



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Elizabeth J. Edwards, Associate Minister

JULY 17, 2016

Standing At the Gate
Nehemiah 2:18, 4:6; Philippians 1:1-11

The Israelites had been through a pretty tough time. About 150 years earlier, Nebuchadnezzar's armies had ended a ten-year campaign against the Kingdom of Judah and had completed the deportation of the leaders of the Jewish nation. He had destroyed the holy city, including the Temple, and had burned down Jerusalem's protective wall. The Israelites certainly weren't alone in their suffering: Nebuchadnezzar had conquered everyone and destroyed everything in his path on his way to Babylonian rule of the known world, but for the Jews, their defeat wasn't just political and military. The Temple represented God's presence among them, and its destruction signified either that God was using a foreign power to punish them or that their God wasn't so mighty after all. It was total humiliation and an identity crisis from which they would never fully recover.

But about 50 years later, Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonian Empire and issued an edict that captured people could return to their homelands and to the practice of their own religions. Even though the Israelites viewed Cyrus as the one chosen by God to be their deliverer, they returned to Jerusalem to find a city in ruins, most of their leadership dispersed throughout Persia and Mesopotamia, and no resources for restoring all that they had lost.

But not all Israelites returned. Those who had been deported had been the educated and skilled, and many of them had established careers and families while in exile. Some had even flourished (For example, see Jeremiah 29), and chose to remain in the diaspora. When we meet Nehemiah, nearly 100 years after the Israelites had been allowed to return to Jerusalem, he is serving as the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes of Persia. He is living a good life in a high-ranking position in the court. His duty was to serve wine at the royal table, and because of the constant fear of plots against the king, a person would have to be regarded as thoroughly trustworthy to hold the position. Nehemiah had done pretty well for himself.

But then something happened: Nehemiah encountered some men from his homeland and learned that things were not going so well there. Even

though so much time had passed, the city had not been restored, and even the wall meant to protect Jerusalem from attack still lay in ruins. When Nehemiah heard this, he wept and fasted and prayed until he knew what he had to do, so he asked the king's permission to go to Jerusalem to begin the work of rebuilding.

Nehemiah could easily have felt badly about the news he received but ignored that tug toward a home he had never even known. After all, he had worked hard to earn the king's trust and had been successful in his position, and he had his own security to consider. But recognizing God's graciousness to him, he departed for Jerusalem to lend his influence, leadership and skill to the grueling task of rebuilding, first the protective wall around the city so that his people would be safe, and then to restore the Temple and indeed the entire city.

One of the offices Nehemiah appointed upon his arrival in Jerusalem were the gatekeepers, those entrusted with monitoring the city's gate, a first-line of defense against invasions or other threats to the well-being of the people. Gatekeepers were charged with keeping watch—They had to be alert, know what to look for, and be willing to stand against whatever might endanger their fellow citizens.

In the late 1980's, Lakeside's youth, just as many youth groups across the country did and continue to do, went on mission trips to places like New York and New Mexico. On these trips, they participated in workcamps to rehabilitate homes while experiencing a new place and culture and building relationships within the group. These kinds of journeys can be important in the lives of young people, and in fact, I am grateful for Lakeside's support of the youth who will be traveling to Seattle one week from today.

But when, in 1991, the national workcamp program chose Enfield as one of its sites, the question emerged: Why couldn't we stay close to home to meet needs in our own community in this way? Twenty-five years ago, in the summer of 1992, a handful of Lakeside volunteers, calling themselves the Country Roads Workcamp, ventured to Enfield to repair houses there. The following summer, Lakeside invited six other local churches to join us in working on six homes in Rocky Mount. The story of Nehemiah's return to rebuild in his homeland was the inspiration for their efforts, and the name Gatekeepers was chosen.

Just as the gatekeepers called out by Nehemiah were chosen to do the work of standing at the gate of their city to protect it and to contribute to the

rebuilding effort, for 25 years Gatekeepers Workcamp has stood at the gate of many Rocky Mount neighborhoods to protect and rebuild.

Of course, there are countless stories of the thousands of volunteers and more than 200 homeowners who have been a part of Gatekeepers over the past quarter of a century. There are so many ways, large and small, that our young people and their adult leaders have stood at the gate for their neighbors to protect them from encroaching rain waters, leaking pipes, rotting wood, peeling paint, and other dangers which threatened to drive them from their homes.

This week, for example, Andy and his crew stood at the gate to replace a deteriorating roof and rotten porch so that Mr. and Mrs. Hardy can live out their retirement in a dry and secure home. Dan's crew stood at the gate for Mrs. Nixon and her five-year-old great-granddaughter to rid their home of pests, repair a rotten porch and damaged wheelchair ramp, and make their home cleaner and safer. Jody's crew stood at the gate for Mrs. Warren whose insurance company had threatened to discontinue coverage because the roof and porch of her home had such extensive damage. Jan and her crew stood at the gate for Mrs. Riggs to remove a screened porch on the verge of collapse, patch her roof, and repair her shed, and when they finished their work earlier than expected, they also spent a day and a half maintaining the garden and play area established by the Lakeside Involved crew at My Sister's House last fall. Carol's crew stood at the gate to renovate an entire bathroom, freshen the paint on most of the interior walls as well as the exterior trim, and repair doors damaged in a previous attempted break-in for Mr. and Mrs. Avent and their four-year-old granddaughter, whose charm stole everyone's heart. And those are just the crews with Lakeside crew leaders!

