

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

September 9, 2018

Unsung Heroes – House of Heroes

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A shoemaker, name George Robert Twelves Hewes, a homemaker name Lydia Darragh, an army physician named William Gorgas and a slave named Ann Williams, these are not household names that we learn in history class. They are names most of us do not know stories most of us have not heard, but without their courage, without their sacrifice, history books would read differently. They are the unsung heroes of history. George Robert Twelves Hewes led one of the boarding parties during the Boston Tea Party, because of his whistling ability, kind of cool. Lydia, Darragh uncovered a British plot to attack American troops at White Marsh. She risked her life to warn General George Washington and his troops. And it could be argued that William Gorgas was the key to constructing the Panama Canal. It was one of history's most ambitious engineering endeavors and it costs 30,609 human lives and most of which were lost to yellow fever and malaria. It was Gorgas, the chief sanitary officer who ordered the draining of ponds and swamps as well as the use of mosquito netting because of his contrarian belief that these were mosquito borne diseases. And that leaves a slave name Ann Williams, but her story takes a little bit longer to tell.

There's a statue that sits outside the national archives with an inscription that reads "what is past is prologue". It's taken from Act II of The Tempest by William Shakespeare. I think it's true, but here's the irony. Most people do not know the history of the city block where the archives now sit. In L'Enfant's original plan it was actually designated for a national church halfway between the White House and the capitol. That idea was vetoed by those who believed that might hamper the freedom of religion and establish a state church. So in 1797, President George Washington designated that two acre plot to serve as a public marketplace. It was called center market. It was bounded on the north by Pennsylvania Avenue, bounded on the south by Washington City Canal, which I referenced last week. Center market open its doors in 1802 there were farmers and fishers and bakers, one of my favorite restaurants. At its peak, there were about 700 vendors Artesian wells provided fresh water, a cold storage room kept food refrigerated. It was the economic hub of this city. It was also the social hub. It was social media 200 years ago. It even had a name. It was called Market Time.

Now, I shared that little piece of history because of the vision that I cast last weekend. Now if you were here not last weekend you might want to watch that message because it's critical to our next chapter as the church. Now, we are focused on phase one and phase two of that vision, which is building out a prototype campus on a city block that God has given us. Phase three is a marketplace and it's a place where church and community, will cross paths. We will incubate entrepreneurs. We will innovate business as mission models. We will conscientiously create jobs and will give every penny of profit to kingdom causes. But it seems to me that if you're casting a vision for a marketplace, you should probably understand the history of markets in the city where you're trying to do it. Center Market didn't just sell goods and groceries; it sold slaves to the highest bidder. Those slaves were held in slave pens, one of them right across the national mall at Seventh and B now Independence Avenue Southwest, surrounded by 10 foot brick walls.

Slaves were held in 12 foot square cells. When those slaves were auctioned, they were coupled with chains and they were often walked all the way as far south as Georgia.

And that brings us to a woman who at the time was only known by her first name, Anna. In November of 1815, Anna was sold to Georgia slave traders. The night before her march south, she was held at George Miller's tavern at 13th and F Street Northwest. She could not bear the thought of being separated from her family, so, Ann attempted to escape by jumping out of the third story of Miller's tavern, the fall broke, both of her arms, shattered her lower spine. Nearby neighbors responded to her cries for help, including James Blake, the mayor of Washington, who was also a physician. Anna survived long enough to tell her story to a young Pennsylvania doctor who happened to be visiting the capital city named Jesse Torrey. When he heard Anna's story it was like Nehemiah hearing about the wall of Jerusalem being in ruins. He said it pervaded my whole heart and agitated my mind. He could not believe that slaves were being sold in the shadow of the capital. And so he canceled his congressional visit, he took up the abolitionist cause and he published an 84 page volume titled A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery in 1817. The cover of that volume was an artist's rendering of Anna's jump. That picture pricked the conscience of some and inspired the courage of others to ban slave trade in the capital city. For 200 years she was known only by her first name, Anna. Then in 2015 researchers at the National Archives, the very place where so many slaves had been sold when it was Center Market discovered her full name. A petition for freedom was filed posthumously in the circuit court of DC and Ann Williams's freedom was granted 200 years too late.

