

Sermon: A New and Living Way

Lessons: Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13: 1-8,21-27

Date: November 15, 2009

The Rev. Merritt N. Schatz,



A good theologian has written: It is an evil which prevails everywhere among mankind, that every one gets himself above others, and especially that those who seem in anything to excel cannot well endure their inferiors to be on an equality with themselves. And then there is so much morosity almost in all, that individuals would gladly make churches for themselves if they could; for they find it so difficult to accommodate themselves to the ways and habits of others. The rich envy one another; and hardly one in a hundred can be found among the rich, who allows to the poor the name and rank of brethren. Unless similarity of habits or some allurements or advantages draw us together, it is very difficult even to maintain a continual concord among ourselves. Extremely needed, therefore, by us all is the admonition to be stimulated to love and not to envy, and not to separate from those whom God has joined to us, but to embrace with brotherly kindness all those who are united to us in faith.” (Calvin, Commentary on Hebrews, [www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/calhb-13.htm](http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/m.sion/calhb-13.htm))

This theologian describes our current life in the Church Universal pretty well. Though our propensity for being divided is not limited the rich and poor distinctions, - one could substitute any number of differences of opinion for that example and find that the rest rings true. Our contemporary society finds it difficult to find common ground, the foundation upon which our life together even as the Body of Christ, can move forward in confidence. The interesting thing is that this theologian is not contemporary. The words I read just a few minutes ago are from John Calvin’s Commentary on the Book of Hebrews.

There would be a number of people who might find it ironic that it is John Calvin, often himself accused of being morose, who charges the church with this sin. We look back on the Reformation as a time which required deep commitment and strong fervor of faith. And it was. However, along with this fervor came strong opinions as well. And along with the deep infighting in the Church came disillusionment and frustration. However, this was not a new issue for the Church even then. The first hearers of this sermon – for the Book of Hebrews is really a sermon more than a letter- are revealed throughout the book to be suffering from fears of persecution, doubts as the second coming of Jesus does not occur, aggravation and disappointment as saints live less than saintly lives. The initial thrill of the coming new kingdom has passed into ennui and maintenance mode. The temptation for them and for us is to lose faith

altogether, or to lower one's expectations so as not to be disappointed. The excitement we have in sharing what we believe, devolves into a desire to maintain what we have, not to lose any more, and to minimize any demands so as not to scare away anyone who might join the effort. Such a response, however, suggests that what we have is not enough.

What is it, after all, that we offer in the Church? In this congregation we have great music, good preaching, a growing youth program, one engaging Sunday morning Adult class, one engaging week night Adult class, a fair amount of mission, and some loving people. To be honest, though, we have to admit that we also have a poorly attended children's Sunday School program, budget concerns, very busy schedules, difficulty in finding support for some programs and offices. But the real truth is that even if we had the most charismatic of preachers, and our programs and boards were extremely active, and we had money overflowing in our coffers, this would be dross compared to what we really have to offer. Welcome dross, to be sure, but dross none the less. For what we really have to offer the world is Christ. We can offer Christ, not because we are so wonderful, or know so much, or have a lock on what being a Christian means, but because God in grace has given Christ to and for us, and has given us the privilege and responsibility to share Christ with others.

This is what the writer of the book of Hebrews is reminding his tired, fearful, worried, disappointed, disillusioned, drifting away congregation. This is what John Calvin reminded a church which was bogging down in disputation and struggling with finding its way forward in faith. Christ is our hope and the hope of the world. Christ is who and what calls us together. Christ is the great high priest who opens the way for us, who mediates for us, who fills us with life through the sacrifice of his life-giving blood. When we turn to what is our heart and soul, the One who has cleansed our heart and body, Jesus Christ, when Christ is the most important thing in our lives, when we consider with each action how Christ, our power-filled Redeemer, figures in each relationship, each responsibility, each joy or sorrow, encouragement or discouragement, when we do all this, then we can move forward with the boldness and confidence that comes from being in the presence of God through the grace of Christ.

Hebrews reminds us that in Christ God has established a new covenant in our hearts and souls and daily lives. We have hearts sprinkled clean with forgiveness and bodies and spirits washed with the waters of baptism. God has made us new creations in Christ so that we can move forward with confidence and boldness into the newness of life abundant.

