhaps the worst part is that they had welcomed the children as enslaved people to pay for what they were owed.

How can anyone be ok with that? How can anyone knowing why people were struggling still allow that to happen as they benefited from it? Would it make you upset if you gave your children to work so they could eat?

Keep in mind these are the same people that not long ago had a major victory against those who were trying to stop their work. Against such antagonists, they remained united and focused on their faith and purpose. They knew each other well; they were no strangers by any means. But now there are divided, not looking after each other anymore; instead, they turned against their own. This led to injustices, oppression, and festering grievances.

We may never experience what these people went through, but we all deal with strife in one way or another. If you are alive, you will experience conflict and injustices sooner rather than later and more than once. We all do.

The reality is that we all experience abusive relationships from time to time. It could be that someone from work, church, or our family has spoken harshly to us or about us or us to them or about them, which has led to bitterness, grievances, and infighting. That is what strife is: conflict disrupting harmony and causing division.

Strife is, by nature, an ugly thing that can destroy all kinds of relationships, including marriages, families, friendships, businesses, and even churches. Unfortunately, we are all in danger of it.

For this reason, as disciples of Jesus, it is imperative to understand strife, how dangerous it is, and how to deal with it.

So, here is the question for us today: how do we stop strife? The answer is in what happened next and how Nehemiah dealt with it,

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, “As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!” They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

After Nehemiah heard their complaints, he was outraged. However, he did not react emotionally but took the time to think about it and discern how to address the grievances. Instead of just “going off” on the people in the heat of the moment, he paused and thought about it for a while. This shows that his desire was not to bring punishment but to heal the relationships. So, he consulted with God, examined his feelings, and thought carefully about the situation to help bring a just solution. He did what Proverbs 16:32 invites us to do, “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.”

Because he did that, after thinking things over, Nehemiah knew what to do and, without hesitation, confronted the people whose selfishness had created strife and suffering. This is how he did it.

First, Nehemiah appealed to their love for each other, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” (7) He did this to help them see they were hurting people they cared about. He made it personal in that sense, speaking to the memory of their relationships.

Second, he reminded them of their identity as God’s people and how God brought them to Jerusalem after they had been taken as slaves for many years, “We have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!” (8) In essence, Nehemiah was telling them “Don’t treat your own people as enemies, remember they are your family and children of God as much as you are.”

After this powerful rebuke, “They were silent, and could not find a word to say” because it was the truth. Nehemiah spoke the truth to them, and he told them, “The thing that you are doing is not good.” Then he challenged them to do the right thing by returning to them “their fields, vineyards, olive orchards, and houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil” they have been exacting from them.

So, Nehemiah appealed to their love for each other, reminded them they were family and children of God, spoke truth to them so they would reflect on their actions, and last, gave them instructions on what to do. After this, the nobles and officials restored everything and demanded nothing more from the people. They did as Nehemiah told them.

What a good and influential leader Nehemiah was. He was able to do this not only because he was thoughtful, wise, and clever but also because he was consistent in his actions. His words and behavior were congruent. He did not ask the nobles and officials to do something he was not already doing or willing to do, as he said, “I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest.” (10) Nehemiah was using his personal resources to help people, his people, giving testimony to the nobles and officials of what they ought to be doing instead of taking advantage of them.

Suddenly, the ugly picture of abuse and strife turned into a beautiful scenery of reconciliation and commitment to the wellness of each other. They all renewed their faith and commitment to God and each other to never mistreat one another in such a manner ever again. And at least this generation of people kept their promise.

My friends, that is how it is done, how strife is stopped. Amazing things can happen when we stop strife in a healthy way!

When things are going bad, and everyone is upset, that is a very confusing time that can make or break the church, our family and friends, our business, and any other relationships we may have. However, if handled promptly and adequately, it could turn into a precious opportunity to make things better for today and the future.

I often say that conflict is an opportunity to make things better because it forces us to address issues, confusion, injustices, and so on. But it only works if we are willing to listen and do what is right. Sometimes, it is healing in a relationship; sometimes, it is addressing issues of justice.

Whatever it is, everything can be improve in more than one way. Just remember that our goal is not to destroy (even our enemies) but to help make things better for today and tomorrow.