

“PROVOKE ONE ANOTHER”

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

When I was a teaching assistant in the Introduction to Preaching course, the most common mistake beginning preachers would make was—by far—what’s called “moralism.” What is moralism? Moralism is what we call it when we tell people how they need to improve, without ever sharing how God empowers and encourages us. What is moralism? It’s mere human provocation without divine motivation. It’s shaking people with rules without stirring them with inspiration. Every semester brought with it at least a half dozen of what we’d call “lettuce” sermons. Lettuce is one of the tell-tale signs of moralism in a sermon. Let us be more faithful. Let us love one another. Let us go out in to the world and make difference. Let us has close cousins like “We must” and “We have to” and “We ought to” and “We had better.” The crucial problem with lettuce sermons is they leave God’s power out of it. We hear what we ought to do, but not what “God has done” or “God is doing” or “God will do.”

If we only on the last few verses of today’s passage, it’s just “lettuce.” *Let us* approach [the sanctuary] with a true heart...*Let us* hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering...*Let us* consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. And *let us* not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some. Though a moralist would say, “As is the habit of *some* people.”

A church lady once told me that her husband used to have an ornery saying about preachers: “Anybody can preach,” he’d say. “Anybody can tell you what you *ought* to do.”

While I hate to admit it’s true that anybody can tell you what you ought to do, that’s not what the preacher in Hebrews is proclaiming. The Hebrews preacher doesn’t start with us and what we ought to do. He starts with God and what God has done. Did you catch it in the reading of the lesson? While the ministers exhaust themselves trying to get everyone right with God, meanwhile God in Jesus Christ went ahead and made it right for us once and for all. He remembers that enchanting promise from the prophet Jeremiah, “Someday I’m going to take this covenant engraved on stone tablets and write it on their hearts and inscribe it on their minds... And after this, I’ve finally decided, I’m going to forget all their sins and their lawless deeds. That’s it. Covered up!” Do you feel the weight of the we ought to’s and we have to’s and we’re supposed to’s lift a bit, and ease the burdensome weight on your back? Forgiveness. Forgiveness. You are forgiven. I know, you remember. But God forgot.

If you could recall all your sins and write them down, how long a list would it be? Would you put some in italics, underscore others, put still others in bold? Maybe you’d need a folder to keep track of your files. Or maybe you only keep track of one—the one that never seems to let you forget. The one that maybe you might describe more accurately as keeping track of you. You know the one. It wraps you like a strait jacket and the more you writhe and twist the tighter

it pulls. St. Paul had that one. He said, *Lord, try as I might I still have this thorn in my side.* The Lord says, “My grace is enough.”

Reading this Hebrews text is like stumbling on newly declassified information. It strikes you as an extraordinary revelation especially if you think the Christian faith is just one option in a buffet of belief systems. When you open the box and go through the files you discover that there’s no system to it. There’s no theory to assent to. No set of precepts to memorize and repeat when you wake up in the morning. All you can see are reams of dot matrix paper listing more old debts than you could ever count. But when you look closely, every line is struck through, and the word CANCELLED is written in every margin.

So the preacher says, “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...and *since* we have a great priest over the house of God...*then let us approach with a true heart.*”

We know the love of God is growing in our heart when, less and less, we think of things we have to do, and more and more, we simply can’t imagine not responding to God’s love. When we truly love someone, we don’t respond to them begrudgingly but naturally, without measuring our moves or justifying our actions. The love wells up from a deeper source...It is less an act of exertion, and more like swimming with the tide, or falling parallel to the grain of the universe.

Why, then, does Hebrews tell us to provoke one another to acts of love and good deeds? Aren’t we provoked enough as it is? Is church really supposed to be a place of provocation? Yes, but only if the provocation is grounded in the gospel. Consider how we might provoke one another in these ways. One member says to another:

“I missed you last Sunday,” not because he’s keeping a record of your attendance, but because you remind him somehow of God’s love, or he is lonely, but he knows by your friendship that he’s not alone, or he is grieving and he may not tell you but to walk beside you keeps him from sinking.

One member says to another: “You should sign up for the mission,” not because she thinks your schedule needs mangling but because she instinctively recognizes your gifts. Maybe she sees in you what you may not even see in yourself.

One member says to another: “Come visit the prison with us,” not because danger is his middle name, but because he knows Jesus has already proclaimed “Release!” to those in captivity...

One member says to another: “You must forgive him,” not because she’s a goodie-two-shoes and “that’s easy for her to say!” but because she sees how the toxic anger simmers in you and it’s even altering the structure of your brain and she just wants you back. And she’s helping you remember Jesus’ prayer that we forgive as we’ve already been forgiven...

One member says to another: “You should come back. This is where you belong. These are your people. We love you,” not because he’s concerned to add numbers but because the same Jesus that dwells in his heart is the same Jesus that prayed that we all may be one...

Maybe these really aren't provocations at all, but stirrings, as we would stir someone awake—to see what is already there.

I couldn't have been much older than six when my mother stirred me awake: "Mack, come and see!" I stumbled out of bed clutching her gown as she led me down the hall to the little bay window. Bursting with anticipation, she pulled back the curtain on a winter's dawn, 8 inches of snow blanketing the quiet woods around our house. Pristine...like the whole world was given the chance to start over...

Behold what God has done!

Now, *Let us* open our eyes, and see...rejoice and be glad...it's a new day, a day the LORD has made just for us...