

Not Neglecting

November 17, 2024

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

The Book of Hebrews is not the most accessible of the writings of the New Testament. The author spent a lot of time bringing up passages of the Hebrew Bible that most people have never heard of. Just as one example, Sunday School teachers haven't spent much time of the priesthood of Melchizedek in Genesis 14, while the author of Hebrews spent a fair amount of time reflecting on it.

However, I'm going to give you my one-line summary of the Book of Hebrews. Ready? OK. Here it is:

It's all about Jesus.

I suppose a little expansion might be helpful...

Are you worried about who to pay attention to? Pay attention to Jesus. Are you worried about death? Life comes from Jesus. Are you worried about forgiveness of sin? That comes from Jesus. Are you worried about whether you should be making sacrifices? Don't worry: Jesus has made the last sacrifice and no more are required.

Or more simply: It's all about Jesus.

As Christopher T. Holmes writes at Working Preacher, "The point is clear: Jesus has removed all obstacles that might keep the hearers from entering into God's presence. The problem, as the exhortation in verses 22–25 makes clear, is with the hearers' willingness to keep drawing near."

Let me re-read that exhortation:

"...Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Amy L. B. Peeler writes, also at Working Preacher, "'Are there any verses in the Bible that explicitly tell us to go to church?' Students have raised this question several times in my

classroom, and rarely is there an occasion where the answer is so straightforward. Hebrews 10:25 is just that verse..." Dr. Peeler teaches, incidentally, at Wheaton College in Illinois.

But why would people "neglect to meet together," as the author of Hebrews put it? Well, first of all, gathering for religious purposes looked a lot different in the first century.

The weekly Sabbath meetings of the Jewish synagogues were the exception, not the rule, among first century Mediterranean religions. Most devotional activity for Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians consisted either of rituals performed in the home, or of bringing an offering for sacrifice in public. Public sacrifices, however, weren't held one day a week. There wasn't a set time when everybody crowded into a building to pray together. In fact, they rarely went into a building. Sacrifices took place outdoors. Most people never entered a temple building proper.

There would have been a few times during a year when everyone came out to worship, but those would have been festivals. And again, the activity of most "worshippers" was probably watching a parade going down the street to one of the temples.

When the author of Hebrews commented on "some" who didn't gather, "some" was "most." Jews who lived someplace other than Jerusalem had developed weekly gatherings for prayer and study in synagogues, a distinct difference between them and the others around them. Christians continued the practice.

Like the synagogues, the meetings of Christian communities had a different purpose than the great festivals of the Greeks or the triumphs of the Romans, or even the rituals of the Jerusalem Temple. The author of Hebrews noted it here. We gather "to provoke one another to love and good deeds... encouraging one another..."

That has remained the reason for the Church's existence in the nearly two thousand years since.

Why do we gather? To provoke one another to love. To provoke one another to good deeds. To encourage one another.

That's one of the reasons that the pandemic was so hard on us. In the presence of a virulent and dangerous disease spread primarily through the breath, it wasn't safe to get together. "We stay separate now," read one version of a common saying, "so that when we gather later, we will all be here." Two years ago on this day I was home in bed sick with COVID. I recovered. Have we forgotten that over a million Americans didn't? That over seven million have died across the globe?

We had good reason to keep apart. But it was hard.

It was hard because the ancient Hawaiians were right: "ha," spirit, breath, is something that two human beings share with one another for the good of both. When sharing breath became

hazardous, we lost something that sustained our spirits, something that needed no words to take place, and what could we share over the wires? Words.

Words suffered as well. I was in my forties when I learned something very important about communication, which is that communication hasn't happened until it's gone two ways: forth and back. Without response, communication hasn't really occurred. Which is why parents get so insistent on getting a response from a teenager.

We used the tools available to us to stream a worship experience to you and to anyone else who chose. It was my decision to use a broadcast-style technology, to use a format that gave worshipers little ability to respond during worship. Mostly I made that choice to keep it as simple as possible for you. I wish I'd created some other more interactive ministries, more than a Bible Study, but alas, I didn't.

Now that we're back together, we've continued the live stream for the simple reason that people still find it useful. Some work Sunday mornings. Others can't physically make it to worship. Those people – you people – are important, and giving you an opportunity to celebrate God's grace is important. We will not neglect you.

Don't neglect, however, to take up what opportunities come your way to provoke others to love and to good deeds, and to encourage them in the faith.

That word "provoke" provoked a fair amount of discussion during Bible Study this week. It seems an odd word to use of love. Katherine Shaner writes at Working Preacher, "Instead of asserting a community built on sameness and good feeling, the preacher seems to note that provocation and exasperation is part of being a community. She exhorts us to build a kind of community gathering that relentlessly, even irritatingly, suggests that actions of love and deeds are not what create faith, but are rather the responsibility of the community which needs to gather because of their faith in the great high priest — a faith God gives."

Can we be a provoking community, one that doesn't settle for a little bit of love? Can we be a community that expects more of ourselves than just a good deed or two here or there? Can we be a community that asks, "How can we do this better? How can we make this good available to more people? How can we equip people to live their lives in fullness?"

It's the irritating sand in the oyster shell that provokes it to produce a pearl. It's those pesky other nene that allow us to fly with less effort. It's those sometimes irritating other Christians who provoke us to do good.

Let us not neglect to gather, to provoke one another to love and good deeds, and to encourage one another.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson