

***Let mutual love continue. <sup>2</sup>Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.***

Most of our Bibles label Hebrews as a letter; it is not a letter. The author identifies it as a word of exhortation or, in our understanding, it is a sermon, or more accurately, a series of sermons. The exhortations were written to a church in crisis. The author was unable to deliver the sermons in person so the concluding chapter is in the form of a letter, one that is personal and quite remarkable.

From the context of the book itself, the crisis seems to be at least in part from extreme external pressure. With this in mind, the beginning of our text is quite extraordinary.

Let mutual love continue! This is not a call to something new, but a plea not to lose this love in the face of hardship.

The author goes on to say that they should not neglect hospitality to strangers. When the world is hostile and one doesn't know who is enemy or friend, welcoming strangers is an act of courage and radical faith. They may have entertained angels, but we know that as they treated the stranger, so they treated Christ.

In a world where so much has changed over the last two years, where the idea of church and community has shifted for so many people, where for some of us the church might not even look like what we expect anymore, we face many of the same questions and pressures that the community of our text faced. When thinking about how we face these challenges head on, while heeding the advice of

this letter about mutual love and entertaining strangers...the best thing I think I can do is tell you all a story. *With my apologies to the Trinity crew that is here because some of this will be a repeat*, but honestly, it's a story that bears repeating over and over again.

A little over a month ago, myself and our youth advisors took nine of our high school age youth to New Orleans. We took them because the regular gathering for all Lutheran youth that happens every three years was fully and completely cancelled for this year which meant that for some of my kids, they were never going to have the chance for a trip like this. One of the most important things for us as we were planning was to give the kids some sort of opportunity to do community service within the city. We ended up connecting with another Lutheran church that was in New Orleans, but it wasn't a church like any of us had ever really experienced before.

Bethlehem Lutheran Church has been a part of the New Orleans community for 130 years, providing a place of grace and worship for the predominantly African American neighborhood where they're located. Their building is unassuming and if you walked by you would be concerned that you might not be in the greatest part of town. However, unassuming though it might be, before you even walk into their building, you *know* what the people of Bethlehem are all about. Two flags flank their sign on the side of their building: a Black Lives

Matter flag and a Pride flag, both of which are also included on the crest of their church. There's also a huge banner announcing their twice a week community meals which declares, "All you gotta be is present and hungry to have a seat and sit around this table." You don't need to look at a bulletin, browse a website, read a mission statement to know who this congregation is. They show you who they are directly.

Their sanctuary is small but cozy. Pews surround a free standing altar and when you worship there, you feel wrapped up by those who surround you. You're making eye contact with people, not staring at the back of an endless row of heads. But as you're worshipping, you may notice a few other things, there are marks in some of the windows that you can tell are from stray bullet holes. If you look up towards the ceiling, you might notice a couple of vines breaking through the windows, the swampy humidity of New Orleans invading the house of God. The hymnals are older. The congregation is small. And yet...I'm not sure I have ever felt as welcomed and as in the presence of the work of the gospel as I did at Bethlehem.

***<sup>3</sup>Remember ... "I will never leave you or forsake you."***

Verses 3-7 start with remember and end with a promise, in between is a list of particular shortcomings of the ones to whom the sermon and letter are addressed. Humanity hasn't really changed in 2000 years; it is the reason

Scripture still speaks to us so well. Lists of sins are different in different places because the things with which people struggle are different. The thing that remains the same is that anything that breaks the right relationship with God, with other people, or with our selves is sin. So, looking at a list and saying I'm good with these, doesn't mean we are living in love.

The Christian understanding, as stated so succinctly by Jesus, is that it is a relationship of love with God, others and self that matters, not the keeping of lists of laws.

We are called to be Jesus followers. In his darkest and most pained of times he cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." God's answer was to draw Jesus to Gods' self. God will not forsake us, either. Christians for millennia have been learning to live in love and our youth learned this at Bethlehem. Over the course of five hours on a Saturday morning, my youth group was led by Chef Dee in cooking and preparing over 500 meals that would be used for two separate community meals. One of my kids mixed a spice blend for homemade tamales, that were served with Mexican rice, all of it so piping hot that you had to load it into the bags quickly. Over 200 bags of tamales were served at noon. My kids commenting that there were people from all walks of life, some on bikes, some barefoot, some in cars. Almost every person's name was known by those working. There were reminders that someone who was shut in but lived down the street needed their food too. There were prayers shared and an entire

community fed. We then returned inside to put the finishing touches on easily 1,000 three cheese sliders with homemade tomato jam, which would be ready for Wednesday's meal which would serve the same number of people.

