

Nehemiah 12
Holy Celebration
March 17, 2019
DT: Celebration Honors God.

When was the last time you were a part of a really good celebration? Not an okay celebration with balloons and a few party streamers, not an above average celebration with cake and ice cream, but a great celebration?! The kind celebration that you are going to look back weeks, months or even years later and tell stories about? Maybe you have a teenager who graduated from high school last year and your entire family went all out and threw a party with hundreds of friends. Maybe it was a wedding you attended and the reception was unforgettable - food and music and dancing. I have a friend who runs a small company, and they exceeded their goals for the year, so to celebrate he took all of his team leaders on a Caribbean vacation. Most of us are thinking, "I want to work for that company." You hit your goals and all you got was an oversized T-shirt and a gift card to Starbucks.

Celebrating is an important part of life. Every year on the 4th of July, our nation celebrates our freedom. On a much smaller level, every year in February the winner of the Super Bowl returns home and their city throws a parade. The entire town celebrates! When something significant is accomplished, we don't just get on with the next event. We draw a line, press pause, and create time and space to celebrate. Celebration is intrinsic to human nature.

And as we continue in our series in Nehemiah, we are going to see God's people celebrate. **For review**, in the first six chapters of the book they rebuilt the infrastructure. In the next few chapters they renew their commitment to God (worship, revival, reading of God's word). In chapter 11 they repopulate the city. People from all over the region move back into the city now that it's safe. In chapter 12, our passage for today, they take time to rejoice in what God has done.

Nehemiah

1-6 Rebuild the infrastructure.

7-10 Renew their commitment to God.

11 Repopulate the city.

12 Rejoice in what God has done.

Let's look at this passage: The rebuilding of the city is complete. They've returned to God with all their hearts. They are living in the city safe and secure. Now it's time to celebrate. 12:27-28: **27 At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. 28 The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem.** Look, they get people from **all around** the area. This is not a lame celebration planned by Michael Scott's party committee from The Office; they are celebrating extravagantly, bringing in the musicians from all over - they got Justin Timberlake and Beyonce and Cardi B. This is a spare-no-expense extravaganza. They want this to be a *party*.

Jump down to verse 31; this is cool: **31 I had the leaders of Judah go up on top of the wall. I also assigned two large choirs to give thanks. One was to proceed on top of the wall to the right, toward the Dung Gate....38 The second choir proceeded in the opposite direction. I followed them on top of the wall, together with half the people—past the Tower of the Ovens to the Broad Wall.** They just completed the construction of this wall around the city. This wasn't a second-rate construction project. It was solid and significant. They were proud of it. Portions of this wall still stand today, 2500 years later. **Take a look at it.** That's the wall they built! The top of the wall was wide enough for large groups of people to walk on for goods to be transported all around the city. It would have been the easiest way to travel around the city - almost like 465 around the city of Indy. Take a look at this picture of **ancient Jerusalem**. Nehemiah gathers all the people **right around here**, and remember, there are 50,000 of them! And he divides them into two groups. One group climbs the wall and starts marching **this way**, and the other half of the people go **this way**. Nehemiah says he's in this second group. Each group is led by their musicians, filling the entire city with music. So all the people are now on top of the wall, making their way to the temple...singing and dancing the entire way.

And remember back in 4:3, when they were building the wall and their opponents tried to mock, discourage, and demoralize them? Do you remember what they said? **3 Tobiah the Ammonite said, "What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!"** Can you imagine what they are saying to Tobiah at this point?! A fox is going to break down our wall?! We got 50,000 people dancing on top of it. How do you like me now?

This is the sort of party in the street that puts Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade to shame. That parade is a great party in the streets of New York, taking place every year; but remember, the parade was begun by Macy's simply to draw attention to their store and increase the company's revenue. That was the original intent of the parade. *This* parade took place to celebrate the grace of God.

Circling the city, they get to the temple, and this is what we see: **40-43 The two choirs that gave thanks then took their places in the house of God; so did I, together with half the officials, as well as the priests...42 The choirs sang under the direction of Jezrahiah. 43 And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.** They were throwing such an incredible party that everyone in the entire region took note of what was going on. Jump down to 12:46-47. This story wraps up in a really incredible way: **Long ago, in the days of David and Asaph, there had been directors for the musicians and for the songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. So in the days of Zerubbabel and of Nehemiah, all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers.** What's happening here is they are saying, "Back in the glory days, David, our first godly king, had musicians who worked in the house of God not one day a year, but everyday all throughout the year, and it was their job to constantly lead the people in songs and celebration. But it hasn't been like that in a long time. That was like 500 years ago. In this passage, **all Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians.** They didn't want celebration to be a one time thing! They wanted to have musicians in the temple all the time so that the celebration and rejoicing could continue all throughout the year.

Looking at this celebration, there are four qualities I want to point out about it. And as we look at their celebration, we are going to learn about the role celebration should play in our lives, too.