This weekend we wrap up a series called House of Heroes. If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Nehemiah. We have talked about pursuing God ordained passions. We have talked about praying for favor. This weekend we celebrate some unsung heroes because guess what? Someone has to rebuild that wall. You cannot just pray like it depends on God. You've got to work like it depends on you, that's how visions become reality. Now the third chapter of Nehemiah reads a little bit like an ancient phone book, a long list of names that are difficult to pronounce, and we often speed read these parts of the Bible. But let me state the obvious about the 38 people whose names are mentioned in this chapter, each one of them made the Bible put that on your LinkedIn profile. Now, I'm not going to mention every name it would feel like a graduation ceremony, but what I want to do is read a few representative verses. You could pick a passage almost any passage, but we're going to start in verse 14. Here we go.

14 The Dung Gate was repaired by Malkijah son of Rekab, ruler of the district of Beth Hakkerem. He rebuilt it and put its doors with their bolts and bars in place.

The Wall of Jerusalem had 10 gates, each gate had a name and each gate had a function. Most of them are pretty self explanatory; you do not have to go to seminary to figure out what the Dung Gate was for. This is Discovery Channel, Dirty Jobs. It's where refuse was taken out of the city. Malkijah must have drawn the short straw. But this is an incredibly significant job. Malkijah wasn't just repairing the Dung Gate. He was saving the city from epidemic. Did he know this? I doubt it? Am I overstating the facts a little bit for effect? I don't think so. Until a hundred years ago, the greatest threat to a city like this would not have been an invading army. It would have been a disease from within. It would have been sanitation or the lack there of if Malkijah doesn't do his job, the city might not survive.

What I'm getting at is this, I'm not sure that any of us know the eternal significance of what we do. When you serve, when you give, when you love, I'm telling you, it makes a bigger difference than what you realize, even if it's repairing the Dung Gate. What you do makes a difference. Now, I know you may feel like you drew the short straw. You may feel like your gifts aren't as glamorous as the person next to you. Can I remind us of something that the Apostle Paul said? In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul likens the church to the body of Christ. He says some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. Now, this is going to be a little bit of TMI, I have never had an ingrown toenail until two weeks ago. Until two weeks ago I wanna just say that I did not give my big left toe the respect that it deserves, and I'm sorry, I love you, I need you. And I'm having a little bit of fun, but I'm making Paul's point. He says, God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. You know what Paul is saying? You matter. You matter to God. You matter to us.

We have a core value at this church, everyone is invaluable and irreplaceable. What does that mean? Well, it means there never has been, never will be anyone like you know. Now, that's not a testament to you it's a testament to the God who created you, but what it means is this. No one can take your place. No one can volunteer your time; no one can use your talent. No one can give your treasure.

Fun fact, when I was a senior in college, Lora and I attended a little church called West Grand Assembly of God. Seven pews on a good Sunday, about a dozen people, but the pastor let me preach and he let Lora and I lead worship and here's the fun fact. I have done special music once in my life and it was special. Are you ready for this? It was a duet with none other than our Gainesville campus pastor Rob Schmidgall. What song did we sing? The 1988 classic by Ray Boltz 'Thank You'. Now we both sang the chorus we alternated verses, and I can't remember who sang the second verse, if that was his verse or my verse and I'm not gonna sing it because I would cry and you may too. "He said, friend, you may not know me now, but then he said, but wait, you used to teach my Sunday school when I was only eight. Every week you would say a prayer before the class would start. One morning when you said that prayer, I asked Jesus in my heart." Now I know that song is dated. That still gets me. I barely got through that because our NCC kids team? You're probably discipling the next pastor of this church. You are raising up those who will lead this church and lead this city may lead this country. Again, I don't think we know the significance of what we do, but I want you to hear this, you can tweet this; your obedience is someone else's miracle. Now, that's gonna make sense in a minute.

Verse Fifteen,

15 The Fountain Gate was repaired by Shallun son of Kol-Hozeh, ruler of the district of Mizpah.

Now, I said this last week. Let me say it again. It was not just the residents of Jerusalem who rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem. They came from Mizpah and Gibeon and Jericho and Tekoa. It took all 12 tribes. Our vision for this city block that God has given us, it's going to take all seven tribes. It's going to take all seven campuses. The vision's bigger than one campus. The truth is the vision's bigger than seven campuses, but that's how God grows us. He gives us a God size vision that will stretch our faith. And I want you to hear this; the goal of a dream is not just to

accomplish the dream. It's about who you become in the process. See, when God wants to grow us, he gives us something that's bigger than us to go after because we have to grow in the process. Listen, you show me the size of your dream and I'll show you the size of your God.

