

2023-04-16 God's People Coming Together – Reconstruction Week 2

Well, if you have been around the last few months, you've heard us talking about this justice work, justice in action. You've heard us talk about maybe you were even asked to be a Justice Ministry network member. Today, you'll have an opportunity to learn more about this.

But along the journey, I want to explain where I started, what scripture can teach us, and the hope brewing in our church and our city. Now, I have spent my whole life trying to do good things. Now, I'm not saying that I have not done bad things because I do bad things all the time.

I mess up. I make poor choices. I've made some poor choices that have hurt some people pretty significantly. I'm not perfect, but what I'm saying is that I knew from an early age that I wanted to help people. Growing up, I spent time with my church's youth group doing service projects and going on weeklong mission trips in and outside of the United States.

I served food to those experiencing homelessness at the mission, and I felt like I was doing good things. I spent a lot of time at church. I didn't do a lot of extracurricular activities in high school. Besides church, I did play one sport during my freshman year of high school. I'll let you guess what that one sport was. But besides that, the only high school activity I participated in school was I was a member of the environmental club because God created the world, and I was created as a steward of God's creation.

So I helped with recycling programs and things like that in order to do my part. So I grew up and earned a bachelor's degree in Human and Social Services Administration because I wanted to help people. Shortly after I got my degree, I started working at the church, and then when I was 30, I became the youth director, working with high school and middle school students.

So then, when I became a youth director, I started creating opportunities for the youth to go on mission trips. I provided them with opportunities to serve and to get outside of their comfort zone. Most of them grew up in a suburban neighborhood, and I took them to different parts of the city where they could experience people living unlike they did.

So I spent a lot of time serving and helping others because that's what I thought Jesus wanted me to do. Jesus came to serve, and so I must serve as well. And I did all the things living my life as best I could to love God and love others. And yet I discovered something well into adulthood that would change a lot for me.

So here's where things started falling apart for me. So I got this job as the youth director, and so I started attending youth leader training, and I started reading books on youth ministry. And I started reading and I started hearing that these day trips, these short-term mission trips that that I, I loved and that I did and I and I had my youth do.

I started learning that sometimes these trips can cause more harm in a community than they do good. And I didn't understand, like I was praised for going on mission trips. People said, Wow, you're giving up a whole week of your summer to help others. The church, you know, brought me up on stage and said, Let us pray over you because you are doing good things.

So I knew I was doing good. I thought I was doing good. But my biggest error was believing that this was enough. So here's what I realized when I was a youth director, no matter how much good I do, no matter how many people I serve, no matter how many people I organize guys to go serve, we still have hungry neighbors.

Neighbors are still in pain. Neighbors still deal with unjust systems. Neighbors experience homelessness. Neighbors go without basic human rights and so on. So the prophet Micah gives us this wonderful foundation of what we are supposed to do. Micah six says the Lord requires of us to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

So justice and mercy are two aspects of what God requires from us. So going on short-term mission trips and serving at the local food pantry or local nonprofit is doing mercy work. But we need both. We need both. Justice and mercy work. And as I always say, it's like you're in a paddle, a rowboat, and you have two paddles.

But if you only use one paddle, you're just going to go in a circle like you need both the mercy and the justice. Paddles. For an example of homelessness. Mercy work provides food and shelter and basic needs for someone which is so important that we do justice at work helps to discover the cause of homelessness, whether it be mental illness or addiction, or lack of jobs or training or pay or whatever else is the cause.

And then it calls for policies that would help with these root causes. Mercy work is just a Band-Aid. It's important that we fill up our food pantries. This is important, but if you don't remove the sharp object that keeps cutting you, you will continue to need Band-Aids. So back to mission trips and serving. So mercy work and mercy work is good.

Mercy work is important. We need to do that. But I said that sometimes mercy work can cause harm. But how? How can this be? Mercy work is important, but there is a right way and a wrong way to do mercy work. And the right way is to serve in a way that maintains a person's human dignity. If we have food and somebody else does not, we are not better than they are going into a neighborhood, a new neighborhood, or going to a new city or going to a new community and saying stepping in and saying, we know better than you.

