

11-14-21

Pentecost 25

Hebrews 10: 11-14, 19-25

## **A Single Offering**

I guess speaking to the Church has always been a daunting task. I can't tell you how many times people have told me they'll do anything the Church needs them to do, but don't ask them to stand before the Church and say something. I had a good friend and good elder in another congregation several years ago who declined to serve another term when the Elder Nominating Committee came calling on him. He had been on the Session before and had sat off a year or two. So everyone thought he'd be fine with another term. This guy was in the insurance business, talked to people all the time, was a member of civic clubs, and was active in other ways in the community where we lived. Talking in front of people never seemed to be a problem for him. In that congregation, the elders rotated being readers during worship and helping to lead the service in other ways. My friend had taken his turn behind the lectern many times, and always did as well as anyone else did. But that was the problem this year. He said he would not come back on the Session as long as that was a requirement for serving. Yes, he had done it before, but it took him all afternoon to recover after his morning at Church, and this time around he decided he just wasn't going to do that to himself again. So, no, he told the Committee, they'd have to find someone else this time around. Standing before the Church, even to read, was simply something he was not willing to do anymore.

Some of you are looking at me as if you fully understand. I had a couple of conversations this week about how some of you are going to have to step up and do things like that in a few weeks when visiting preachers start being here. I know that task is not

easy for some and that it's not for everyone. But there are plenty of you who will be able to stand and deliver when you're called on.

Imagine having the responsibility of speaking a word the Church needs to hear—not just read what's in the bulletin or review the announcements. Imagine being the one who tries to discern what God wants the Church to hear Sunday after Sunday. And then being the one who tries to tell it.

That's the predicament in which the writer of Hebrews found himself. In fact, most people who study such things think that this letter was originally a sermon that some early Christian preacher circulated to several different churches, hoping to encourage them in their ministry. It wasn't unusual for worshiping communities not to have their own resident pastor in those days, so sometimes when they gathered for worship that's what they did: they might have gotten a letter from Paul, who used to be their pastor or from someone who traveled and worked with him. So they would gather and sing some hymns and pray for one another and for the world, and then they'd read that letter and talk about what it said.

They may very well have been how this Letter to the Hebrews was preserved for us to read after all these years. Those first congregations who read it found things in it that they thought were important enough to save, so they passed it on to others, and after some time, when the Church began to put the New Testament together, it became part of that canon.

If you'll go with me on that kind of origin for this book, then we need to see what we can figure out about the world into which it was written.

All is not well in the churches to whom this letter was written. Covid wasn't the problem, but there were others. In the earliest days of the Church, enthusiasm and excitement about ministry were just part of the equation. The Good News that Jesus came to bring and which the Early Church felt compelled to share was contagious. People wanted to hear it, and plenty of people wanted to share it. The wonderful stories of what Jesus

had done and the effect his life and witness had on people's lives was something people had waited all their lives to hear. Add to that the prospect that he was coming back—any day now—and people just couldn't wait to gather to hear more about him and his Gospel.

But you know how that kind of thing goes.

I've told you before that Deanna and I graduated from a high school that was academically and artistically sound, but we weren't much on athletics. It's football playoff time in Kentucky as it is here, and we're all amazed that our high school is still alive and playing on Friday nights. District champions as of Friday night! It wasn't that way when we were there. But Friday after Friday afternoon, they'd troop us into the gym for a pep rally. Trying to rally the team and convince them and us that we really had a shot. We were usually done by this point in the season, but we had stopped believing long before now. Pep rallies were a lot more fun than geometry class, so we went, but we mostly went through the motions.

Something like that is what the Early Church faced. They believed that Jesus was coming back and that all the wonderful things he had promised, but it had been a while and there was little sign of any of that coming to pass. It's been about thirty-five years since that Friday when Jesus died and that Sunday morning when he rose again. Some of the ones who had been there to see those things and all the other things they talked about have died. Some of the ones who came after them have gotten caught up in other things. Some have stopped believing. Others may not have given up altogether, but they're beginning to wonder if it's worth it. They're tired. They're weary. And they wonder if they can go on.

Add to that the weariness that comes with trying to live a life that is different than the ones people around you live, a life based on a whole different set of values than the conventional ones of the culture around you. And trying to live that life without much support or encouragement.

As you might imagine, the life of congregations that might have gathered to read and hear this letter has suffered. Attendance falls off. Enthusiasm for mission and ministry lag. The nature of the life of those communities where people have been nurtured and sustained has taken a hit, and people are beginning to wonder if it's all worth it anymore.

The preacher who wrote this letter was wiser than most. Maybe it was a good thing that he didn't have Google at his fingertips. He couldn't log onto the web and find the latest gimmick to stimulate the life of the Church or the latest church growth technique to turn things around. As he sat in his technology-deprived environment and pondered what might help the doldrums into which the Church had fallen, he decided that what people really needed was to know more about Jesus. And from that thinking comes this Christological epistle we know as the Letter to the Hebrews. We've read from it for several weeks this fall before we took a couple of weeks off for special celebrations. This book is all about Jesus, and that's not by accident. All that talk we had a few weeks back about how Jesus is superior to the High Priest is not just something to talk about. Again today, he reminds us that those High Priests stood day after day offering sacrifice for sin that never seemed to be effective. But when Jesus came, he offered himself as a sacrifice for the sin of the world, and he did that once and then his work was finished. Then he sat down at the right hand of God, confident that he had accomplished what he came to do.

There are very few things that most of us can do once and consider it done. We might like to add some things to that list, but there are very few of them. We've moved more times than most of you have, I suspect, and every time we do, we think surely that's it. Now as we face one more time to pack up and head out, we discover that we're not quite done with that part of life. I really can't think of very many things that we do only once. Most things wind up being repeated, or being done again to try to get them right.