I think the thing that excites me about the vision that God has given us, it's not just rebuilding some walls. Again, our legacy is not a piece of property, our legacy is changed lives. It's what God is going to do in each one of us. Guess what? We're going to have to grow in faith; we're going to have to grow in love; we're going to have to grow in the grace of giving. Why? Because that's the only way we're going to get where God wants us to go.

So they come from Mizpah and they rebuild, they roof it, they put doors and bolts and bars in place, and then it says this,

15 He also repaired the wall of the Pool of Siloam,

Now I'm not going to teach this, but do you notice also repaired? If you read the chapter or third chapter of Nehemiah, what you'll discover is that many people repaired one part of the wall, but then there were those who repaired multiple parts of the wall. Here's my prayer for this process, for this vision. I believe God wants each one of us to have a piece of this wall. But I also know that there are some of you that have the capacity to do more and you may need to rebuild a couple portions of this wall. And so he also repaired the wall of the pool of Siloam. Now, what did I just say? Your obedience, oh boy. Your obedience is someone else's miracle. Ah, you got it. You got it. What happens at the pool of Siloam five hundred years later? It's where one of the seven miracles in John's Gospel happens. I've been there. I've filmed there. It's incredible to see that ancient pool. It was there that Jesus encountered a man who was born blind and restored his sight. Why is it such an incredible miracle? Because if you're born blind, there are no synaptic connections between the optic nerve and visual cortex in the brain. This is not healing an astigmatism, this is nothing short of synaptic genesis. It's an unbelievable miracle. Now, did Shallun have any idea that that part of the wall he was rebuilding would be the setting for this miracle five hundred years later? No way, he had no clue, and neither do we, but his obedience, our obedience sets up things in God's kingdom where God does what God does. See, we obey, and then he does the miracle.

Next verse,

15 He also repaired the wall of the Pool of Siloam, by the King's Garden, as far as the steps going down from the City of David. 16 Beyond him, (Here's another Nehemiah) Nehemiah son of Azbuk, ruler of a half-district of Beth Zur, made repairs up to a point opposite the tombs of David, as far as the artificial pool and (ready drum roll. Here it is,) and the House of the Heroes.

You thought we were making that up, didn't you? No, it is in the Bible. Now, the funny thing is we don't really know what the House of Heroes was, but I think we know what a hero is. A hero is someone who sacrifices for the greater good. A hero is someone who goes the extra mile. I think a hero is someone who takes responsibility when things go wrong, and gives credit when

things go right. I think a hero is all in, blood, sweat and tears. A hero is all out, time, talent and treasure. I want to say this. NCC is a House of Heroes. Lora and I are continually amazed at the way you serve sacrificially, at the way you go the extra mile. And I want you to hear me say thank you for who you are and what you do. It makes a difference. And so what I want to do is actually brag about a few people behind their back. Is that okay?

Let me start with NCC youth. This week we welcome 63 incoming sixth graders to NCC youth. Yeah, if we're going to clap, let's clap. If you are one of those sixth graders or the parent of one of those sixth graders, we've got an incredible youth ministry. We meet in four different places around the DMV, you can find that information and this would be a great weekend to jump in, right from the get go. So thankful for Pastor Steffen, Pastor Brook, but they would be the first ones to then deflect that and say we've got some incredible youth leaders. Sherry Miller is a teacher by day and then she turns over and loves and serves and discipless our middle school and high school girls at NCC. Matt Josai (sp?) started serving a year ago. The first thing he said to Pastor Steffen was, I'll go wherever there's the most need, and so we sent them to the Dung Gate. Just kidding. I love it. I love it. Someone who says, hey, whatever you need, God honors that.

Now, this week we kick off our small groups at NCC. I think we've got about 150 groups across our campuses and we have hundreds of small group leaders and I'll, let's just do this. If you're a past or present small group leader at any of our campuses, would you stand up right now? Would you just stand up, come on a past and present small group leaders? (clapping) Yeah, I want to honor you, say thank you for what you do and I want to say this. I think small groups are the community in National Community Church. And I don't have time to shout out everyone, but you know what I'm going to pick on Dave and Lynn Weatherby. They have served as mentors for our freshmen of the city group for 12 semesters. Every semester they are mentoring about a dozen people who are new to NCC, new to DC, and then they mentor our mentors.