Celebration honors God. We're told **They offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy.** 12:43 When they celebrated, they weren't congratulating themselves for all they accomplished. They weren't patting themselves on the back because of their achievements. They were rejoicing because God has given them great joy. They understood the truth we see in Psalm **127:1 Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.** As they celebrated, they gave all the credit and honor to God!

I appreciate how some Christian athletes do this. After setting a record or winning a big game, and an interviewer puts a microphone in their face and asks how they did it, often times they'll begin by saying: "I want to thank God, I couldn't do anything without his help and strength." In the past, I've been kind of dismissive of that because it can seem kind of repetitive and insincere, but then I started thinking about it. If I was given a microphone and asked to speak to a million people about my accomplishments, what would I say? Would my first instinct be to give glory to God? Would yours? Most of us are never going to find ourselves in that place, in front of a camera, speaking to a million people. But what about when someone asks you about something exciting happening in your life: How did you become so successful? How did you grow your finances? How do you have such a strong marriage? How did your kids turn out so good? When someone asks you about something you're proud of or excited about, is your instinct to celebrate God or to commend yourself and talk about all the admirable things you've done.

Everything good in our lives is from him. Listen to what Frederick Buechner has said: "**Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.**" God has been so gracious to every single one of us. When we celebrate, it honors him.

Here's something else that stands out to me: **Celebration brings unity.** We see "**The women and children also rejoiced.**" 12:43 This celebration wasn't just for the elites, the people in the C-suite, the celebrities and politicians and those in the in-crowd. The women and the children were a part of this celebration, too. And in ancient society, they didn't have much standing.

Celebration has a way of bringing people together. We are in the middle of March, which means right now the entire nation is gearing up for **March Madness.** I know basketball isn't a very big thing in Indiana, but I'm from Kentucky (I'm just kidding! Don't throw any chairs at me!). I have been in an arena, and when a Kentucky player hit a winning shot at the end of the game, in celebration I have been picked in the air by a complete stranger and twirled around. And here's the thing, I actually enjoyed it! Celebrating brings people together.

I think about this **iconic picture from the streets of NYC** after victory in Japan had been declared. There was singing, dancing, and partying in the streets. Everyone was involved! Kissing strangers. Now of course we have come to a place in society where we all understand it's not cool to kiss people you don't know. But there is something in this picture that conveys the

ecstatic joy of celebration. Evil has been defeated. The world is safe. We've won. Celebration brings people together.

If that is true for people who root for the same team, if that is true for people who live in the same country, how much more true should that be for us. We are a part of the same family, and we come together every week to celebrate what God has done for us. Celebration brings unity!

Celebration draws attention. Verse 43 says **The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.** They celebrated with so much zeal and passion and energy that everyone in the entire area could hear the sound. And as they did, they couldn't help but recognize all that God had done! Don't you want that to be said of you, said of your family, said of your group of friends, said of this church?! When we get together, there is so much joy - gratitude, life, vitality, and thankfulness is just welling up from within us - and others take note of it, they hear about it even from far away, and they are drawn to it.

You may have seen this: Last week a young man from Texas named Billy took to Twitter to share with the world that his dad has opened up a new store. He shared **this picture** with the caption, **"My dad is sad because no one is coming to his new donut shop 🙄"** Sure enough, the store was empty as could be. Almost immediately his message lit up Twitter with hundreds of thousands of retweets and likes. **Within hours**, there was a line out the door and all the donuts were gone. They've sold out by noon every day since.

If a sad dad behind a donut counter can draw that much attention, what can thousands of people filled with the joy of Christ do?! I was reading a leadership book a few weeks ago and came across this: **Research from Harvard University supports the idea that the emotions you feel are contagious and affect the people around you. The people around you are just as likely to catch your bad mood as they are the flu....Each day you are broadcasting to others how you feel. You are broadcasting either negative energy or positive energy, apathy or passion, indifference or purpose.** Our negativity can be felt. So can our joy.

Listen to what one author wrote: **I am learning that the church has nothing to say to the world until it throws better parties. By this I don't necessarily mean balloons and confetti and clowns who paint faces. I mean backyards and basements and porches. It is in the flow of real life, in the places we live, with the people we're on the journey with.**

In a different place, this same author spoke about what it was like for him when he visited a church that was actually doing this. Listen to what he said: **Visiting this church changed everything for me. It was like nothing I had experienced before. This community was exploding with creativity and life — it was like people woke up on Sunday morning and asked themselves, "What would I like to do today more than anything else? How about going to a church service." I could not get my mind around this at first. This concept was so new and fresh — people who gathered because they wanted to. There wasn't a trace of empty ritual or obligation anywhere in the place. I felt like I was going to see my favorite band. The anticipation. The fact that I would do whatever it took to get there. It didn't matter how far away I had to park. Not "I have to" but "I get to." Not obligation but celebration. Not duty but desire.** Don't you want to be a part of something like that? That's the

sort of culture we want to continue to build here. That's what we want to experience. This author was so inspired visiting this church and being a part of it for a few months that when he returned to his hometown, he planted a church with that vision. In less than two years, that church had an attendance of over 10,000 people. It was one of the fastest growing churches in history. Celebration draws attention.

