

The Farewell Blessing
Selections from Hebrews 12-13
August 26, 2018
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12.12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, **13** and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. **14** Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. **15** See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.

28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; **29** for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

13.1 Let mutual love continue. **2** Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. **3** Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

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

20 Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, **21** make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us^[k] that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Final Exhortation and Greetings

22 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[l] bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. **23** I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. **24** Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. **25** Grace be with all of you.

We've made it! We're here at the end of ten sermons on the long and winding, beautiful and complicated 1900-year-old sermon of Hebrews together. As we look over these farewell words in chapters 12 and 13, let's review its mysterious framework before entering into the text itself—we don't know who wrote these beautiful words or where the author was writing, though there is a reference at the end of today's text to Italy. We also know it's written more as a sermon manuscript than a letter. And while the sermon certainly appears to be written to a very particular context, there's also a good chance the sermon was passed around and shared among many small congregations somewhere between 60-100 C.E.

Presbyterian preacher Thomas Long says this of Hebrews, “[W]e peer into the depths of the text unsure of who wrote it, to whom, from where, or when. Imagine being handed a book today with the comment, ‘Here, you may enjoy this. It was written in America or Russia or France, I’m not sure, by a Jew—or was it a Gentile?—anyway, it was written sometime between 1920 and 1970. Enjoy.”¹

None of that is reason to dismiss these words. All of that is reason to hold them tenderly and holy as words that have mysteriously endured from a people of faith some 1900 years ago to us today. Gathered in people's homes or some kind of small meeting place, people listened to these words in hopes of figuring something out about their lives. People got together and broke bread, drank wine, sang and prayed, and heard these words spoken over them like a blessing.

I believe the very best sermons are not the ones that dig deepest into the biblical text and go spelunking in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek for the sake of that work. The very best sermons are the ones that grab the essence of a word and then speak to the heart of a people and their struggles and questions. The very best sermons offer the heart of the biblical text to the heart of the listeners sitting before it.

To that end, Long offers clues of the congregation receiving this sermon, “[The listening] congregation is exhausted. They are tired—tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they

¹ Thomas J. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, p. 2

will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith.”²

When we hold this old, old sermon in our hands and imagine the original audience or audiences who received these words of assurance, admonition, and affirmation, this whole thing reminds me of a great line by Emily Saliers in a song she wrote after first reading the published diary of Virginia Woolf. She said reading those words was like being “On a kind of a telephone line through time/And the voice at the other end comes like a long lost friend.”³

We know these people. We know their fatigue and their frustration. We know what it is to look at what the way of faith asks of us and want to walk away from it. Love God, love our neighbors, love ourselves. That’s what we are about here, and it sounds lovely and simple enough. Until we actually have to do it. And if loving God means loving our neighbors, well, I’d like to know which neighbors we’re talking about first. Have you met people? Even the really great ones will wear you out. Have you met some of the horrible ones? The ones who aren’t going to apologize, are only ever going to be toxic, the ones who always always put themselves first. And do you know what it feels like to watch those unapologetic, toxic, selfish neighbors succeed and win and advance and get rewarded by culture in spite of (or even because of) their toxicity? It’s enough to make you want to walk away from this whole “love your neighbor” thing.

Add to that the work of caring for the poor and the orphan and the widow. Add to that the need to reach out to strangers in time of crisis and offer solidarity, prayers, and resources. Add to that the tremendous work of peace and justice in a conflicted and unjust world. Add to that the ongoing work of our own faith community and the beautiful facility that houses us as a people. And we haven’t mentioned all of the other stuff going on in our own, individual lives of caring for aging parents, caring for children, sometimes both at once. Oh, and caring for ourselves when we remember. Making it through a week, maybe grabbing some really great rest and play over the weekend, and hoping you can muster the energy to start another one on Monday morning. Do you feel this? So did they. Imagine for just a moment how exhausted and overwhelmed this congregation may have been to warrant these beautiful, blessing words from an unknown preacher.

It helps our interpretation tremendously if we can approach this text with empathy. We know something of what they were living and experiencing because we are living and

² Long, p. 3

³ “Virginia Woolf” by Emily Saliers

experiencing so much of it, too. The preacher of Hebrews helps us look back on our life story and congregational story with the right perspective, and he tells the story of faith across time as a word of deep, abiding blessing to an exhausted people.

Thomas Long brilliantly adds this note, “The Preacher’s congregation, after getting up morning after morning and finding that the world of resistance and suffering has not gone away during the night, greets each new dawn not with energy anymore but with drooping hands and weak knees. In response to [the] congregation’s fatigue, to their wearied bewilderment over the hardships of the Christian life, the Preacher” tells them their story. This is not nostalgia. This is not amnesia. This is an honest survey and reminder that we do not stand in this present moment alone. All of the “therefores” in our text today follow that litany of people of faith that we read two weeks ago. “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of [them all],” the Preacher wrote. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...”

That tremendous build-up becomes the punch of his farewell blessing. We are surrounded. We are surrounded by the women and men who first told us the stories we cling to today. We are surrounded by the women and men who guided us as children and young people to care for strangers half a world away and just down the street whispering to us the secret truth that our neighbors are not random strangers but little holy mysteries—made in the image of God just like we are—maybe even Divine representatives without our knowing. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who didn’t just show us what living well as people of God looks like, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who still cheers us on in our race today.

As we name the witnesses in our cloud who surround us even now, our hands rise up and our knees are strengthened. As we name the living ones who stand as saints in present time—cheering us on, showing up at just the right moment, bearing witness to our lives and doing the sacred work of simply saying, “I see you. I see you carrying so much and pushing so hard. I see you just as you are. You are not alone. I will carry this with you,” we discover we are part of a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

My friends, I know you are exhausted. I am, too. This life can be so hard. And there is so much happening around us right this very minute that is enough make us all want to walk away from what our faith asks of us and hide our faces. We are standing against selfishness, against greed, against pride and ego, against hate and anger. And it didn’t just start with Hebrews this summer or my pastorate some 5 years ago. No, we’ve been gathering together for years on end to foster peace, love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. *sigh* I want to give up, too, sometimes. I think this way of faith is asking an awful lot, and I’d really love to be at

brunch and just not think about the weight of the world. I would. I can taste that third cup of coffee and that almond croissant!

This is when that dear preacher of 1900 years ago puts a proverbial hand beneath our lowered chins and raises our faces to look us in the eye.

Do you see what we've got? An unshakable kingdom! And do you see how thankful we must be? Not only thankful, but brimming with worship, deeply reverent before God. Stay on good terms with each other, held together by love. Be ready with a meal or a bed when it's needed. Why, some have extended hospitality to angels without ever knowing it! Regard prisoners as if you were in prison with them. Look on victims of abuse as if what happened to them had happened to you. Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of "sacrifice"—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets. May God, who puts all things together, makes all things whole, Who made a lasting mark through the sacrifice of Jesus, the sacrifice of blood that sealed the eternal covenant, Who led Jesus, our Great Shepherd, up and alive from the dead, Now put you together, provide you with everything you need to please him.

That is to say: You are not alone, friends. You are surrounded by this tremendous cloud of witnesses who struggled and suffered just like you do. But they stuck with their race, and they are cheering you on as you stick with yours right now. You are not alone, friends. God is guiding you. God is protecting you like a shepherd protects and guides sheep with a rod and a staff. God is redirecting you and teaching you as a loving, patient parent redirects and teaches a child. Don't give up. Don't hide. Don't walk away from the challenges because the rewards are so much greater. Hold onto these words because they are for you. Hear them not just with your ears but with your heart. And let this blessing work its way through you until you lift "your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." Grace be with you, every one. May you be strengthened and encouraged just as you are surrounded and loved. Amen and Amen.