

STIRRING UP LOVE

Isaiah 58:6-12

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

TEXT: Hebrews 10:24 “Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works.” (Jerusalem Bible translation)

PURPOSE: To encourage the consequences arising from the direct access to God which Jesus makes possible: clean consciences, confident faith, firm hope, and loving service.

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November 15, 2009

When I was a teenager, I hung out with a group of kids whose hangouts, more often than not, were each other's churches. That may sound like a rather weird adolescence, but it actually was a lot of fun. Our base of operations was a coffeehouse we set up in my church's basement. But we also lounged on pews at St. Luke Lutheran Church while one of us, a guy named Hal Pysher, worked out Bach pieces on his church's organ. For reasons that were, of course, completely upright, we knew many of the lesser-traveled places in lots of the church buildings in my home town.

My high school girlfriend was a member of the highest-liturgic Episcopal Church in town. That church never invited us to play our folk music during one of their services. But I remember wandering around that building as well. I recall exploring Christ Church's sanctuary one day with Debbie and another member of our crew who was a member of that church. The layout of the chancel area was similar to this one, although it was much more ornate. But there was a tall wrought-iron fence separating the space where the choir sat from the altar area.

I walked up to the gate on that fence, opened it, and started to go in. “Don't go there!” Debbie's friend Susan called out in alarm. “Why? What's the problem?” I asked in low-church ignorance. “No one goes into that area except priests and altar boys,” Susan answered. Which sparked an argument among us about what that says about who's allowed to get close to God. I do hope teenagers today still carry on intense theological debates with each other.

All three of today's scripture passages address the question of access to God. The passage from Isaiah includes the phrase, “repairer of the breach,” which has been the theme for our special financial appeal this month. The chapter begins with Isaiah recording the people's complaint: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” The problem was that the people were operating under the illusion that religious rituals, in particular fasting, would get God to pay attention to their situation. Isaiah, speaking for God, responded that not ritual, but righteousness, was what connected the people to their God. If you want God to meet your needs, if you want those breaches repaired and communities revitalized,

then let justice and mercy be your true worship.

In the passage from Mark, Jesus dropped a bombshell. His disciples were admiring the beautiful temple buildings. Jesus said they were about to fall. The center of ritual religion, the cultic means for connecting with God, was about to collapse. In its place would be his body, crucified and risen, by which we connect with God not through architecture, but through faith.

The passage from Letter to the Hebrews pushes this point to the limit. The author of that text was convinced that daily sacrificial practice of the old priesthood had no power to take away the sins that separate us from God. But Christ's offering of himself accomplished the forgiveness by which we now have "confidence to enter the sanctuary." (Hebrews 10:19) This means more than giving us access to that extra-holy place behind the gate in my girlfriend's church. This means that, because of what Jesus did for us, we have full, unhindered access to the presence of God. We take this as for granted as the fact that anyone in this church can walk right up to the altar here. But it truly is an astounding breakthrough.

Too many people, even churchgoing people, wonder about our connection with God. We cry, and we don't hear God answering. We seek guidance, and we don't find an instruction book in our mailboxes. We long for confidence, but almost any little thing can provoke timidity or fear. Too often, it seems as if there really is a barrier more impenetrable than that gate in Debbie's church keeping us and God at a safe distance from each other. What our faith wants us to realize is that Jesus Christ has broken through that barrier, and that the name for that breakthrough is *forgiveness*. His offering of himself has overcome the ways that our feelings of guilt and unworthiness keep us wondering what will happen to us if we get too close to God.

