

# Sabotage

Nehemiah 4 especially verses 6-15

Have you ever been sabotaged?

Has anyone ever ruined what you are trying to achieve...

There have been times when you've done something that people have said will never work, and then later on they admit

Other times it is just been waste - I remember a project that I worked on for a year at the end of time time in computing, and then at the very last it was just canned.

Or when you have done something in the Church and then watch it disintegrate after you have gone.

A vision of presbytery planning

A new way of planting Churches

A new way of training.

All of those ways I aimed for, and they were agreed

But they never survived the sabotage that came after

Change only comes when you have survived the sabotage that comes after.

There was one time I had the whole might of the Church establishment against a decision that I had made, big debates at the general Assembly, and we won, although now I wonder if that was the right decision.

There is something about sabotage that some of the time you never get there.

And another time though I can remember, two things that I stood for

Nehemiah is trying to Build the wall

And he experiences sabotage.

The Sabotage has a root

It begins with a man called Sanballat

And spreads to a man called Tobiah

Who laugh and mock at the building efforts, who say that their armies are going to destroy, that even a fox could knock down the wall.

Every change if it is real change,  
Will cause sabotage.

Now if someone is mocking a wall, you can guarantee it isn't the wall  
It is something which matters deep to their own identity which is bothered by this wall  
You are just trying to do your thing  
But someone, somewhere, for complex reasons of history which you know nothing about  
Needs you to keep that wall down.

At the heart, there is a sense of what might be called a zero-sum world  
In which if you do well, something within them feels like they have failed.

Here is a question?  
Are you going to be able to fix that?  
If you stop building the wall, is that mentality going to go away?  
The answer is sometimes... and sometimes not  
And here is the time that is sometimes not.

I think there is a clue, when there is a threat to you personally,  
When the person wants to hurt you  
That means that they are hurting  
And you are limited in what can be done.

One thing that Nehemiah does, is he gives his anger to God  
"Hear, Our God, for we are despised,  
Turn their taunt back on their own heads  
And give them over as plunder in a land of captivity"

I think that pretending to be nice is actually quite helpful in the place of sabotage  
Because you kind of adopt this moral superiority which doesn't pay attention to your own shadow.

So the first attempt is met with prayer, and then they carry on building.

The second attempt, is more concerted, it looks like a plot

So this time Nehemiah hears this - so perhaps having good intelligence is part of the issue, and then

“We prayed to our God **and** set a guard as a protection against them day and night”

Note the importance of the word “and”

And note that this is night shift

I was in the Co-op this morning, and both the folks on - Eilidh and Erika come to our Messy Church

So part of our Church community, and they are starting work at 6 in the Co-op

It demands work

This Church demands work, protection, day and night.

And the reason that they are doing that is that they are trying to build homes, Trying to build a place for their families to grow up in.

So it is with the Church, we are trying to build a place for people here to grow up in.

I don't want to overly dramatise too much

But I think that when you come under threat

Now is the time to show how much this matters

To give ourselves to the work.

And Nehemiah gets sabotaged, or attempts at sabotage.

And then things get really tough,

Because the threat has moved from the inside to the outside

Next though it amplifies into his own people

There is a complaint from Judah about the work

Its interesting that now the threats are coming against them

Now the work gets harder

“The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is too much rubbish, so that we are unable to work on the wall.” Nehemiah 4:10.

It's interesting that Nehemiah ignores this threat, he perhaps recognises that the real threat underneath is that people are afraid.

Tod Bolsinger, following Ed Friedman

Says that a failure of nerve is accommodating ourselves to immaturity, or the least mature views in the organisation.

These are people who are frightened, but he doesn't accommodate himself.

But then the people come again and say ten times

"From all the places where they live, they will come up against us."

And this time Nehemiah does something extra, he realises that if they don't deal with this threat, then everything will be lost,

But also that they have to keep going with the mission,

They will not be deflected

What is the mission

To build the wall.... - actually we are going to come to that

Because actually building the wall isn't the final end point

But that's the mission now,

So they do this remarkable thing where as well as the guards I presume

They also work with swords in their hands

We will have to slow down to deal with the threat

But we are not going to stop.

