

**Holy Discontent**  
Noble Cedar Campaign Week 2  
Nehemiah 1  
February 5, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

This is week two in our Noble Cedar series and if you're new or weren't here last week let me get you up to speed

As a church we're in a season that is full to the brim with possibilities and opportunities as we're tackling two things at the same time:

We're launching our Pittsboro service on March 5<sup>th</sup>, super-excited about that

We're also getting ready to buy 10.5 acres of land just down Andrews Store Rd. that will one day be the site of our permanent facility

In order to do that, we're doing this noble cedar series, talking about what kind of church we want to be and how the land and the building will be a part of it

And we're asking everyone to be praying and thinking about how you might be able to give financially over the course of the next two years to help us purchase that piece of property

Our commitment Sunday is the last Sunday of this month, Feb. 26<sup>th</sup>

And like we said last week, if you can't or don't want to give financially, nobody's going to know it, you won't be put on some sort of naughty list and you won't be relegated to last week's donuts out on the hospitality table

Your kids won't get the mean teacher in the back!

But we are asking for everyone to be willing to engage in this process with us. We are asking everyone to be willing to at least pray and ask the question, "God would you have me to give, what would you have me to give"

And we started last week with a passage of Scripture from the Old Testament where the nation of Israel is in a bad spot—they've been conquered by the Babylonians

But God gives them this little parable that holds a huge promise—in the parable, Israel is this small vulnerable twig that God is going to pick up and here's what he's going to do with it:

***I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain... that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest.***

This magnificent promise of God taking a run-down, vulnerable people and making them majestic, noble, strong, fruitful, and all the people around them will come, from all around the known world will find shelter and rest under their strength

And we talked last week about this vision of becoming a Noble Cedar kind of a church.

What if we were a noble cedar, with branches that reached out all across Chatham County, and what if we were noble enough for all kinds of people to take their nest and find their rest here?

What if we were noble enough, with enough branches for believers and cynics and skeptics and African American and Latino and Asian American and White folks and Republicans and Democrats and people who have been here for generations and people who are new here

What if we could build a building where other organizations could meet: Al-Anon, AA, Scouts, Recovery groups of all sorts, kids tutoring programs and feeding programs because we're a space where all the birds of the air might come together?

What if we were a hospitable enough community where everyone was welcome here because Jesus is at the center of it all, and Jesus welcomed and hung out with all sorts of people, didn't he?

We are asking you to consider making a financial commitment to the noble cedar campaign because a building gives us deeper roots in this place where God has planted us

AND it gives us broader branches and more branches for more different kinds of birds to make their nest right here with us.

And we closed last week with each of us writing the name of a person or an organization that we would love for our noble cedar community to touch, bless, serve, or even to make their home here in some way—we hung them up here on our own noble cedar

And I was looking over it and was really moved by the birds of this community that are around each of us that we want see blessed and served by this church

So I'm going to pray over a string of birds this week and if you'd like to come up after the service and add more or if you weren't here last week and you want to add your own bird up here, feel free to do so after the service

*[Walk over and read and pray over one string of birds]*

This morning, we're going to pick up on a story that happens many years after that promise that God gave through Ezekiel—this promise starts to be realized through a man named Nehemiah, as God raises him up to go and help re-build the people of Israel.

We're going to be in Nehemiah 1 today, Bible/no Bible/Free Bibles

This is approximately 150 years later after that promise to Ezekiel we looked at last week and by this point the superpowers have changed hands and the Babylonians have been replaced by the Persians

But Israel is still just kind of another small, over-run people stuck in between these superpowers vying for supremacy

And Nehemiah is in the capital of Persia, which is the city of Susa, and we don't know if he's ever even been to Israel, it's just as likely he was born in captivity

But he asks a question about the people back in Jerusalem that changes history forever and it's the reason why we're reading about him approximately 2500 years later

Let me ask you something: have you ever NOT asked a question because you didn't want to know the answer?

Nehemiah would have been totally lost in the sands of time except for his willingness to do something that many of us would have ducked, he asked a question that changed his life and history, let's see what he does in Nehemiah 1:

***The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa,<sup>2</sup> Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.***

There's the question—at least two questions, maybe Nehemiah loved run-on sentences like I do and he squeezed it into one sentence!

