

SERMON: September 1, 2019 – Hebrews 13: 1-7
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Our scripture reading this morning comes to us from the final chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews is one of those books that I have chosen to preach from almost never in nearly 4 decades of preaching. If asked, “tell me what you know about Hebrews” the answer would be, “the great cloud of witnesses” referenced in chapter 12 (starting v.1), a great scripture reminding us of our connectedness with those who have preceded us in faith. If pushed further, I’d recall the whole progression leading up to that, (in chapter 11) where the faithfulness of long-ago figures from Abel to Abraham and many others is recounted; and if the questioner was waiting for me to retrieve one more thing from my memory bank, I would say something about the metaphor in Hebrews of Jesus as the new High Priest in the tradition of Melchizedek (7:13-17) – but probably couldn’t say anything more than that. In other words, I know enough to get a couple of chips in a Trivial Pursuit game, but it’s not going to be the focus of my first book.

So in preparing to preach on Hebrews today, I figured the least I could do was read the whole thing; and what a curious read it is. Most of the letters of the New Testament have a salutation at the beginning, a summing up with well-wishes at the end, and some specific points about theology and practice in the middle. Hebrews has only the middle and the end, which leads to much speculation: did it originally have a salutation, which got lopped off, or was it originally just the middle section, which looks more like a sermon than a letter, with someone tacking on the closing bit later on to make it look like a letter? Alas, this is nothing more than conjecture, as nobody has ever found a version of Hebrews with a greeting at the beginning, or without a sign-off at the end, so what we have is what we have.

And what we have, is a writing that goes back and forth in the classical style, making a theological point, and then saying what the practical implication is for the community. Most of the theological points, as I put it together, are about our connection with the heavenly realm of God Most High. Hebrews has a very systematic picture of the way heaven works, or perhaps it is speaking to a community that has a very systematic picture of heaven, and encourages Christian communities to reach into that heavenly wisdom, and open ourselves to God’s holiest intentions for our lives.

Hebrews speaks of an age-old human desire to reach beyond what we see to what we do not see, to interact with the holy mystery of life. We live our lives and wonder, how does my life fit in with the big picture of life? We try to live ethical lives and wonder, how does this fit in with the harmony intended by God? We experience brokenness in relationship or in our bodies, and we wonder how we can reconnect with God’s intention for wholeness? We look at the circumstances around us and seek similar situations in history, wondering how the actions of our today reach forward and backward in the big human story? We deal with the details of our lives and seek the bigger themes of life, and wonder where God fits in that story, or how the story of my life fits into God’s big story? To quote Dr. H. Beecher Hicks: “The task for us...is not to see God in our stories but to imagine our story in God’s, learning somehow to see our humanity in divinity.” As people of faith, gathering in religious community, we sense that in this walk of life there is more than meets the eye, and we want to learn more about what that is and to personally connect to it: to actually experience the love of God, coming to us, working through us, binding us as one.

In talking about this desire to reach beyond the visible reality, Hebrews talks a lot about angels, servant-messengers who busy themselves in the heavenly realm doing God’s bidding and then, at God’s command, crossing over into our lives to tell us something. Back to the opening bit of this sermon where I tried to recount what I knew about Hebrews, I would not have placed the lovely line from today’s reading about “entertaining angels unaware” (13:2) in Hebrews, but now that I’ve read the whole thing it makes perfect sense that it would be here. In the hierarchy of Hebrews, Priests also serve a role of bringing heaven and earth together: everyday priests serving at Temple, the ancient priest and king Melchizedek who conveyed God’s favour to Abraham, and our high priest Jesus who forever bridges the gap between humanity and divinity. And then there is that whole series of faithful

folk, the great cloud of witnesses beginning in the most ancient of days, who have done their best to follow God's path even when the way was anything but clear. Clearly, the author of Hebrews sees all of this culminating in Jesus, the perfecter of our faith, the one who shows what it is to live an integrated life where divine and human hold hands, where beliefs and practices inform and strengthen one another. While it all comes off as kind of haphazard, and wayyyyyyyyyyy more detailed than it needs to be in describing the mechanics of how it all works, from start to finish the book of Hebrews engages our desire to connect heavenly realities with daily life, and our great human desire to take that connection and do something with it.