They are going to work

And they are going to fight for what matters.

You have to be prepared for the conflict of working for the thing which really matters to you.

Edwin Friedman has this remarkable quote, he said

""In any type of institution whatsoever, when a self-directed, imaginative, energetic, or creative member is being consistently frustrated and sabotaged rather than encouraged and supported, what will turn out to be true one hundred percent of the time, regardless of whether the disrupters are supervisors, subordinates, or peers, is that the person at the very top of that institution is a peace-monger. By that I mean a highly anxious risk-avoider, someone who is more concerned with good feelings than with progress, someone whose life revolves around the axis of consensus, a "middler," someone who is so incapable of taking well-defined stands that his "disability" seems to be genetic, someone who functions as if she had been filleted of her backbone, someone who treats conflict or

anxiety like mustard gas—one whiff, on goes the emotional gas mask, and he flits. Such leaders are often “nice,” if not charming.”

If Nehemiah had been a peace-monger in the sense that he would have appeased, at any cost, then the wall would have been lost - sometimes you have to work out what the mission is and realise that some people are simply against you.

That is such a challenging quote - that was not Nehemiah's aim  
Nehemiah didn't go and make peace with the enemies  
Nor did he give into the people  
He kept on the mission, but he managed the threat.

And what is brilliant is that when the people who were against them found out  
It was their turn to have a failure of nerve, and they never actually attacked them  
They will keep on trying other strategies, but their plan A will fail  
Remember that those against you are also fallible, and immature, and give into their own fears.

But the people keep working with the swords at their hands, they keep alert, so there are some risks that they will take no chances with - it is better to work at half the pace but manage to get there, rather than not to get there at all.

Tod Bolsinger tells the story of his greatest failure which as the time that he had proposed a new system to the PCUSA which would allow them to organise themselves in experimental ways, they had done all the work, they had brought everyone with them, and then at the last moment, because of other wiser political concerns, they lost the whole Church. Friends were coming up to him before the vote to tell him that they were sorry.

He writes that this is because any system when it goes through change will experience sabotage, and you have to be ready for it, but the good news is that the sabotage is also when the change happens, that you begin to influence people, that people begin to get used to the new reality.

As we change, what is the sabotage that we are going to experience- partly it is perhaps the powers that be, and we have to make sure that that we can win their trust - they might

also see that it is us who is sabotaging them. We have to make sure that we are not the saboteurs,

But there will be conflict, but it is in pressing through the conflict, that we begin to change people.

My great hero Ken Newell tells the story of a meeting with the Catholic Church that they had in his Church once, there were all kinds of threats of riots, but they believed that it was the right thing to do, the Church was surrounded by police land rovers, but the service went ahead, and then he says, there were never any protests again. It is by pressing into the sabotage that you change the situation. You realise the strength of God with us.

Paul says a very important thing about conflict which we have to again and again.

It is in Ephesians 6, and it is his famous chapter about the armour of God.

He begins though by saying that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and the powers. These are the spiritual powers over this present darkness, the cosmic forces of evil in the heavenly places.

We engage in spiritual work.

The powers are a spirit of timidity in us

The powers are the way that keeps us attached to safety, and not to real change

The powers are a way of being in Scotland which detaches itself from God, and believes that we can be masters of our own destiny.

It is this power which we wrestle against.

I get nervous at this point, because I think that if we are going to do anything significant we are going to encounter opposition, and that I am going to upset you at points.

This is the path to transformation.

But there is good news in this too

Because this too is how we build Jerusalem -

I love the way that the hymn puts it

Until we build Jerusalem in Scotland and England's green and pleasant land.

And this Jerusalem that we build

It is a city of peace

A city of justice

The community where relationships are looked after

The Wall is not the end in itself

It is the place where community can thrive

I want us to imagine building a wall round our communities

And saying "no poverty enters here, no injustice enters here, this is a place of peace"

That is what Nehemiah will do in the next section when he discovers that one section of people are defrauding the other.

This is what we think about on CAP Sunday

That we wrestle against the Spiritual Powers

We wrestle through Sabotage

To bring the kingdom here,

The place of justice

The place of peace

The place of shalom

The place where community happens

AMEN