***6So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.***

We follow in the footsteps of a long line of faithful people who have faced great uncertainty and hard circumstances. The great cloud of witness that encourages includes all those who are a part of how you came to your faith and all those with whom you have shared worship and life over the years. God is our helper and through our faith we become part of that great cloud of witness, too.

For my youth, their great cloud of witnesses now includes Chef Dee. Through the course of the day, we learned her story. She was once a chef at one of the most prestigious restaurants in New Orleans, Commander's Palace. A place with a dress code and high dollar menu items. She lost her job a week after the pandemic began, and she had no idea what to do. Over the next few months, she realized that a person kept commenting and liking posts she was making on Facebook about politics and just the general state of the world. It turns out, that person was Pastor Ben of Bethlehem. They connected and he asked her if maybe she would like to come just help out at their meals on a Saturday. So she did, and the person who was supposed to be in charge of the cooking that day failed to show, and from that moment on she has been Chef Dee of Bethlehem. She's helped them connect with

food distributors and apply for grants, building up a program that before Covid fed maybe 50 people, and which now feeds hundreds. She doesn't get paid. She now works as culinary instructor for underprivileged kids, but the rest of her time is given to Bethlehem. She's not a member there. But it's where she feels called to serve.

This one woman welcomed my kids into her kitchen, gave them jobs, and a purpose, and showed them what it looks like to follow God's call without saying a single word about God the whole day. She was the living embodiment of the gospel. She was the living embodiment of letting mutual love continue. She was the living embodiment of not being afraid in the midst of a world of change. She was the living embodiment of grace above all things. Kindly correcting when we made a misstep, and emphasizing that no matter what, our main focus was giving the people who would come for food, a warm, good, full meal that had been lovingly made by hand, not just the throw away leftovers that were pulled out of the back of someone's cupboard.

***<sup>7</sup>Remember your leaders... <sup>8</sup>Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.***

This is a call for our leaders to keep our eyes focused on the good news of the gospel so that the lives we lead match the words we speak and preach. With such leadership, we can invite the congregations we serve to imitate our faith. It is also a call for all of us to remember that we have come to our

faith and our faith lives through a journey, one that had leaders who continue to influence our faith.

I invite you to remember a person whose lived faith gave you the courage to live your faith. For me it was my Aunt May; she embodied the command to love others as she loved herself. It was her example that made it possible for me to accept God's call to pastoral ministry.

The call on our lives as Christians is simple; we are to love as God has loved us. It is simple but far from easy. Those among us who do it well, if not perfectly, give us courage and strength to live our best lives. And all of this is possible for Christ is the same loving and gracious Savior he has always been.

So how do we do this? How do we learn from this text and from the past of the church to look towards the future? Now obviously, we can't just copy and paste other churches methods here into our own lives and ministries. *But* we can learn from them. We can learn to be bold and upfront about who we are, where we stand, and what we're passionate about, unapologetically open about where the gospel has called us. We can learn that the heart of the gospel is caring for our neighbor, not worrying about what our building looks like or if we're the fanciest church on the block. We can learn that community and hospitality can happen with complete strangers when the love of God is at the center. We can learn that new communities can be created from the smallest of connections and through

those tiny things the Holy Spirit does a whole lot of huge. I don't know what exactly the future holds for the church, for all of us, but what I do know is that if our goal is love, service to *all* of our neighbors, and a radical hospitality that says here you are at home with us, then I have nothing but reasons to hope for where we are going.

***<sup>15</sup>Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. <sup>16</sup>Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.***

This text, this entire book, was written to people who were being persecuted to the point of death. Their speaking the name of Jesus the Christ was likely to be a sacrifice if heard by the wrong person. Yet that sacrifice could also result in great changes in the hearts of “enemies” and those who opposed them. The praise of God in words should result in praise that is embodied in love and hospitality, for to pray or praise in Christ's name is to act as Christ would act.

May God be praised for the witness of faithful saints through the millennia, and may we each strive to be a faithful witness in our circumstances.

May God be praised for the witness of the faithful servants of:

First United Methodist, Hilton Baptist, Hilton Christian, Hilton Presbyterian, St. Andrew's Episcopal, and Trinity Lutheran. May God be praised for the community we have built and are building together. **AMEN!!!**



