

Hebrews 10:11-15, 19-25 Pentecost 25 Bill Uetrict 11.11.21

This sermon didn't come easy for me this week. Most of our texts are apocalyptic in character; they focus on the "final things" and the awful things (wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes) that are occurring and will occur. While undoubtedly, we are living in apocalyptic times, the apocalyptic texts from Mark and Daniel just didn't grab me this week. You got to do a lot of work to unpack these kinds of readings. They are very meaningful, but at an initial glance, they seem tough to relate to for us moderns. The reading from Hebrews did grab me, but it, too, seems quite disconnected to the lives of Michiganders in 2021. High priests, animal sacrifice, temple curtains? Huh?

How do you talk about this Hebrews stuff in a modern way, I asked my wife the other day, while she was under the influence of her Moderna booster shot? It probably wasn't fair on my part. But I was struggling. I told her that I thought Hebrews was trying its best to communicate something very important, something that resonates with all of humanity, but did so in a way that leaves many of us modern folks out. I said that Hebrews was dealing with some tough stuff to understand (the death of Jesus and the relationship of the new and the old) and then was explaining these things in a way that would have made sense to Hebrews' Jewish-Christian audience. How do I make sense of his vision for people who live now?

When my wife heard me ask this, she said: "Well, that's *your* job." Now truthfully, I don't think she was just being flippant or trying to avoid the hard work of answering the question in light of her Covid-booster brain. She was simply reminding me of what preachers are called to do, what preaching is all about. Preaching takes old stuff, written to ancient audiences and brings it on home, makes it come alive to people who don't necessarily relate to how the message was being

communicated and the images in the message, but who, it is hoped, can clearly relate to the content of the message.

It is no surprise that most scholars would consider Hebrews to be not a letter, but a sermon—a sermon addressing a real congregation with real needs, bringing home the message with symbols and images that would have made sense to the people of the time.

But yes, they don't make a lot of sense to us. For Hebrews, Jesus is the new high priest, a high priest who is far superior to the previous high priests. As I trust you know, high priests offered sacrifices regularly on behalf of the people. They had to do it again and again because sin, even their own sin, had to be dealt with anew.

Now again, most of us have a hard time relating to offering sacrifices. As far as I know, very few of you are burning animals to expunge your sin. Yes, you put some chicken or steaks on the grill, but I doubt many of you view your charbroiled lamb or beef as a way of wiping out the messiness of your life.

High priests, sacrifices, and temple curtains—all mentioned by Hebrews—are foreign to us. But what is Hebrews getting at? Is there a message there that we can resonate with? The author of Hebrews in critiquing ancient Jewish practice points to the fact that the high priests had to offer sacrifices repeatedly. Sacrifice was a non-ending reality. His point is that as Jesus offered his life on the cross, he did so once for all. The need for sacrifice is done. The author of Hebrews imaginatively puts what happened after Jesus' death with these words: "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he *sat* down at the right hand of God." Most high priests stood in their work. Jesus, the imagination of Hebrews says, after his sacrifice, sat down next to God. His work was done. The work of sacrifice was over.

What's the point? Is Hebrews telling me something that matters for my life? Absolutely. I like what William Loader says, "The emphasis

here is on completeness. Nothing is missing. There is no need for an additional mediator. You don't need a priest as a broker before God. You don't need additional rituals which only they can perform. Nothing needs repeating. God does not hold back. Love is there for all of us, 'once and for all.'"

How much of our lives is a matter of making up for the past, as if the love, grace, and compassion of God are not sufficient for the present? How often do we hold on to guilt because, believe it or not, guilt makes us feel better? Sometimes guilt is what we hang on to because we think it is something we can do when we really can't do anything at all. Some of us love to live in the punishment mode. We cripple ourselves with what is often self-imposed punishment because we feel we must make up for what we did. Honestly, sometimes we have done some pretty bad things, but also sometimes some pretty bad things have been done to us. Some of us are not even guilty. Yet we hang on to what has been done to us, as if that past stuff can define us.

What if grace is sufficient for the day? What if the kind of compassion that is experienced in a dying man on a cross, embracing us who have done all kinds of terrible things or have had terrible things done unto us—what if that compassion is enough for the living of this day and the movement into the future? What if there is abundance in God that frees from the confines of the past? And that, I believe, is what Hebrews is telling us. We don't need to keep offering sacrifice. The sacrificial system is over. We don't need to grovel before life, people, and God.

Actually, according to Hebrews, we can have *confidence* to enter the sanctuary, live our lives before God. Life in God is not about pretending that we aren't worth much, that what we have done or what has been done to us makes us unworthy to approach God or to assert ourselves before people. Hebrews says, "Let us approach [the

presence of God] 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.” We approach God and life with a full assurance of forgiveness, which, by the way, frees us to bring our brokenness before God and others. The power of forgiveness is to be discovered in our ability to tell the truth, to admit what we’ve done and what’s been done to us. To know the reality of forgiveness is to be free to seek it. Our lives are messy. We can bring the totality of them before God and yes, even before one another.

Hebrews takes seriously the importance of others, the importance of the communal character of this faith stuff. Faith is not meant to be done alone, something that so many believe today. I don’t need to be with other people. I don’t need to gather with others. Faith is a personal, private journey. Not according to Hebrews. The confidence that we are called to live is confidence that we get in community. Listen to the author’s words: “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.”

It’s in community that we take the confidence that is God’s gift to us to help us live out love, to do good deeds for one another and for the world. It’s in meeting together that we are reminded that there is enough grace and forgiveness to go around. It’s in meeting together that we are provoked to think beyond our own little lives, to reach beyond our own concerns and issues, something which, actually, often helps us deal with our own concerns and issues. You don’t know how many times I have been told by people that their being provoked into doing good deeds has served to help them deal with themselves and their problems. As they are in community and as they reach out to other people, they get help with their issues, and they are able to put

their problems in perspective. A problem shared is often a problem halved.

We are living in a time that Hebrews could never have imagined. We don't have to get together to be together. The pandemic has made us all grateful for the Internet. It can keep us connected. And I would encourage you to use it for that purpose. Our adult education classes are supreme examples of connected people, of people who don't neglect to meet together. But I would urge you not to allow the Internet to turn you into spectators. We need to be together. We need to be accountable to one another. We need to support one another.

And we don't need to be together so that we can earn our way, make points, keep offering sacrifices to deal with the past. No, not at all. Our gathering online or in-person is about the sheer joy of being together. As Martin Luther reminded us, worship, being together, is not about obligation, but rather about communion, about connection, about reminding ourselves of grace and forgiveness, about being freed up to tell the truth about our brokenness, about being provoked to love and serve. Seldom do you get all of that when you live your lives disconnected from community. New members, remember that. Community is gift.

Well, I don't know if I did my job or not, if I brought it on home. But this I know for sure. Old, old words can still speak powerfully new and life-transforming messages.