

Epworth Chapel on the Green
Pentecost 15
September 1, 2013
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6
Psalm 112
Hebrews 13:1-8
Luke 14:1-14

On prior occasions when I've preached from the book of Hebrews, I've noted that this New Testament letter or epistle is actually closer to a lengthy *sermon*, not an epistle. The main body of the book bears all of the marks of a sermon, or what the writer calls "a word of exhortation" (13:22).

And the congregation to whom he preaches faces a problem not uncommon to many congregations today. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of being peculiar and being whispered about in society, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired of the spiritual struggle.

In some ways, they are even tired of *Jesus*. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12). Attendance is down at church, and they are losing confidence (10:25). The challenge to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction. The temptation facing this worn out congregation is to drop their end of the rope and just walk away. Tired of walking the walk, many in this group are considering "taking a walk," leaving the church,

and falling away from the faith. [See Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 2-3]

Our text this morning from chapter 13 is a bit unique in that the preacher's "formal" or official sermon came to a close at the end of chapter 12. What we seem to have here in chapter 13 is a mish-mash of things, an assortment of concerns, the post-service "announcements" if you will. Similar, I suppose, to what I do here at Epworth at the end of our service of Word and Table.

But with the preacher here in Hebrews, the sermon does not end just because the sermon notes are folded up and put away. His post-sermon "announcements" have much to say to us, if we are willing to listen.

He begins by reminding the people to continue to show true love to each other. But that love of one another should not become so ingrown that folks fail to practice hospitality to strangers. For the strangers in your midst could be angels in disguise!

The preacher's second announcement involves ministry to the imprisoned and wounded. As I've mentioned before, some in this faith community had been persecuted, and even imprisoned, for their faith in Jesus. The preacher makes it clear here that when the church does prison ministry, it should be done not from a spirit of "condescending charity," but rather from a spirit of genuine *empathy* and

compassion. “Share the sorrow of those being mistreated, as *though you yourself were being mistreated*,” says the preacher.

As the preacher moves to his third announcement, he goes from preaching to meddling, as he tackles the subjects of sex and money.

The preacher reminds his congregation (and us) that it is possible to bring pain and heartache and division to the church as much by what we *love* as by what we *hate*. That is, it is possible to love the wrong *persons* (through fornication and adultery) and to love the wrong *things* (i.e., money).

Stay away from the love of money, the preacher says, and be content with what you have. In support of this, he offers two Old Testament references for support: “God will never leave you nor forsake you,” and “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.” (Deut. 31:6, Psalm 118:6)

This puts an interesting spin on the exhortation about staying away from the love of money. I have always thought that the preacher here is railing against *greed*. Warning against the constant grasping for more, the incessant desire to hoard and stockpile and accumulate. And perhaps he is.

But these two Old Testament references may add something to the discussion. They say: “God will never leave you or forsake you,” and “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid.”

If I were honest, I would admit that there are times in my life where I need this admonition about staying away from the love of money. I have a deep-seated fear (probably from childhood) that I won't have enough, especially when it comes to the future.

But what if the love of money that plagues us is *not so much the product of greed but the fear of abandonment?* What if my obsession about money is less about my *greed* and more about my *fear*? What if I'm afraid I'll be alone, that I won't be able to provide for or care for myself? What if the preacher here is addressing not just our greed, but its underlying cause, which is fear?

If so, these quotes become especially relevant. "I will never fail you or forsake you." "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid."

Finally, the preacher concludes his announcements with a word about Christian leaders, and the need to trust the Lord as they do.

While it's tough to piece together, apparently there were at least two issues that this congregation was battling. First, they were close to turning their Christian faith into a legalistic, rules-based religion (cf. 9:6-10;12:9; 13:9).

Second, there were some in the congregation who were struggling to share their faith outside of the walls of the church. And with good reason. To do so often meant being exposed to public abuse and persecution (10:32-39).

But the preacher's words about money also apply here. The Lord will not fail or forsake such believers, and in the end, there is nothing that mere mortals can do to harm them. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. And if he made his way outside the camp and offered up himself as the supreme sacrifice, God's tired and weary people can also be strengthened to fulfill God's call on their lives.

I'm not entirely sure how this group at Epworth is similar to this preacher's congregation, and how we are different. Perhaps we are similar in that we sometimes become tired and discouraged. We can be tempted to look for love in the wrong persons and things. We can be tempted to reduce relationship with Jesus to rules-based legalism.

It can be hard for us to reach out to those we don't know or who are different from us. And we can be tempted at points to keep our mouths shut and not admit to being Christian, from fear of being misunderstood, or from fear of being *fully understood* and what that might mean in a culture increasingly hostile to Christian faith.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come with faith, and with the resolve that we will continue our journey *together*, loving one another deeply, as God in Christ loves us. Let the bread and wine be promises this morning that Jesus

will never leave us to our own devices, or forsake us as we seek to follow him. Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, and let him meet our need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.