We are here to fix whatever problem that you have is not maintaining a person's dignity. I want you to see this video of Alyssa Hammett. She is a missionary. Some of you may know her, but she is a missionary. That Horizon's support. So take a look at her video.

"Hey, Horizon's church. Alyssa Hammett here. Just here to update you guys on a little bit of what's happening here. The adventures in Guatemala, Adventures and missions, Guatemala and that guy's life is just it's just been so good. It's such an honor to do life here. We just recently in the villages that we're working in have started doing house churches and it's been so beautiful to go even deeper in discipleship with the families that we're working with there and learn more of what it looks like to walk and do life with them.

Something else we also are doing right now is creating a six-month internship program for the Latinos that we are sending to the nations. And yeah, our hope is just to come alongside them and equip them so we can send them well. And speaking of sending them well, I get to go to Turkey this fall and I'm get I'm so excited.

I get to go network. I get to go see what it looks like over there. I get to go see what does what does it actually look like to be a missionary in the Middle East. And we're doing that so we know what it takes to be able to train them right where you need to be able to train them and set them up well for where they're going.

And so, yeah, I just get the honor and privilege of going to Turkey and it's just going to be so beautiful. So thank you guys for following along with the journey of what we're doing here. There's literally so much more. So if you would like to follow along. Alyssa Hammett on Facebook and Instagram and so free to connect."

Yeah, I really appreciate you guys. So thank you for everything that you're doing. Pray for me. I'll pray for you. I hope all is well. So the relationship with Alyssa in Horizon started before I came, and so I didn't know much about Alyssa, but I had the privilege to meet her a couple of months ago when she was back in the States.

And to be honest, I'm always cautious. I'm skeptical about missionaries. I know that sometimes missionaries do go in to cities and say, here we know how to do things, and we will help fix you sometimes. But when I met with Alissa, I was very impressed by her organization and by her and what she what she does. In that video, she said things like, We will we learn from them and we will walk alongside them that we are that they're not just coming into to their village to tell them the right and the wrong things to do or believe or any of that.

But they are doing life with them, and that is doing mercy work. Well. And so I want to thank you for supporting her. So back to me, being a used director and realizing that I need to do both mercy work well, but also I needed to do justice work for years and years. I said, I don't know what to do right.

I know I should vote and I know I should, you know, maybe contact my elected officials on things that I feel strongly about. I know I was doing those kind of things, but like, how can I do justice work? What am I supposed to do? I don't know what to do to make a difference. Like I see the injustices in our world, but what should I do?

Well, the story of Nehemiah found in the Old Testament holds some really great advice on how to do justice work. Well, so much of the Old Testament is about God calling God's people to do justice work. Along with Nehemiah, there's Micah and Isaiah, An Amazon of a lot of the other prophets. Relay these messages from God to God's people, telling the people to do justice work.

Now, I was originally going to do a whole sermon series on Nehemiah, and several weeks ago I decided, Oh, I'll just condense it down into one Sunday. And then I started working on this message and I realized I kind of regretted my decision because there is so much that we can learn from Nehemiah and his story. So here is a really super fast overview, knowing that there are many, many parts that we will skip over and not cover.

But the Book of Nehemiah is a history book of the reconstruction of Jerusalem's walls and the reconstruction of the Jewish community after the Babylonian exile. So Jewish people were exiled and they were starting to return to Jerusalem. So Nehemiah was a Jewish cupbearer to the Persian king, and he is granted permission to go to Jerusalem and oversee the reconstruction of the city's wall.

It was about 500-mile journey, I believe. So Nehemiah faces some pretty big opposition when he gets there and decides to start rebuilding the wall. He receives some opposition from the local leaders and the neighboring enemies. Who are they? Just try to sabotage this building project. However, through Nehemiah, his leadership and the people's determination, the walls of the Jerusalem walls are completed in just 52 days.