One: How's the Jewish remnant, the people who are still living in Judah, and TWO: how is the city of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

Now if your people have been a conquered nation for 150 years, you probably have some idea of the answer to this question, right?

How do y'all think they're likely doing after 150 years of being devastated by the Babylonians and then the Persians?

That's right! And if this was MY brother I was talking to and if I asked him a question this obvious, he'd probably shoot back to me: "They've been a conquered people for approximately 150 years, How do you THINK they're doing, Alex?"

But Nehemiah's brother and his friends much kinder, here's what they say:

***<sup>3</sup> They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.***

Nehemiah asks, and he gets an answer that breaks his heart. His people and the capital, it's all still in ruins—STILL, 150 years later!

The walls are burned down, over-run—now given our current political climate, we need to make absolutely sure that there's no confusion:

The fact that we're talking about this wall is in no way endorsing or condoning or taking any position at all on any proposed wall that any president may or may not be talking about building!

when I mapped this series out a couple of months ago, didn't think it would be in the air quite this freshly

Walls in this time were much, much, much more integral to the life, health, and safety of the people

An ancient city without walls was a sitting duck—no protection from the next superpower that would come through.

And typically the way it worked was that the city would be walled but all outside the city for miles would stretch farm-lands

and the peoples who lived out in the country would come fleeing inside the walls for safety when an enemy army approached—NOW, everyone far and wide was vulnerable!

AND, it had been 150 years since they'd been over-run. And it's still not fixed!

This would be like your house gets broken into, and the entire front of the house gets burned down, but you can't afford to fix it.

So you're living in a half-burned out house 40 years later, and everyone who goes by wonders what your problem is!

And this is a shame/honor culture: the bigger the city, the bigger the walls, the bigger the temple, the bigger the palace, the more glory and honor you and your gods have

And so to be sitting there, living among burned down walls and a burned out city, it's in ruins, it's a disgrace

And so Nehemiah hears this, and he weeps, he mourns, he fasts, and he prays. And it all started with asking a simple question.

Today is a special day for our church, today is our official 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary—happy birthday to us!

Come join us for our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in a couple weeks at our new Pittsboro space, chili cook-off, PBO preview, and a celebration of 10 years on Saturday, Feb. 18<sup>th</sup>, details in the bulletin

See about 12 years ago, there was a group of people who were driving 25-40 minutes from Chatham County to go to Chapel Hill Bible Church

a contemporary, lively non-denominational church that was and still is very engaged in serving their community and facing outward

And they asked a very good and important question: why isn't there anything like this in Chatham County?

All the churches here are very traditional churches, some were wonderful, some were old and dying

But they wanted something that was more contemporary, more outward facing, so they were all driving forever to find one: Why isn't there anything like this in Chatham?

And because they asked this ridiculously wonderful question, we're here today! If you were a part of that original launch team that came over from Chapel Hill Bible Church, would you please stand?

They asked a question that generated holy discontent that drove them to much prayer and lots of meetings and then eventually to action

this is something like the journey that Nehemiah is on here in the opening scene of his tremendous story—the journey of the man who will be the noble cedar planter starts with a genuinely engaged question that leads to holy discontent that leads to important action

When I first got here 4 ½ years ago, I tried to ask lots of questions, too.

Let me share with you a seed of some holy discontent that got planted in me over the years

I learned that there are almost exactly 100 churches across Chatham—and that with a handful of wonderful and very notable exceptions, the vast majority are old, small and dying

In my first few months here I met with the leader of a local non-profit who lived here in Chatham and who still attended church at Chapel Hill Bible Church

She worked at a GREAT non-profit, very worthy and important work they do here

And when I asked her about her organization's work with Chatham churches, she shook her head.

She described how they would try to reach out to churches and how impossible it was to get any kind of response from most of them

She described how when they did hear back many of them either weren't interested in something that wasn't their own programming

OR they just weren't healthy enough or had enough people and the energy to engage with any sort of effort outside of their own church walls

And then she said that the ones who attempted to partner with them had so little influence to mobilize their own people or to affect the people around them that their participation basically didn't make much of a difference.

And she said something to me that was so formative that I've quoted it here several times over the years, it's been seared into my heart she said, "I don't want to say that Chatham County is a faithless community...but it's kind of a faithless community."