Now, let me just say this, we want to grow bigger and bigger as a church and I'll tell you why, as long as there is someone who has not experienced, the joy and grace and love of God, we need to keep growing and we exist for the people who aren't here yet. And so we want to keep growing bigger and bigger, but at the same time we want to grow smaller and smaller. How? Through small groups, because that's where you're going to find relationship. Listen, the greatest apologetic for the Gospel is not intellectual; the greatest apologetic is relational. Jesus said by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

There are 38 names mentioned in Nehemiah 3, but, they're also 42 groups. You could call them small groups. Spirituality, it's a team sport. I just don't think we can get where God wants us to go all by ourselves. Did you know that they're 59 one anothers in the New Testament? Love one another, encourage one another, spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

All right, let me pick on a few more people. Takes about a 400 volunteers to pull off 12 services at seven campuses. And so I am barely going to scratch the surface. Beth Ann and Adam Runyon not only serve as small group leaders at our Gainesville campus, Beth Ann, wears one of those very cool NCC kids tee shirts. And she checks kids in, she welcomes new families as our family connect. Now, it does not take a NASA engineer to run, sound at NCC, but Lee Noble is one and he serves at our Kingstowne campus. If you look at that little magazine that you may have

gotten on the way in, the Next Booklet that you get each month. Really awesome story written by Stuart Elzinga. First of all, Stewart has an amazing beard. And he and his wife are a power couple, Stewart leads hospitality, Kyla leads NCC kids at our Ballston campus. And I love what he writes in the next magazine. He said, if you're struggling to feel connected, serving is one of the best ways to start building community. That is so true. And you know what? I have a hunch and my hunch is that everybody that help rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, I think they did not do it without some blood, right, and some tears and some sweat. What bonds you to the people around you? I think its blood, sweat, and tears when you're kinda in this thing together. There was this unique bond to everybody who had rebuilt the wall. I think when you are serving in a ministry, there's just something that creates connection with the people that you're serving with.

At our Potomac Yard campus Jacob and Ashley Baber setup and tear down our kids loft every week. At our Lincoln Theater campus I see Paul Elbo doing what he's done since our Union Station days. A little shout out to Jordan Castilla, who interprets our messages for the deaf community. And James Bayot who has served NCC kids for eight years. At our Barracks Row campus Julianna Hershap, I think she's done everything. I think she's done everything. Faithfully leads first impressions. Samantha Gonzales leads our nursery. At Echo Stage, we have got our parking crew, John Stevenson, Tom Malay. I wish I had more time all of that to say this. There is a third chapter of National Community Church and it's the names of some of these unsung heroes and its the groups that make us who we are. Many of the names you would not know, stories you have not heard, but you're making a difference.

Let me close with a conviction. The miracle is in the house. What I mean by that is this, we have a God size vision of vision that's going to take all seven campuses, but here's what I believe. When God gives a vision, he makes provision. How? Through people like you and like me, we have time, talent, and treasure at our seven campuses to pull off this vision. It's going to take a team effort. It's gonna take some sacrifice, but come on. Do you believe this? The miracle is in the house. Your obedience, your generosity, your sacrifice, make this church what it is, and it's going to turn into some miracles for some other people.

Alright, this weekend, NFL season kicks off, that means I'm allotted one football illustration. Pastor Joshua could explain this a little bit better than I could. He played in the NFL. My backup in peewee football actually played in the NFL. So there's that, true story. There's a concept in football called gap integrity, and I won't get into the nitty gritty, more true of the 4-3 defense, but there's a gap between the center and guard. There's an a gap between the guard and tackle; the b gap, and really if you're going to play an effective defense, which you need is defensive lineman who understand gap integrity. And if they function as a team, they're going to keep the offense from scoring. When I read Nehemiah three, it just screams gap integrity. I mean Malkijah just steps into the gap at the Dung Gate, Shallun steps into the gap and rebuild the pool of Siloam. Nehemiah, son of Azbuk rebuilds the House of Heroes. It's gap integrity. And this is where I just want to say something so simple. Don't let what you cannot do keep you from doing what you can. If we do little things like they're big things, God is going to do some big things like their little things.

In the months to come we'll keep casting vision. We'll let you know when we do demolition, let you know when we get that building permit and we'll let you know when it's time to rebuild this

old car barn and turn it back into a turnaround and each one of us is going to have a piece of that wall. And the God who began a good work is going to carry it to completion. May his kingdom come. May his will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, amen.