Here's the last observation I want to point out: **Celebration became a way of life.** We see **All Israel contributed the daily portions for the musicians and the gatekeepers.** 12:47 They said "We're not going to only celebrate once a year, or every time we complete a big project as a community. We're going to do this every day, this is going to make celebration a part of our life." It's like they are saying: "We don't need a major political victory. We don't need a Saturday night. We don't need three or four drinks. We don't need a dozen friends, we don't need really loud music. We don't need a special occasion - celebration has become our way of life." And I think, deep down, we all want that...to have so much contentment, joy, optimism, and hope that we can't help but to have a song in our heart, and a little bit of rhythm to our step, even for those of us, like me, who can't dance.

If we ever want to see celebration become a way of life, here's what we have to do: **We have to choose to celebrate.** The celebration in Nehemiah didn't come about by accident. They planned it and put a lot of work into it. They made it elaborate and extravagant. They financed it. If you want celebration to become a central part of your life, if we as a church want celebration to be a central part of our community, it's going to happen by intentionally making the choice.

And so much of it depends on the perspective we choose to cling to. Listen to what C.S. Lewis said as he reflected on the atmosphere of his home growing up, set by his dad: "**My father, whom I implicitly believed, represented adult life as one of incessant drudgery under the continual threat of financial ruin.**" That's the home he grew up in. That's what he thought life was about. Then he became a Christian. He wrote a book about what life was like as a Christ follower. What did he call it? "**Surprised by joy.**" You get to decide your perspective on life. Are you approaching life like it's incessant drudgery with ruin always lurking around the corner? Or are you looking to be surprised by joy? Are you going through life angry and afraid, or are you going through life like a child on a safari, eyes peeled, constantly on the lookout, hoping around every turn to see something new, beautiful, and breathtaking?

Celebration is an intentionally chosen way of life. And it's also a command. The Bible tells us: **Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! (Philippians 4:4).** This is one of those rare passages in the bible when we see a command, and then we get the same command given to us right away. He repeats himself. Why does he do that? Because he knew we needed a reminder. Rejoicing and celebrating doesn't always come naturally; we have to be intentional about it!

When I think about the things happening around this church, there are so many things worth celebrating!

- This is **Zach.** He's been coming to our church for four months now. Last week he decided to be baptized and publicly commit to being a follower of Jesus. When he was

baptized, he had about a dozen people come around him - those are people from the rooted group he's joined. Do you know who all the research tells us is the least likely type of person to make a decision for Christ? Adult men. We regularly see adult men give their life to Jesus. When they do, our church does a good job celebrating baptisms, but I think we can do even better. How many of you in here can do that whistle with your fingers? Let's try that out together on three. We don't have any baptisms planned for today, so file this away, but when someone makes a decision for Christ, we got to really celebrate. The Bible says that whenever someone find salvation, the angels in heaven are rejoicing around the throne. We want what happens here to be a mirror reflection of what's happening up there!

- In the last two months, we've had 57 people reach out to ask about becoming members at our church through **Welcome to the Creek**. Three times as much as we usually do!
- Just a few weeks ago **400 people joined rooted groups** and got plugged into community at this church. We have so much to be thankful for!

There are so many great things happening here I could celebrate them with you for hours. Every once in a while (this has only happened three or four times), I'll meet someone. And it'll actually be my first time meeting them. And do you know how they begin the conversation? With a complaint! And I just want to press pause, draw a line in the sand and say, "At this church, we are not complainers, we are celebrators! There is so much that God is doing. We have so much to be thankful for, so we are going to be thankful! And of course we will create space for constructive feedback. We want to grow and learn and get better. But we are people who celebrate.

God has given us a built-in rhythm for celebration every single week. It's called Sunday. Every week we join together to celebrate who he is and what he has done. God is the one who created the world and everything in it. He created us and gave us the gift of life. He woke us up this morning and gave us the gift of another day. Though we have all made countless mistakes and should rightly pay the penalty for those mistakes, Jesus died on the cross for our sins. He rose from the dead, which means we can be restored in our relationship with him! We are forgiven for our past; we have freedom for today; and we have the promise of eternal life for tomorrow. We have so many reasons to celebrate! That's part of what we do at communion. Oftentimes we approach communion with a somber and introspective demeanor, and that is right because we are reminded of our sins and mistakes that were so severe, Jesus had to die for us. But we should also celebrate, because we have a God who loves us so much he was willing to die for us, and he didn't stay dead, he conquered the grave. In Revelation we see Jesus, robed in glory, saying, "I was dead, but behold I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and Hades." As we come to the table today, let's celebrate!