

Don't Give Up
Hebrews 10:11-25
Sunday, July 22, 2018
Pentecost +9B
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

We're nearing the end of this epistle sermon. The Hebrews Preacher has gone on too long. The noon bells have chimed and silenced, everyone's stomachs have rumbled for so long that the dull ache of lunchtime has passed, and he now concludes this sermon within a sermon about Jesus the high priest. It has taken us three weeks to cover just this portion of preaching—Jesus advocates for us, Jesus welcomes us into the holy inner shrine, Jesus makes a way for us to come directly to God in worship. You still try for all those old ways of accessing God, but there's a better way—a straight-to-the-source way. You don't need some human priest to go between you and the holy, Jesus invites you straight to the heart of things.

Now we get to my favorite part of any biblical text—the "so what" of it. So what are we supposed to do with this information? So what does this high Christology matter (a teaching of Jesus focused thoroughly on his divinity—as opposed to a low Christology starting at a place of full humanity)? What difference do any of these fancy words make to our every day, ordinary, walking around lives? So what if Jesus pulls back the curtain of the inner shrine for us when we have more month left to live than paycheck to cover it? So what if Jesus sits at the right hand of God and offers a pilgrim path for us to join him when we are battling injustice and putting out the fires of despair and oppression right here in this world every day? So what, Preacher?

I'm glad you asked, he seems to say. The whole point of all of this, the Preacher tells us, is in the way we live it out. We live out our faith in Jesus the Christ together. We live out this love. We live out these good deeds. We live out the holy path to the heart of God. And we absolutely must do so together. You cannot go it alone as a Jesus follower. I wonder if this message was as hard for the Preacher's audience, all those centuries ago, as it is for us now. He had to encourage them to not fall out of the habit of meeting together. He referenced the "some" who are in the habit of NOT meeting

together. We don't quite know when this sermon was circulating among congregations of the early church, but we know it was in those first centuries after Jesus' life. Even then, gathering and meeting to love and encourage one another was a habit to be cultivated, and a necessary one if we are to have any chance at all to living this Jesus path well. The preacher exhorts them: Do not give up meeting together!

In conversations with Nathan over the past several weeks, as we have focused on what a good life looks like, I've become keenly aware of the fact that I really don't work well alone. I need moments of solitude and quiet, to be sure. I need to write by myself, though I prefer to be near people even while I'm writing by myself. At my very best and healthiest, I understand the work of ministry to be collaborative. I don't want to sit in an office alone dreaming up a vision for a people and a place, I want to be in a circle of beloveds hearing their dreams, and then pulling together the threads of detail into a tapestry of vision. It is no surprise, then, that I naturally lean into ecumenical and interfaith friendships with other clergy for creating projects, sharing support, and imagining together. I do not thrive when I am sitting alone for hours on end, and too much isolation lands me in a pretty unhealthy place in my brain and body.

In thinking through this truth about myself, I've been reflecting this week on the story of Jesus sending out the disciples in pairs. In Mark 6, Jesus sends the disciples out to do the ministry they have watched him do. He instructs them to go simply and with a clear vision. He does not send a disciple out alone, he sends them together; they will support each other in this work. They will lend each other courage, when it's needed. They will laugh together and cheer each other on. They will commiserate when the time comes to shake the dust from their sandals because a town has let them know they aren't welcome there. Even Jesus the Christ (messiah and high priest) does not embark on his own ministry alone, he gathers a community around him to collaborate, dream, share, study, play, eat, argue, discern, delight, pray, and hold space together. This work is not meant to be done solo. Our lives are not meant to be done solo.

"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."

"Garret Keizer has written a beautiful and telling description of his work as a lay minister in a small Episcopal church in Vermont. He describes a Saturday night Easter vigil service at which only he and two other people were present. He began the service by lighting the Paschal candle and praying, 'O God...grant in this Paschal feast we may so burn with heavenly desires, that with pure minds we may attain the festival of everlasting light.' As he prays, he is struck by the ambiguity of the situation.

The candle sputters in the half darkness, like a voice too embarrassed or overwhelmed to proclaim the news, 'Christ is risen.' But it catches fire, and there we are, three people and a flickering light—in an old church, on a Saturday evening... The moment is filled with the ambiguities of all such quiet observances among few people, in the midst of an oblivious population in a radically secular age. The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme; the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools."¹

How do we continue to gather together, showing up and lighting a candle of mystery, in the midst of an oblivious population in a radically secular age? This is the age of "spiritual but not religious." How do we continue to boldly claim, "The Lord is with us!"

Debra Dean Murphy observes of the Nones and Dones (those who in surveys on religious identity claim either no religious tradition or no longer practicing the religious tradition with which they identify), "no matter the age group or demographic, this business of shedding the 'baggage of doctrine and religion' is what it's all about: snubbing dogma and its perceived strictures, rejecting all forms of religion, especially the organized kind.

But... 'being against organized religion [as Bill Cavanaugh puts it] is like being against organized hospitals.' Institutions will always be subject to corruption and silliness, fraud and ineptitude, since they are comprised of people who . . . well, since they are comprised of people.

But the organized, institutional part of religion – the messy materiality of people and practices – is its beating heart... That's the inconvenient thing about religion: it asks you to do stuff – like worship with other people, love other people, do good to and for other people."²

Now, I agree wholeheartedly with Murphy's assessment of religion as messy and inconvenient community as its beating heart. I agree fully that the challenge and beauty of faith community is the call to do life together. I also hear in this assessment an overly simplistic dualism, and I want us to always push back when we are presented with an "us=good, them=bad" scenario. We know nothing is that simple and easy, even if we're acknowledging that doing church and faith and life together is inherently messy. We know there are lots of really valid, good reasons people have walked away

¹ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, p. 107 quoting Keizer, *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, p. 73

² <http://www.ekkleziaproject.org/blog/2009/11/religious-but-not-spiritual/>

from institutional church and organized religion. We know plenty of examples (and have even lived some in here!) of faith community gone wrong. So it's not as simple as saying, "Don't give up the habit of meeting with us good folks in here who are getting it right while you lost folks over there wander alone without direction."

Because we also know Nones and Dones are creating communities of their own, and those communities are often effecting more change, speaking more truth to power, and able to respond to issues quickly because they are lithe and functioning without the old structures of religion and tradition. Let's not get lost in dualism because the Preacher is not saying, "Do not give up serving on the nominating committee as some are in the habit of doing." "Do not give up on showing up with a forced smile on your face even when you are exhausted and dying on this inside." This is not an argument for structures or propriety or pretense, it is an admonition for community. Do not fall into the habit of doing life alone. Do not fall out of community. And if the life you want to live is the Way of Jesus, then you absolutely must surround yourself regularly with other people who are on that Way, too.

Hold unswervingly to that Way and unswervingly to those people. Even when they're messy. Even when it's inconvenient. This isn't about lampstands and oil, structures and denominations, Robert's Rules and bylaws, buildings and plaster. This is about sharing your life with partners and collaborators, dreamers and co-conspirators. Even in the poetry of creation, God the eternal mystery invites man and woman to join God as co-creators in naming animals and caring for the good world. God doesn't want to be alone. It is not good for man to be alone. The covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, promises made to Isaac and Jacob, care and affection communicated through Isaiah and Jeremiah are all about God calling and gathering a people. Jesus enters ministry through baptism by John's hands and immediately gathers friends to journey alongside him. Jesus pairs those friends to live and serve together, as teams. This story is to be understood in the living, and our living must be together if we have any hope at all of getting it right.

My friends, my sisters and brothers, my siblings in the family of God, *"Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another."* Every day. Right here. We will live this thing out together. Amen.