That conversation and her quote has driven me to prayer and to holy discontent over and over and over again for the past 4 years:

God would you change the name of Chatham County from a faithless community to a faith-rich, faith-filled community? God, would change that name?

We believe that God wants to change the name of this county, and our church is just a small part of that.

10 ago CCC was launched and today we are still the only contemporary non-denominational church in the entire county, and many of these sweet, churches are continuing to slowly die

In fact, my guess is that in the next 10 years or so we'll see many churches closing their doors forever

And part of the rub of this is that even while all these churches are dying, Chatham County is EXPLODING!

Did you know that Chatham County is the second fastest growing county in the entire state and ranks in the top 100 in the entire country for percentage growth??

So what that means is all these new people in town and if folks don't want a traditional service experience or just want something that's a little more alive, many of them drive that same 25-40 minutes to find a church

Here's reality: every Sunday morning, THOUSANDS and I do mean THOUSANDS of people flee chatham county to go find healthier, more alive churches which are in every compass direction all around us: Apex, Sanford, Cary, Chapel Hill, Burlington

In fact, just last week we had not just one but two new couples that were here for the first time who had gotten tired of their 30+ minute drives to church

You know what happens when you're driving 30+ minutes to go to church on Sunday mornings? You don't really get to be a part of a community, you're a permanent visitor

AND if you've got a neighbor who needs an invitation from you in order to come to church, how easy is it to invite someone to come with you when the trip is 30 minutes?

And on top of all of that, as thousands of people flee Chatham County for church on Sunday mornings, they bring their gifts and abilities and money all with them

Meaning a huge brain and financial drain that leaves Chatham each week and gets invested in other places, great places, but this community which is so very under-served in so many ways, continues to be under-served

We believe God has put us in Chatham County to be a Noble Cedar Church community to stretch out our branches across Chatham, and to be a redemptive presence that helps to change the name of Chatham County from faithless to faith-rich

And the step that we're taking of launching Pittsboro is a big part of that, extending our branches to more parts of the community so that more birds might find a place to land

Eventually we're talking about putting a service in Siler City as well, so that by 2020 or so all of Chatham County is within 20 minutes driving distance of a church like ours that they can invite their neighbors and friends to

AND the land purchase and a building, is also a way of creating new branches for more of the birds of Chatham County to land and be served and to grow

As Northern Chatham continues to grow, the needs and opportunities for ministry continue to grow. Some of them we just can't meet in a borrowed space

We LOVE WOODS! But there are limitations as to what we can do with borrowed space

Last week I told you about how Al-Anon used to meet weekly in our old office space when we were located up at Cole Park Plaza where the McDonald's is now in northern chatham

After we got booted out of there, Al-Anon went looking for a place to meet in Northern Chatham but couldn't find anywhere to meet, so they've left Northern Chatham.

After I shared that with you, this past week I got an email from a woman going through a nightmare-ish stretch of her life

and she shared with me that she has been looking for an Al-Anon group to help her get through this nightmarish stretch but she can't find one that she can get to with work and kids schedules

This email broke my heart—a deep holy discontent over the fact this woman needs help but can't get to it.

This is the kind of difference that a Noble Cedar church building could make—but we've got to be willing to ask the questions, look around, ask God to break our hearts for what breaks His

That's what Nehemiah is doing here as he prays--and part of the power of the prayer part is that it helps you to figure out what's yours to do and what's NOT yours to do. Because not every problem that you discover is yours to fix

Say that again: not every problem that you discover is yours to fix

But some of them are. And the way that you discern that and figure that out is through prayer.

And we get the content of Nehemiah's prayers here in chapter 1:

***<sup>5</sup> Then I said: “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, <sup>6</sup> let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.***

***I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you.<sup>7</sup> We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.***

In college I worked a couple summers doing in-house network computer support for First Union Bank before they merged with Wachovia Bank before they got bought out by Wells Fargo bank

So if a computer in a First Union branch went down anywhere, they would call our department and we would help fix their computer issues.

And there was this one teller named Betty in Boca Raton—I think Betty called us about weekly to fix her computer that she had somehow gotten all turned around in.