Gerald Batts, Connie Lilley, and Laura Durham and their crews also stood at the gate last week, protecting homeowners from problems which threatened their security and even their health in their own homes, providing repairs that they did not have the means to provide for themselves. In all, over 150 Gatekeepers spent their week standing at the gate for people we did not previously know but, because they are our neighbors, we are compelled by the love of Christ to serve as we protect and rebuild in our own community.

Of course, being a part of Gatekeepers is only one of countless ways we are called to protect and rebuild in our city. Every day, in whatever ways each of us is gifted, we are called to stand at the gate to protect the lives and well-being of our neighbors. Maybe you can stand at the gate for the homeless by volunteering at the shelter, or for someone who is homebound by delivering Meals on Wheels, or by visiting one of Lakeside's members at

home. Perhaps you can stand at the gate for the children of our community by delivering Backpack Buddies, serving a meal with Bites & Books, tutoring in a classroom, or volunteering at Bassett Center or Down East Partnership. Maybe you are called to be a gatekeeper by advocating for racial and economic justice, by protecting our natural resources, by working for economic development, by tending a community garden, or by providing encouragement and companionship to someone whose religion or disability or language or sexual orientation has left them isolated from the community.

Whenever we find suffering or destruction, wherever we find deterioration of homes or health or relationships or hope, God calls us to stand at the gate—to be gatekeepers who stay alert to the dangers that threaten our neighbors and then do our part to offer security and protection for the vulnerable and restoration for our entire community.

As we were preparing to leave here on Friday afternoon, one of the adult volunteers from another church told me that she had always felt a bit guilty that she had never traveled overseas or across the country on a mission trip. She said that family responsibilities and other limitations had prevented her from going where others in her church had gone to places of tremendous need and returning with stories of the great work they had accomplished. She became involved with Gatekeepers about five years ago, and she said she began to see that the need is just as great and the stories of transformation just as meaningful right here in her hometown.

She told me that after they had been working at their site for a couple of days last week, cleaning and repairing and improving the home of a woman who is quite elderly, the homeowner grabbed her hand and asked, "Are you a missionary?" She hesitated for a moment because she had never thought of it that way, but then she realized that what she was doing through Gatekeepers was sharing the gospel through hammers and paintbrushes and gallons of degreaser and gallons of sweat. So she smiled and replied, "Yes. Yes, I guess I am a missionary."

For the past 25 years, Gatekeepers Workcamp volunteers have been spreading the love of Christ as we spread paint, offering compassion as we offer skills and energy, repairing spirits as we repair rotten wood, rebuilding hope as we rebuild roofs and porches and floors. With your support and prayers and those of our other partnering churches, we have stood at the gate for homeowners who are threatened and vulnerable to offer security and peace of mind for them and their families. In just 359 days, the Gatekeepers will take up our posts once again to begin our 26th year. Won't you come and stand with us?

July 17, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

No matter what direction we look, we discover evidence of your care, O God. You watch over us and take care of us, and when trials, tragedies, and triumphs come our way, you are there to pick us up, dust us off, and help us continue on our journey. We are grateful for your persistent love and offer our praise and thanksgiving for all of your care.

We thank you for the good work done this past week at homes throughout our community. We are grateful for repairs that were completed and improvements that were made, but we are especially thankful for the relationships that were built and the compassion that was generously shared. Continue to bless the people who live in those homes and bless each one whose hands have touched those dwellings.

In the midst of all of the good we have experienced this past week, we have been hurt again by the horrific attack in France and the attempted coup in Turkey. We grieve over so many lives lost to hatred. We stagger from the ongoing violence that plagues our nation every day. We look to you for help, O God, and pray for an overflowing of compassion rather than a harvest of hatred. We beg for a shield for the suffering and a balm for the wounded. We pray for a change of heart in the people who would execute such evil and for wisdom and courage as we choose the path we will follow. Steady us and deliver us, O Lord.

Bless our friends who are ill, we pray. Bring to them all of the resources for healing that you have created. Wrap them in a blanket of love which will help regenerate not only their bodies but their spirits as well. Surround their families and all who care for them with your grace.

We pray, O God, that you will lift from our eyes the veils that distort how we see one another. Clear our vision so that we recognize in each person we meet the brother or sister in front of us. Refresh our hearts so that we are not jaded by prejudice or selfishness and call us to repentance for all that we have done to harm one another.

For this good and beautiful day, we offer our thanksgiving, O God. For the many blessings we have already received this day, we are grateful. For the generosity of your love, we are humbled. Grant us your redeeming grace, we pray, today and for all days to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jody C. Wright
Senior Minister