

“A Sacrifice of Praise”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 28, 2022

12th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 112:1-9b

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

“There are times when Christian faith calls us to strike out and blaze new trails; there are times when it calls us to stay on the well-worn path.”¹

This passage from the closing verses of Hebrews offers wisdom for churches throughout the ages, including congregations today that are still emerging from pandemic changes and navigating the shifting landscape of church in the American context. From beginning to end, the exhortations offered here are communal in nature; they offer a compelling picture of what the church might look like in a time when increasingly large numbers of people doubt its relevance.

The author of Hebrews rounds out his sermon with a set of ethical teachings about how to live as a community of faith in an indifferent or even hostile world. They provide practices that set it apart from – rather than move it in closer alignment with – its broader culture. In keeping with the image of a Christian life as a race from the 12th chapter, these words function as marks along the trail; they keep us on the path on our way to the goal.

The first mark, not surprisingly – and that which forms a foundation for all the rest – is love. The author focuses our attention in two directions. First, he points us to love for fellow believers in the community, saying: “let mutual love continue.” Here, he uses the word *philadelphia*, “love for brothers and sisters.” We are a family, he says, and we must continue to forge, nurture and strengthen those filial bonds if we are to find our way.

Still, they should not become an insular community focused only on themselves. They can’t forget to love the stranger as well. The Greek work that is traditionally translated “hospitality” is *philoxenia*, literally, “love of the strange.” In ancient times hospitality was an important practical virtue largely because inns were disreputable, unsafe places. There were no Ramadas or Holiday Inns. So, when people were away

¹ Alan Brehm, “Following”

from home, whether they had the resources or not, they were dependent on the kindness and generosity of others, often strangers, for a place to say.

In addition, many ancients were locked into lives of routine and their mobility was limited. One way that the world became larger was to open up one's home, however modest, to those who came from the outside. Hospitality was provided by those who had a "love of the strange" and were curious about the wider world. Hospitality, therefore, was a gift that could nourish both guest and host.²

The Hebrews were also encouraged to remember those in prison and being mistreated. The prisons of the ancient Roman world were crowded and daunting places, inmates often abused or neglected, meaning that family and friends would need to provide goods and visits to those bound in chains. Since they are all part of the same body, the congregation should serve those suffering just as if they were going through the same horrors, themselves.

Marriage vows should be also honored. Husbands and wives were mutually responsible for maintaining fidelity within their relationships. They were to show contentment rather than the love of money. Lack of gratitude and grasping for greater wealth should not color their lives. And leaders should be remembered. These could well have been direct witnesses of Jesus, who heard the gospel themselves, then spoke of it to this congregation. The author asks his listeners to recall the way these people endured to the end, just as he hopes his listeners will do. They are now part of the great cloud of witnesses and their faith should be imitated.

The final mark is proper worship and, in particular, proper sacrifice. This advice comes as no surprise, since worship has been a central tenet throughout this sermon. As a congregation, we make an offering of thanksgiving in response to the blessings we have received. But acceptable sacrifice moves beyond the arena of worship and praise. As those who have received grace and trust in God's provision, we are to extend such grace toward others by doing good and sharing what we have. We honor our generous God by living with open hearts and hands. We do not cling to our resources in order to secure our own lives in the face of an uncertain future. Instead, we share what we have as divine gifts entrusted to us as the stewards of God's bounty.

Acceptable worship does not find expression solely in ritual acts or in the sanctuary. It must infuse all of life. Thus, in our love for each other or for strangers in our midst; or for those facing difficulty or crisis we are worshipping God. In our faithfulness to our relationships and to the example of those who came before us we are worshipping God.³

² Eric Heen from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Bryan Whitfield from *WorkingPreacher.com*

In our context, we have many resources that we can use to walk this path, to access the tradition of faith and life handed down to us by those who have gone before us. In a very real sense, much of what we do comes from the witness they bear to us about faith – through hymns, prayers, and stories – these gifts they left for us that continue to nourish and guide us.

Our Christian tradition is rich in hospitality. Much of Jesus' life and many of his activities were tied to giving and receiving hospitality. He came as a stranger into the world, vulnerable to the welcome and rejection of others. He was a guest in numerous homes and meals, often acting as a host to individuals, small groups, and huge crowds, making use of the places available to him.

Even the earliest followers of Jesus were known for hospitality. Strangers were welcomed, gatherings were household-based, and inclusion was intentional. Congregations distinguished themselves as communities that cared for poor people and strangers, especially those who were sick or destitute. This focus on “public service” led to the founding of hospitals and educational institutions, which – over time – became more specialized. Eventually, separate buildings were dedicated not only for worship, but also to carry out these aspects of hospitality.⁴

In our modern society, many of these institutions – even if they have roots in the Christian tradition – operate independently. Our health care system is increasingly specialized and done by professionals. Hospitality has also become a huge industry. The prospect of welcoming traveling friends – not to mention strangers – into our homes is a scary proposition for most. We are afraid of being exposed, of being stretched thin, or of being taken advantage of.

So, what can we learn from the history of Christian hospitality that might suggest our small-scale, personal places of welcome are still crucial along with more institutionalized expressions of care? In what ways is the character of those offering hospitality crucial if it is to be truly life-giving? And, how can we, as Christians today, do good by sharing what we have by offering to God a sacrifice of praise?

Author Christine Pohl says,

There is blessing and mutuality in hospitality. Both recipients and hosts benefit when gifts are shared. In every form of hospitality, it is important to resist flattening roles to provider and recipient and instead find ways to nurture and value mutuality in relationships. Assistance and welcome can be provided in ways that value persons and give them a place in the community. Our tendency, even in congregational life, is to move from personal forms of community-based hospitality to organized programs

⁴ Christine Pohl, “Building a Place for Hospitality”

*of helping. But the personal and communal responses are crucial, and if there is move toward programming, it should be with programs that open into relationships.*⁵

We cannot eliminate all the risks that are present in offering and receiving hospitality. At times, people will misuse generosity. Efforts to protect ourselves and our communities from every possible contingency or risk result in ineffective or inhumane practices. And because, today, we have so many large-scale institutions that offer assistance without providing community, followers of Jesus can be especially attentive to opportunities to reconnect hospitality and community in our homes, congregations, and local ministries.

For example, many of us fail to realize how much genuine welcome can mean to others. Making time for a neighbor recovering from surgery, an international student, or a migrant family can be incredibly life-giving. Providing meals or sharing holiday celebrations with those who are usually overlooked can make a huge impact. Offering a place to be for someone who is alone or afraid or in need of encouragement opens the door to incredible blessings. What a gift it can be to practice “love of the strange” for someone who feels out-of-place or beyond-the bounds of the accepted or mainstream. This does not have to take place in your own home; maybe a park or a coffee shop is better; a fellowship table or a farmer’s market or an exercise class might become that sacred, shared space.

Sometimes, it is important for churches to move into new spaces, to blaze new trails, and to create attractive and engaging program offerings. But, as this letter to the Hebrews reminds its readers – who, like us, were a small band of faithful but sometimes struggling followers of Christ – we are called to two essential, fundamental goalposts on our life’s path: to worship God with gratitude and to do good by sharing what we have with others. Together – because the two things really cannot be separated – we offer to God a sacrifice of praise; for we are stewards of the good news that, in Christ, God’s love has and always will be with us. Amen.