And most of the time it was really simple stuff: turn it off, turn it back on, good as new, thank you for calling network support

But SOMETIMES it was a little more complicated

and, there were people up the support food chain who were much more skilled in different areas who we would connect them to if there was a problem that was more complicated

So you’ve experienced this before, right? You call a call center for something, that person can’t help you, so they connect you to someone and pass you off, right?

Well, at THIS call center my job was to STAY ON THE LINE WITH BETTY FROM BOCA RATON OR WHOEVER IT WAS UNTIL THE SITUATION WAS TOTALLY RESOLVED.

If the first person that I called couldn’t fix it, I stuck with Betty and took her to another department that COULD fix it

And if THEY couldn’t fix it, I went with her to the NEXT level of support and assistance.

See, when Betty called me with her problem, her problem became my problem and my job was to own the problem until the problem didn’t exist any more!

Nehemiah here does this crazy, un-American thing: His friends have called him with this wall problem and he’s OWNING the problem including the ROOT of the problem—the sins of ALL the people—he confesses using the ‘we’

He’s OWNING the problems and the sins of his great great grandparents. he confesses CORPORATELY on behalf of all of his people:

We've sinned, God, I confess for the whole nation, myself, my parents, my grandparents, everyone! We've all sinned against you!

He wasn't even alive when the people initially rebelled against God and God disciplined them, that was 150 years ago!!

But he owns the sins of his entire people for generations going back—not in a self-righteous, “I can't believe they did that” kind of a way, but in a humble, “I'm with them and I need forgiveness too” kind of a way!

Because Nehemiah knows that ***if he does not own all of the problem, then he cannot be a part of the permanent solution.***

This is not how we tend to roll in our culture. We split hairs over who's responsible for what. To be willing to own someone else's sin goes against everything our culture has ever taught you about personal, individual responsibility.

But the kingdom of God is NOT the kingdom of the United States of America and we have to listen to Nehemiah and learn from him as he owns the sins of all his people.

Here's how this works in my line of work—I get here four years ago and I see that the church community in Chatham is still very divided along race lines.

Now I just got here, this has been going on for a long time, this ISN'T MY FAULT!

but I can either sit here and blame everyone else for this problem or I can do the spiritually healing work of confess on our behalf of the churches all across the community and ask God to forgive us and heal us.

“God, we as your people here in this community have not pursued racial reconciliation as we should have, please forgive us and heal us.” And today I confess that I personally in my 4 years here, have not pursued racial reconciliation as I should have, please forgive me.”

Nehemiah owns the spiritual problems of the people he is being burdened to serve and heal, even the problems and the sins that he didn't commit, even the stuff that he didn't do.

But in this great little prayer, Nehemiah then takes this wonderful turn, watch this:

***<sup>8</sup> “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup> but if you return to me [that's what Nehemiah is doing right now!] and obey my commands [that's what Nehemiah is doing in this moment, fasting and praying and seeking God and pleading for God's people], then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’***

So Nehemiah starts off by owning the problem and confessing the sins of this people, but right here he makes this wonderful turn: he's owned the problem, and now he dis-owns the problem.

God, we've sinned against you, but remember what you promised you would do for us if we returned to you

You promised that you would re-gather us--you promised that you would do something that I can't generate, I can't make happen. You said that YOU would do this work that I can't control.

And notice: He Dreams BIG!!! Re-gather ALL your people from all over the place!  
Audacious request!

In almost every situation where we experience heartbreak there's some part of it that we cannot change or manufacture or control, God is going to have to do something, and often if we're honest that thing we want God to do is BIG

And so we own the problem but then we embrace our limits:

God, I'm putting this thing that I'm heartbroken over in your hands and I'm willing to do whatever, whenever, wherever, but this is ultimately yours to heal, there are parts of this only you can control, only you can change, only you can do, and I'm looking to you for the ultimate solution: I'm dreaming big and asking you to come through!