This is great good news. But like all of the good news of our faith, it is followed with a "therefore." The good news of our faith – news of forgiveness, news that Christ is really in charge, news that he intends to return and complete what he began, is always news that calls for a response. "Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary," writes the author of Hebrews, "therefore, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith." (10:22) In other words, since full and trustworthy access to God has been made possible, let's go ahead and make use of that access. Which is to say, let's worship. But let's not take worship back to empty ritual. Let's worship as if our lives depended on it, which they do. Thomas Long, commenting on this passage in his marvelous commentary, notes how easy it is to be

“tired in worship and tired of worship. The weariness of worship is a jaded sense that nothing of real significance happens here. The local video store has better drama; the television has more interesting stories; the pool club has friendlier people; the park has a nicer view; the Sunday paper has more intrigue, and sleeping in provides a more profound Sabbath rest. What is more, nobody at the beach or backyard barbecue is going to hand us a pledge card, call us to pray for people in a country whose name we cannot pronounce, or ask us to teach the junior high youth. The only thing about that, says [the author of Hebrews], is that while we are in the beach chair filling out the crossword puzzle, the faithful in the sanctuary, doing the best they can with their off-key voices to belt out ‘Holy, Holy, Holy,’ have been gathered by a mystery beyond their seeing and knowing into the great choir of angels in festal garb and the saints singing ceaseless praises to God.”¹

The “therefore” that arises out of our unhindered access to God will not be confined to an understanding of worship that fits into an hour on a Sunday morning. Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary, says the author, let us come in full assurance of *faith*, with our hearts cleansed. Since we have this confidence, let us hold fast to our *hope* without wavering. And since we have this confidence, let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in *love* and good works. Worship is not ritual; worship is faith, hope and love, experienced in and nourished by the community of the forgiven.

For quite a while this week, I sat with the phrase, ‘let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works.’ That’s the translation in the Jerusalem Bible; the translation in the New Revised Standard Version which Sylvia read wants us to “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” I thought we might be a bit more willing to “stir” each other than to “provoke” each other. Stirring or provoking, here’s the thing: the point of our being concerned for each other is to get us loving and doing good. Which is to say, God’s reason for opening our access to God is not for our sake, but so that we are more able to participate in what God is doing in and for the world. The concern we have for each other is a powerful encouragement. There are people in this congregation who are more isolated than they let us know. When we ask each other how we’re doing, and make room for a genuine response, when we send a card that expresses empathy and encouragement, when we take time to telephone or visit someone who is struggling for any reason,

¹Long, Thomas G., *Hebrews*, in *Interpretation*; Louisville, John Knox Press, 1997; page 108.

our concern may be the very thing someone needs to be assured that they matter, and that continuing to hope is worthwhile. That is a wonderful gift. But the concern Christians have for each other points past our personal welfare. Its purpose is to keep us all involved in God's loving work on behalf of all creation. The reason God gives us unhindered connection to God is so that we are fully connected with God's purposes.

There are quite a few older people who are members of this congregation who, for one reason or another, are not regular participants in our worship or our program. Many of them were heavily involved in our ministry not so many years ago. When I visit them, they often express real grief over their perception that they are no longer of any use. "I'm just taking up space," they'll lament. "I've got nothing to offer." What is the right thing to say to people whose disabilities make it difficult to do almost anything, and who feel like they and the world would be better off if they weren't here anymore? The author of the Letter to the Hebrews would say, why should they be any different than anyone else? Be concerned for them in ways that stir a response in love and good works. What I say is, you are still able to pray for your church. The prayers of faithful people on behalf of those who are actively engaged in the work is a spiritual resource that we dare not underestimate. What I have witnessed, is that, as the person takes up the ministry of prayer, she feels a stronger connection to our community and our ministry, she experiences herself as having a valid purpose to continue living, and, she discovers that her prayer for us is enabling a more vital connection between her and God. If that is what happens in the soul of a person who isn't regularly among us, how could we experience anything less as we stir each other to love and good works?

God is looking for a people who worship God with all our heart and soul and strength. God is not interested in empty ritual or ornate architecture or anything that maintains barriers between God's holiness and our need for God. God wants a people who are confident in faith, fervent in hope, and stirred up in love. Jesus gave himself to create such a people, and now, that people is us. So may we hold fast to hope, remembering that God is faithful. May we be fully assured in our faith, trusting the forgiveness Jesus has accomplished. And most of all, may our concern for each other provoke more and more love, for each other and for the world God still loves through Jesus and through his church, which is his body still alive and at work in the world.