

“ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Hebrews 10:11-25

In just a few days, we will be gathering with family and friends to celebrate Thanksgiving. It's the first big celebration in what we have come to call the "Holiday Season," that spans from late November through the New Year. In just two weeks, churches around the world will kick-off Advent, which is the season of preparation leading up to our celebration of Christ's birth. Advent is also the beginning of what is called the liturgical year. Over the course of each liturgical year, which we will be following this year—at least in part, we move from Christ's birth through his baptism, teachings, healings, miracles, death and resurrection, and on to his glorification as the exalted Son of God, the Messiah. So it is fitting that as we close out this liturgical year and look forward to the coming Advent season that we come to this passage from Hebrews—a broad sweeping view of the work of Jesus and its significance for each of us.

The image the writer of Hebrews uses to portray Christ's accomplishment is one of Jesus, seated at the right hand of God the Father, casually awaiting the day when his enemies will be made into a footstool for his feet. It's the picture of rest at the end of a long work day; relaxation at the completion of a great project, the satisfaction of a mission accomplished. So what is it, exactly, that Christ has accomplished. Well, the writer of Hebrews tells us that, too, by way of contrast. For generations, "every priest," the writer tells us, "stands every day serving and offering the same sacrifices over and over, sacrifices that can never take away sins. But this great high priest, Jesus, offered one sacrifice for sins for all time." Here finally, concludes the author of Hebrews, is the fulfillment of all the promises of scripture and the prophets; Christ has achieved that day when the law will be placed on our hearts and written in our minds, but our sins and lawless behavior are forgotten. And "when there is forgiveness for these things, there is no longer an offering for sin."

Christ has done for each of us what no other priest has yet been able to do. Day after day, year after year, generation to generation, the priests have been hard at work at the Temple, offering sacrifices to God on behalf of a sinful

people. And yet the sin remains. Fallen humanity is still separated from their God; the Holy of Holies is still closed off to all but the highest of priests on only the holiest of days; no one else is worthy.

Have you ever been paralyzed by guilt? Many of us struggle under the weighty pain of regret and guilt regarding our past behaviors, especially when those behaviors have caused harm to others. I remember something that happened when I was a little kid; still in elementary school, still in single digits. I was down at my Granny's house and Granny had this really cool toy that probably was brought in by my cousins. It was a matchbox like car that fit on this track and you pull the car back and let it go and it would go forward really fast and do a loopy-loop upside down and then on out. We would all play with that car for hours on end. One day, I decided in my infinite wisdom that I wanted to the fun to continue even after I left. So I took the car with me. I stuck it down in my pocket and took it home. I know that the other cousins had looked for that car and they all just assumed it was lost.

Evidently, I didn't hide it very well. My Mom and Dad found it one evening. It was obvious that they were disappointed in me. Their daughter, the thief. They made me go down to Granny's house (in my night gown) and apologize and return the car. Granny just embraced me and held me that night. I remember just crying. I wasn't crying because I had gotten in trouble—that had passed. I wasn't crying because my Mom and Dad were mad at me--that was over. I was crying because I knew I had done something wrong; because I thought my Granny should have been mad at me; because I felt guilty. In fact, I felt so guilty that I didn't even understand why my Granny wasn't angry with me. I was a bad person who did bad things; I wasn't worthy of being loved unconditionally. That's the way it's supposed to work, right?

Interestingly enough, my thinking wasn't too far off from the reality of the Israelites and their relationship with God up to the point when Jesus came. They were a people whose entire sinful existence was spent trying to appease an "angry" God through sacrifices. No sacrifice was great enough, and it was continually pressed into their brains that they were not worthy of entering God's presence; they were not blameless enough to be in relationship with God; they were not deserving of God's unconditional love. Can you imagine how that must have made those people feel?

Yet, for the author of Hebrews, the purpose of sacrificial offerings is not to meet God's needs, but to meet our human need for a clean conscience. And now, says the author, the work has been done once and for all. The ultimate sacrifice has been made by Christ himself; the work is done. We no longer need to fear the wrath of an angry God. We no longer need to be paralyzed by guilt. We no longer need to feel as if we are unworthy, vile, unlovable. Christ has ripped the curtain of the Temple and we are welcomed into God's presence; weak, vulnerable, broken, guilty though we are. Now this doesn't mean that we have a free pass. We are not unleashed to go and do as we please and expect that our relationship with God will be as strong as ever. Our sin does separate us from God, when we behave contrary to God's will, we build barriers between ourselves and the God of love. It is important that we take responsibility for any and all consequences of our sinful actions in a mature and Christ-like way. But it is also crucially important, and modeled here by Christ himself, to forgive ourselves as God has forgiven us.

In retrospect, I have come to understand that guilt as the source of my distress that night so many years ago when I had behaved so badly. Only the space of time, perspective, and a growing faith allowed me to understand why I began to sob when I saw my Granny that night. Granny had forgiven me, she still loved me; in fact, she had never stopped. But I had not forgiven myself; I felt like a bad person, I felt unlovable, and so I just cried—words were inadequate to express what I felt.

But, oh, what a feeling to know that we are loved even when we have messed up! What a joy to know that we do not have to drown in feelings of guilt and inadequacy! And so it shall be for each of us because of what Christ has done through his sacrifice. Yet, we cannot just leave it at that; such a great blessing requires a response. Christ's sacrifice is life-changing, and so we must live changed lives. Christ has opened a new way to be in relationship with God, and so we must live in a new way. "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 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.”

Indeed, Christ has made a marvelous sacrifice for each of us; he has not only freed us from the bonds of sin, but also the chains of guilt. The gates of heaven are flung wide, and we cannot help but respond! The author of Hebrews even gives us an idea of how to begin living this new life Christ has made possible for us. First, we must put fear and remorse aside. We must forgive ourselves as Christ has forgiven us and move forward with confidence, holy boldness. Christ has opened the door for us to enter God’s presence, and that is what we must do; enter God’s midst with praise and thanksgiving, and experiencing God’s presence fully, honestly, and authentically. We must believe and exercise our faith boldly, following the example of Christ, who will be faithful to his promises.

But the freedom of knowing that God loves and accepts us should translate into selfless service. The author of Hebrews suggests that we should be creative in provoking and encouraging and pushing and pulling all those in our family of faith to “love and good deeds.” This is all about participating in the body of Christ, working with and for others in the family of faith. We are not mere spectators of God’s work or simply recipients of God’s grace; we are active participants in the saving work of God in the world, as we follow Christ’s ultimate example of sacrificial giving, serving, and loving until the very end.

The overwhelming message of this world is that we are not good enough, and we are affected by that message every day; paralyzed by feelings of guilt, shame, and unworthiness. But here’s what we celebrate today; God’s work through Jesus Christ addresses the world’s real brokenness. God does not look down from a distant heaven and offer empty words of consolation, “There, there, it’s all right.” Rather, in Jesus, God entered into the full range of human suffering, our suffering. Jesus walked right into the fire of human pain, and while we ordinary human beings allow the troubles of life to twist and distort us, Jesus; suffering shaped him into the perfect offering. And it is his offering that makes us worthy; so worthy, in fact, that Christ wants us to be a part of his work! Christ wants us to help him! How could we possibly refuse such an offer? We cannot leave others to suffer in pain and regret, my friends, we have work to do!