In this passage, God is stirring up Nehemiah to be a part of planting the Noble Cedar community he had promised in Ezekiel: **Noble Cedar Planter Preparation**

1. **Nehemiah asks a question** he doesn't duck or run from bad news—fully engaged and interested and attentive
2. **Results in a holy discontent** that leads to
3. A **prayerful engagement** where he BOTH
  - a. **owns the sins of all of his people**
  - b. and then **dis-owns the outcomes and dreams big.**

As we get ready to launch into this next season of new risks and stepping into the mission we believe that God has given us to be a noble cedar with branches stretching all the way across Chatham County

I want to invite you into this same journey—that we might share in the journey of becoming Noble Cedar Planters together

This week, your **Wildly Important Take-Home Assignment** is this:

1. **Ask questions:** This week, I want you to be open to actually asking questions and engaging with the answers you find of the people and community around you
  - a. **Neighbors and your friends** about how they're doing really. Are they struggling at home? Kids? Marriage? Stuff at work? Medical issues? Family struggles? Addictions?
  - b. I want to challenge you to ask questions about how things are here in **Chatham County**—how are things for the kids, for people in impoverished situations, how

are things in our community? Who's hurting, really? What's it like there, really? What's actually going on around us? What's it like outside of my bubble?

## **2. Embrace holy discontent**

There are some things around us that just are not right, right? There are things around us that should not be but are. Kids should not go to bed hungry, amen? Marriage vows were not made to be betrayed. Bodies weren't made to be ravaged by cancer. And no one should go through earth-shattering and devastating experiences alone and without support of a loving community

## **3. Prayerful engagement**

### **a. Confess corporately the ways the church has failed to live up to our calling and our potential.**

If you're not a church person, this should be fun! But as much as possible, I want to challenge and encourage you to make this a "we've fallen short" and not a "they've fallen short" prayer!

I want to invite you to confess on behalf our church, on behalf of all the churches across our community: We've sinned. We've fallen short.

We need God to forgive us collectively as churches for not doing what he put us here to do and we need God to forgive us individually for our roles in not being a part of the solution

Did you know that the church can be an awesome catalyst for life-giving change across society? Really!

In the Welsh revivals of the early 1900's, thousands and thousands of people became Christians and you know what happened as a result? They had to shut down prisons because they were empty. They closed prisons because the churches were full.

And people didn't need to steal food any more because the churches were providing it for them. And alcohol and other addictions were broken. And the community thrived because the church served

When I get an email from a woman who can't find an Al-Anon meeting here in northern Chatham, my response is if the churches as a whole were more available and doing what we should be doing, one of us would have a space that we would find a way to make available to help make that happen and to meet that need.

Forgive us, Lord, forgive us all for the ways that we've fallen short of loving our neighbors.

When I hear of someone in our neighborhood whose marriage just suddenly fell apart, I wonder if we could have done more to help them connect here with a church community that might

have helped them to come back together. Maybe that family would have found a good church somewhere here in our community and maybe it could have helped

Forgive us, Lord, forgive us all.

What problems are you hearing and where specifically are there places that if we were as noble a cedar as we'd like to be, and if the church community here in Chatham County was more alive as a whole, we could be making a difference there but we're not currently.

**b. Dis-own the problem and dream big (including how we might be a part of it)**

In almost every situation that really matters to us and that really breaks our hearts, there are things that we CAN do and we CAN influence and then there are outcomes that we CANNOT generate, we cannot manufacture or create on our own.

And so at the end of this exercise, I want to invite you to pray big, ginormous prayers, asking God to do something awesome that you maybe can't imagine ever actually happening but you're willing to dream it

God, I hate that people are battling addictions that destroy bodies and marriages and kids and lives for generations—God, would you put something in place that would break every chain of addiction here in Chatham County?

Would you allow your church, maybe even THIS church, to be a part of solving that problem? Make us a noble cedar that might help or participate somehow in helping to solve that problem. Would you give us a building that might host ministries that would serve your purposes?

God, I hate that kids go to bed hungry in Chatham County. God, I'm praying that you might do something that I can't see to solve this problem.

God, would you allow your church, maybe OUR church to somehow be resourced and positioned to end that problem for good? Make us a noble cedar that might help or host help for that problem.

Whatever you ache for, there are likely outcomes that you cannot manufacture or control. I want to invite you to disown those outcomes before the Lord and ask him to do what only he can do. And DREAM and ASK BIG—and maybe even ask God to let us be a part of it!

Nehemiah is on a journey that's going to lead him to be a part of God's work of making Israel into that noble cedar that he had promised many years earlier

This week, I want to be praying together that God would make us into a noble cedar kind of a church by walking Nehemiah's same path towards becoming the kind of people who plant and start noble cedar communities.

**Benediction: Prayer Room!**