For twelve chapters, Hebrews alternates between preaching about these topics, and giving practical and sometimes pointed reminders about how this should impact a community of faith, and then in its final chapter – our text for today – brings it down to a handful of things for Christian communities to be aware of:

- Love one another
- Welcome strangers
- Have empathy for prisoners and all who suffer
- Honour your marriage covenants
- Beware of the love of money
- Learn from the faithfulness of others

Taken on their own, these statements might come off as very parochial or straight-laced, the kind of things easily relegated to days gone by. But these statements *don't* just stand on their own; they come at the end of twelve chapters of passionate, sometimes disjointed writing about how much we want the realities of Divine presence to be the very foundation of our lives. Some places in the Bible we read virtual laundry-lists of do's and don'ts that just sort of appear from common wisdom and push their way into a scripture, but that's not what these points are. These summary points emerge from a desire to actually experience God's presence in our lives and in the life of a Church, saying that these things are both the evidence of God's presence, and practices that will make us more keenly aware of what God is calling us to be and do.

Online commentator Joe Gorman, who writes from the Wesleyan/Church of the Nazarene tradition, has done an excellent job of describing how these practical points in Hebrews 13 tie in with our desire to have our life and our world re-integrated with the intention of the Divine. He writes,

“We submit to one another in mutual love because we have given ourselves over to God and to one another.

“We don't neglect to show hospitality to one another because we have given our own lives up and feel no pretension about welcoming others into our lives.

“We remember those in prison, as though we were in prison, because our life is not our own. We remember those who were tortured, as though we were tortured, because we have died to self.

“We keep marriage pure; not committing ' pornos' [the Greek word used in Hebrews 13:] or adultery, because marriage is a holy act of perpetually putting the needs of another above your own; because marriage is sanctifying.

“We don't love money, we are content, because our hope rests not in what can be bought but in the resurrection; that thing to which sacrifice leads.

“And we remember our leaders because, in the church, our leaders are the ones who have sought not wealth or accolades but have gone with Christ outside of the tent...we 'consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith.'”

These words from Hebrews 13 are expressing the same thing we say each Sunday when we recite The Lord's Prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This prayer and this scripture bring to mind God's grand, beautiful commitment to a love that knows no boundaries, accepts that daily life falls short of this, and commits us to a life that changes as it becomes wide-open to God's love. We open ourselves to God's love in the way we treat our loved ones, the person sitting

beside us in the pew, our neighbours, complete strangers, and the world in general. We seek these practical, meaningful forms of love in our personal lives, we invite them to set the priorities of our Church life, we desire this kind of openness and empathy and active engagement of people's needs, not just within these four walls but within our town and nation.

These same points are before us at this time of year, when many programs in our community and in the Church are starting up again. This desire of the letter to the Hebrews, to break down barriers between the God of love and the lives we live, will set the tone of our worship life, on Sunday mornings and, later this month, as we resume our contemplative Wednesday night Evensong gatherings; it will inform and shape our Children's Church and perhaps even stretch us in new ways of relating to children and youth; it will be expressed through the practices of our Healing Pathway ministry, through our pastoral care and the prayer shawls; it will encourage us in community engagement, through the CYAN Young Adult network and the Bow Valley Syria project, through Living into Right Relations and participation in Food and Friends, and everything funded by our Benevolent fund. These points speak to the work of our Council and committees, to the decisions that you make in your financial donations, to the vote we will have two weeks from now about becoming an Affirming Ministry, and in the upcoming report regarding the building, and how this building can help to support and expand our mission of outreach and inclusion. The writer of Hebrews started out talking about the communication pathway between God and the world and ends up with these practical ways that we can not only keep that pathway open, but allow it to make a profound impact on the way we live our lives. What a gift, to bring our religious yearnings for the presence of a loving God, into full communion with the way we actually conduct our life as individuals, and our life as a congregation.

If you've not read the book of Hebrews, give it a go sometime, especially from a good readable translation like *The Message* or *Good News*. Thirteen chapters, about that many pages, fairly dense material but with a great message of integration: the intimate connection between God's love and our lives; the inspiring connection between those who have gone before us in faith, and our spiritual hopes; the hopeful and decisive connection forged by Christ, between what we do, and the holy source of life. May these words bring life in abundance, to all who hear. Amen.

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