

Enduring Blessing
Hebrews 12.1-13
Sunday, November 5, 2017
All Saints Day (Observed)
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

On a couple of Wednesday nights this Fall, we have begun studying Hebrews together. We've laid out a bit of a 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 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. Long also describes the clues of the congregation receiving this sermon. 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 speak to the heart of a people and their struggles and questions and offer the heart of the biblical text to the heart of the listeners sitting before it.

To that end, Long writes, “[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 will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking

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

the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith."²

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 where we were last week, and it sounds lovely. Until we actually have to do it. And if loving God means loving our neighbors, well, that's really asking a lot, isn't it. 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 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. Making 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? Can you imagine how exhausted and overwhelmed this congregation may have been?

Just as with our text last week, it helps tremendously if we can approach this text with empathy. We know something of what they were living and experiencing because we are living and experiencing so much of it, too. But last week, I was talking about religious leaders who were frantically, anxiously protecting what they thought were the essentials of their faith. And they were missing some tremendous opportunities for growth and expansion because they were holding onto a story with nostalgia and amnesia. But the preacher of Hebrews helps us look back on our story with the right perspective, and he tells the story of faith to an exhausted people.

² Long, p. 3

³ "Virginia Woolf" by Emily Saliers

The preacher tells them the stories of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Rahab. And builds to this crescendo, “And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two,[1] they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.⁴

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”

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. 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 because our neighbors are made in the image of God just like we are. 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.

We don’t talk like that in here, but we sure did on Wednesday night as we stepped into this text for just a few moments. We named the witnesses in our cloud who surround us even now. We named 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.”

⁴ Hebrews 11:32-40

Then the preacher takes a turn that can be terribly triggering for us because it sounds punitive and harsh. For seven verses, we're told that God is disciplining us the way a parent disciplines a child, and this discipline may be painful rather than pleasant but is good for us. Let's tread very lightly here. You and I both know these verses (and others like them) have been manipulated as a biblical case for abuse. Real abuse. Verbal and physical abuse. Abuse protected and even encouraged by pastors. And we know this because many of us personally have experienced the damage of abuse as children and even as adults in toxic relationships. This is not what the preacher of Hebrews is describing. This is now what the book of Proverbs, quoted here in verses 5-6, is describing.

Misuse of Proverbs 13 famously gives us the phrase, "spare the rod and spoil the child," while the text itself reads, "Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them."⁵ The same word translated "rod" here is also used in Psalm 23, Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me." So what is this discipline? What is this sometimes painful and not always pleasant guidance from God that is rooted in God's love for God's children? This is language not of abuse or harm, this is language of protection and guidance. This is language of a parent teaching and guiding a child because the parent loves the child. These are words of blessing.

Have you spent much time with a three year old? Have you been with a three year old who is confident she knows what is best and is going to head off in the direction of her desire no matter what? No matter if it leads here into oncoming traffic? No matter if the family is already 10 minutes late getting out the front door for the day? No matter if food has just been served at the restaurant but she decides she's ready to leave? Have you found yourself in the heat of that moment? And a really, really good parent who is centered and calm and has a great sense of humor, can redirect that child, teaching what is safe and right and necessary for that child in that moment. This is the loving discipline of a mother and father to a daughter and son. This is Divine guidance and affection that produces peace, not anger and anxiety and fear and trembling, but the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

"Therefore 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."

⁵ Proverbs 13.24

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. We are preaching and teaching against selfishness, against greed, against pride and ego, against hate and anger. We're 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. 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. **"Therefore** 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." Amen.