But when Jesus had made things right between God and us, he was done.

That's what the writer of this letter wanted people in his day to know, that our salvation is a completed act, that Jesus has done what was necessary for us to live in peace with ourselves, with one another, and, most importantly, with God. That is, apparently, a difficult concept for many to grasp. Even for us in the Church. We like to think that there is always more we need to be doing, that somehow what Jesus has accomplished is not quite enough. Somehow, we need to come to terms with this once and for all nature of what Jesus came to do and did.

Jesus didn't just open a door for us and then leave it to us to decide whether we'd walk through it or not. The Church can be as much a part of the problem as the rest of the world around us can be sometimes. I haven't done a real statistical study, but I've hung around church folks enough to know that celebration and joy don't come naturally to us. Far too much of our preaching and teaching seems to be designed to help people think there is still more they need to be doing in order to be saved. That work is done. There is plenty left for us to do because we have found peace with God, but anything we do or say that causes people to question whether that peace can be possible or not is not only not helpful—it's not Christian! I read a piece not long ago from a pastor from a tradition that is much different than ours. He took job after job at what he called feel-good churches, churches that constantly tell people they are OK,, they living at peace with God and with themselves is a good thing. He seemed to think that the role of the Church was to convince people that they were not OK. I read over that piece several times and the biggest problem I had with it was that I never saw any path to being OK in it. If peace with God and peace with ourselves is not the goal, then what is? If all we can offer people is frustration and obstacles, then we have less to offer them than their jobs or their civic or social groups or their families or any of the other identities in which they live. Without a sustaining and redeeming relationship with Jesus Christ, we are definitely not OK. But once we have found that

relationship and the peace it brings, we can celebrate unspeakable joy without worry that somehow we haven't done enough. That joy and the life to which it calls us is what Jesus did before he sat down.

That joy is what the writers of Hebrews offers his tired and weary friends as a way not to lose hope. They found themselves in that state in thirty-five years. Here we find ourselves after more than two thousand years of waiting for what Jesus promised to come. Covid has swept in and changed the world and very likely changed the Church forever. If all we can do is gaze back and wonder when we'll get back to what we once were, we'll be as frustrated as those early Christians were. But if we can dig deeper into our relationship with Jesus and hear him calling us in ways we haven't before, we need not lose hope. The division in our culture grows deeper and wider every day. Some parts of the Church seem to contribute to it by indicating that some are welcome, and others are not. Remember those What Would Jesus Do bracelets that many wore a few years back? Maybe it's time to dust those off and wear them again to remind us, if not everybody else, that the Church that Jesus founded must be a place where all are welcome, regardless of who they voted for or didn't, regardless of whether they agree with us or not. Our call is not to live in little enclaves of self-supporting thinking. Our call is to hear what Jesus said and is still saying and to create a community in which those things guide and govern—not whatever is most popular or whoever shouts the loudest.

It really is all about Jesus. It always has been. And if we are to have a future, it always will be. I know that hearing that the pastor is leaving in the midst of these confusing times adds just another layer of disruption to an already confusing scenario. The answer to what this Church or any other one will be going forward lies in how closely we follow Jesus. He is the one who did what God required to make us whole, and what he did for us is supposed to make a difference in our lives. That work is done. The work that remains for us to do must not involve challenging people's faithfulness or the quality of their commitment. There will

always be people around and among us who don't know what we do: that God loves us—always has and always will, and that that makes a difference. Those of us who know that need to be sure we are doing all we can to insure that no one within our reach misses a chance to know that truth and to see their lives transformed by it.

I believe it is more than acceptable for us to help people know they're OK. That's what Jesus came to assure us—that when our lives are wrapped up in his, we are beyond OK; we are what God has been calling and equipping us to be forever. And when we know we're OK, worship will be a joy and not a drudgery. Discipleship will be the foundation of a new life and not just something we are required to be or do. Life in this world will be filled with joy and fulfillment that will sustain us until we experience joy beyond measure in that place where Jesus awaits us at the right hand of God. His work is done. Ours continues. But it can be much more joyful than we seem to think it can be. Thanks be to God! Amen.

### Prayers of the People

Great and gracious God, in your mercy, you hear our prayers and you know the deepest desires of our hearts and minds. You answer our prayers and provide for our needs in abundance. So we come to you in faith, gracious God, praying for our own needs, for the needs of our community, and for the needs of the world. We pray first today for the witness of the Church, that we might be signs of your grace and mercy and that our presence might guide people to peace and not frustration. We pray that we might live out our response to your call.

We pray for the global community, divided and diverse as it is. We pray that we might learn from and alongside each other even while we remain apart on issues, and that we might strive to find ways to live in peace with one another, regardless of what it requires of us.

We pray for the needs of our own community. We all have our ideas about what those are. Help us to look beyond our own

perceptions and our own wants and strive for what will improve life for all who live here and make others want to live here, too. Help us not to be complacent or satisfied until schools educate kids for futures and streets lead to places people want to do, not just out of town. We know that you are our provider, O God, and that you want more for us than we know how to want for ourselves. Help us to continue to seek until we find your way. We pray for all who suffer. Whether it be in mind or body or spirit, help us to be signs of your healing presence in the world, offering peace and comfort when we can and presence when we don't know what else to offer. We give thanks for all who care for the sick and for those who care for the caregivers. We remember families who have experienced death and pray that we might be signs of comfort for all who mourn. We lift to you our own prayers for people, places, and issues that are dear to us.....

We ask all these things, O God from the depths of our searching for your way and in an effort to do and to be what brings honor and glory to you and to your Church; we pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us all to pray when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever.

Amen.