The power of the people is the central theme throughout the book of Nehemiah. So despite facing numerous obstacles, the Jewish community came together and worked toward a common goal, demonstrating their resilience in adverse city. So Nehemiah encourages the people to work together to rely on their faith in God and to overcome these challenges. So here is an even shorter recap.

Nehemiah saw something broken, gathered the people and reconstructed it. Now, if we want to reconstruct a better city, here's what we can learn from Nehemiah. First of all, it starts with compassion. Nehemiah was the King's Cupbearer in Susa, so his brothers and some others came to visit Nehemiah. And Nehemiah asked them, Hey, how's it going in Jerusalem?

And they replied with words. They said those in the province who survived the captivity are in great trouble and shame. And then they said that the wall around Jerusalem is broken, the gates have been destroyed. And then when Nehemiah heard this news, he sat down and wept. Nehemiah cared about what God cared about, and God cares when his people are hurting.

So if we do not see those around us who are hurting, maybe we are a little too isolated. Or I could say we're a little too selfish because if we're not getting to know people, we'll never sometimes see the hurt that people are experiencing. But when we do ask the questions and we do get to know people, we will know that there are a lot of people hurting in our city.

So Justice in Action is this county-wide initiative we are part of with 20 other faith communities and the process began with asking a question just like Nehemiah did. We heard, we listened and we hurt. We ask the question and we listened to the people in our city. Hey, what's keeping you up at night? What are your anxieties?

What's your stress thing? What are you dealing with? Then we listened. And then in November, all of the churches gathered and we voted on our top priorities. And these top priorities are going to be mental health and criminal justice reform. These are our first two focuses that we voted on. So if we want to reconstruct a better place in our city for those who are dealing with mental illness or the effects of a broken criminal justice system, we must include prayer. Now meet Nehemiah prayed.

He prayed a lot. I think it said he was like 14 times in the book of Nehemiah that Nehemiah prayed after Nehemiah sat down and wept, The Scripture says right away in verse four of Chapter one, it says, He mourned four days fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Now, if you don't do anything else with this project, I invite you to pray.

If we want to reconstruct a better city, we have to believe that everyone is called. Nehemiah was not a pastor. He was a layperson. In other words, don't wait for someone else to step up and do the work. Now, Nehemiah had some pretty good skills. He was good at identifying people's strengths and putting them to work and holding them accountable.

And there are some really great leaders here in Harris Horizons there. They're some of you are just incredible leaders. But I bet there are some more people here with some skills that could help us grow in our purpose and in our mission. Nehemiah also used his earthly power for God's work. He used his earthly power. He was a governor, and he used his position to bring people to God.

And we should use our power and influence, whether we're a young person or whether we're a parent or whether we're a grandparent or whether we work outside the home or whatever it is we can use our power of influence to stand up against injustice. I want you to take a look at this other video. This is Amy and Kendall.

They're part of Horizons and this is why they do justice work.

"My name is Kendal Lehnert. And I'm Amy Lehnert. Just as work is important to me because I want to be the change for my generation. I want to inspire others to take actions to make our future a better place. And I'm about for their generation to which is why it's important that I lead by example.

It's one thing to talk about change and wish situations or outcomes were different, but I want to be a voice that promotes equity, inclusion and opportunities for everyone."

If we want to reconstruct a better city, we need to go straight to the source. It doesn't do any good if we just complain. It doesn't help if we just talk to our friends about how the system is broken.

For Nehemiah, he went straight to the king. He went to straight to the people who had the power. He went to the king and he said, We need beams for our city gate. And the king gave him those beams. And then he went to the governors with the king's letter and said, here is what the king said.

Now, on May 4th, we will have our Nehemiah Assembly at the Lancaster Event Center, and we have invited all of the city officials and leaders to attend this event. Anyone who has anything to do with mental health or criminal justice. And we're going to ask them some difficult questions. We're going to present some solutions and we're going to expect a response from them.

We are going to the people who have the power to make change. Now, if we want to reconstruct a better city, we must understand that there is power. When God's people gather. Nehemiah used the power of people to overcome some of the opposition that he faced when he encountered resistance from some of the local leaders. He gathered the people around to support him and to put some pressure on the opposition.