Hebrews also reminds us that the path we take in this newness of life is not through the same old patterns and relationship with God. In the past the sacrifice for forgiveness needed to be repeated, and only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. In Christ, the sacrifice is accomplished once for all time, and Christ then sits at the right hand of God to wait for the time when all God's enemies shall be placed as Christ's footstool. This sitting and

waiting is not a passive stance. Christ's seat at God's right hand is a place of power and authority. Christ's waiting is the opportunity which God has given all those being sanctified to participate in God's work, God's ministry of love and reconciliation in this world. As the Body of Christ, we are called to be active through the Holy Spirit, in demonstrating the active power of Christ's grace. Christ has opened the way, through his sacrifice of becoming human, suffering and dying for us and then rising from the dead, so that we, forgiven of our sins and made a new creation, can enter the Holy of Holies, the direct presence of Almighty God. We are called to enter this presence boldly, the Greek word refers to confidence, freedom of speech, the power to speak openly. This boldness comes through the righteousness of Christ, who frees us and empowers us.

The frequent references in Hebrews to body and blood; spirit, heart and body, direct us to the nature of God's purpose in Christ. There is to be no separation, no division between our spiritual and our physical lives, no split between our Sunday behavior and our weekday behavior, no skating by in our so-called secular life. We have but one life, our life in Christ. We are called to live, not with abandonment, but with the abundance of the new and living way of Christ.

Having been reminded of who Christ is, and to what Christ invites us, can we any longer give Christ the second, third, or fourth priority of our lives? Can we deny ourselves the nourishment of His presence because we will not schedule ourselves in ways that allow for Sunday worship? Can we stunt our spiritual growth because material goods and other activities, even worthy ones, deplete our time, energy, and finances so that little is left to give to the Body of Christ? When Christ opens the way into the living presence of God – how often do we say, “Oh, I'm so sorry, but I have out-of-town guests, or soccer games or am too tired. I'll do my best to come next time.”? And next time becomes the next time and the next time...

This sermon, and these points are difficult, uncomfortable ones to make. Those who have given much of their time, energy and money might feel unappreciated. Those who have health issues, or caring ministries which keep them away, or unavoidable travel, might feel guilty and then stay away because the unintended guilt is burdensome. Those who most need to hear the message might be unlikely to hear it because they are not here. Why run the risk? Should we question our priorities lest we hurt someone's feelings, or chase away someone who is at least participating in the life of the church some? Please know, it is not my intention to be chase anyone away, and that I am aware that the challenges I feel the book of Hebrews places before us come just as sharply to myself as to anyone else. I do not repeat the challenge of Hebrews with any sense of self-righteousness. I am grateful to God that the writer of Hebrews spoke so lovingly and bluntly to his congregation, because it is what we, all of us, maybe especially me, need to hear.

The writer of Hebrews knew also that some would be hurt by his challenge, would think that he just did not understand their situations. Yet the writer did not seek to hurt, but to build up. He reminds the listeners that they – and we – have a great high priest in heaven, even Jesus Christ, who knows our limitations and our frailties. He is not trying to subject the good people of his church to further aggravation. He is challenging them and us to reach for the potential which is given to us in Christ, to provoke – in Greek to pester, nag at – one another to love of God and one another and to express of love in action. He is very aware of the tiredness, the fears, the disappointments. He is determined to let the people know that God is also aware of all these. God, who sent His Son to earth to become one of us, did not and does not desire that we should collapse under the weight of our struggles. Jesus told his disciples to take his yoke upon them because his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Hebrews tells us that Christ has already taken our yoke upon him, and lightens our burden, removes our sin, so that we can walk beside him. Our struggles do not easily go away. We are not instantly lifted to joy and trouble-free life. But we do become members of Christ's Body, enabled to grow in faith and to share our joys and struggles. Together we are lifted in hope by the One who leads us and is our Head.

In this world of bombings, shootings, economic issues, intra-denominational as well as interdenominational division, overly scheduled lives, we need to hear again the words of hope to which Christ calls us. We need to be provoked – pestered, bothered, nagged, even shocked on occasion, to experience once again the love of God, and to love God and one another, propelled by this provocation to loving acts of kindness and grace.

God in grace does not leave us in lethargy, or in despair, or in busyness. God acts to wake us up.

On the show, NCIS, a mystery show involving the US Navy Investigative Services, there is a character, Tony DeNozo, who, while a good investigator, often gets a bit full of himself. The lead of the investigative team has a simple remedy. He baps the DeNozo on the back of the head with a quick, sharp tap. It gets his attention and brings him back in focus. I don't recommend hitting folks in the head, nor do I consider all problems we have as tests by God. But I do think sometimes God gives us a DeNozo, a wake-up call, to remind us to focus on the gift of grace which we sometimes let slip to the back of our attention. The book of Hebrews, and especially this passage from it, is one of God's DeNozo's to us. Let us receive this call to hope with thanksgiving!