For example, he organized a nighttime patrol around the city walls to demonstrate the situation's urgency and to show the people what was at stake. Nehemiah used the people of Jerusalem as the primary resource for rebuilding the city. He recognized their skills and their strengths and their potential, and he harnessed the collective power to accomplish the monumental task of rebuilding the walls.

On May 4th, we need people to show up at the Lancaster Event Center. We need to put pressure on these officials and people, the people in our city, in order to make changes. We will put a little pressure on the officials. We're going to challenge them now. They're going to come knowing the questions that we will be asking.

But there's probably going to be a little bit of tension in that room. But that's okay. We need the power of God's people to show up. Now, if we want to reconstruct a better city, we must focus on the common goal. The power of God's people worked in Jerusalem because they were all focused on the common goal. They rebuilt the walls.

In 52 days, everyone doing their part with one goal in mind. Now, maybe mental health and criminal justice, for maybe those are not the top things on your list. Maybe there are other things that keep you up at night that stress you out, that hurt you, seeing that people are in pain. But we're going to present these first two, two issues on May 4th with the two, those with the power to make a difference.

And then we'll monitor the work and we'll continue listening to the people of Lancaster County, will continue to vote on the next top priorities, will continue to do research and present solutions to the city. So this is an ongoing thing that we are a part of. If we want to reconstruct a better city, we must always return to faith and prayer.

The book of Nehemiah wasn't a complete success because people strayed from God as we do, and we have to remind ourselves over and over again who God is and what God's mission is. If we want to reconstruct a better city, we must believe that we can make a difference. I'll tell you that being a part of this justice in action, I personally have never felt more proud to be part of something that has the potential to make a difference than I have ever felt before.

I am excited for the people at Horizons, the people who have stepped up to be a part of the research team and on the boards and have shown up to the Justice Network ministries. Those who have prayed for this ministry. I left a meeting the other day where all of the network members for all the churches were gathered in one big meeting.

And I left that meeting. And I thought after all of the years where I thought, okay, I know we are supposed to do mercy and justice work, and after all of these years of just not knowing what to do, I have never been more moved or excited in my whole life to think that we have this potential to make a difference in our city.

And I invite you to consider joining the movement. There are a couple ways that you can do that. I should have put three on here because, of course, praying is one of them. That's another way you can be a part of this as be a Justice Ministry network member. There's a commitment where you have to show up a few times a year and do a few things.

Now, another thing, a really low commitment thing is to show up on May 4th to our Nehemiah Assembly. Now you can find out more about being a network member or about the assembly on May 4th. There will be people out in the atrium after the service and you can talk to them. You can sign up on the church center app as well.

And on the website, the story of Nehemiah shows us that when people come together with a common purpose, they can accomplish amazing things. And this is the power of the community. And it's not just about numbers, but it's about a shared vision and a commitment to work together toward a common goal to do God's work. Nehemiah's determination and leadership inspired the people of Jerusalem to work together to overcome really big obstacles to achieve something that they could have never accomplished by themselves.

Now I have one last hope for this project. But before I get to my one last hope for this project, Bowling, that was the sport I did. I'm not quite as sporty as people think I am. But yes, bowling. So here, here is my last hope for this project that we can restore the hope people have in the church.

Here is a chance for the nonreligious, the skeptics, the broken-hearted, those who have given up on the community or the city to see people, different people from different faith community ethos come together to work toward a common goal. What is the impact we could have on those who are done with church if they see churches coming together to fight against injustices?

We can do the hard work that God is calling us to do. We can reconstruct a better city. Would you join me in prayer? Father God, we come to you in prayer because you care about us. Because you long to have a relationship with us. And when we come together to you, to pray, to pray to you, we not only speak to you, but we know that you are starting to work on our hearts when we pray.

So I pray that we would all spend some time today to just listened for you. God, that we would be able to continue to do mercy work in the right way, that we would continue to fight against injustices in our city together, that we would continue to humbly walk with you. God, we say all of this in Jesus's name.

Amen.