

November 14th, 2021

Psalm 16

Hebrews 10: 11-14, 19-25

Mark 13: 1-8

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

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 through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our passage today from Hebrews contains a phrase that has stayed with me all week. Hebrews is among the Letters in the New Testament, but like many others, was not written by the apostle Paul. The Letters are the earliest of the

New Testament writings, occurring before the writing of the gospels. Hebrews was likely written before 70ce, and the author is unknown though scholars have made guesses.

The letter was written to newly converted Christians, many of whom had been Jewish. The first part of the letter encourages those hearing the letter that Jesus is the one sacrifice needed.

The phrase that stuck with me all week is in the last sentence:

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

A very unusual choice of words, to speak of provoking one another to love and good deeds!

Provoking is much more often heard with negative acts:

She was so angry she was provoked to violence.

Its synonyms are incited, triggered, roused.

Provoked is rarely heard with love!

And yet, all things are made new in God, perhaps even provoking!

I was drawn to check out other translations of this unusual phrase, and found in the New International Version translation:

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...”

And in The New King James translation:

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works...”

Provoked, spurred on, stirred up to love and good works.....

Evidently, the folks receiving this letter to the Hebrews in the early church needed just the same thing we still do today:

A reminder, a lesson, a push to take the energy of hate and give it to love.

I have said before that hate and anger are energizing, even exciting feelings. We feel invigorated, purposeful, and that we belong when we are angry and against something or someone.

Anger and hate today seen in the rampant name calling in our politics and discourse, can so quickly become our default mode, our habit.

And underneath most, even all anger, is fear....Fear moves silently below the surface, threatening to pull us under.

Obviously, the readers of Hebrews, those to whom the letter would have been read, needed to hear these words as much as we do in our anger drenched times.

Be provoked not to anger but to love.

This past Thursday was Veterans Day. A conversation with a friend in Richmond this week reminded me of how the first step to offering love is to listen.

So often we think, ok, what does that person, that group needed?

We think of something, decide and give that something. But we have missed that first step.

My friend called on Veterans Day, needing to talk about her son, over whom she worries much. He is a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And Veterans Day can be painful for him. He was not physically injured in the wars but all that he saw and did has left him with PTSD.

And though he appreciated all the care of Veterans Day, he also found it painful, as memories were stirred by the ceremonies and the offers of free breakfasts.

My friend's phone call reminded me that our first act of love is to listen, and not assume what is needed. Again, the starting place of love is not us, but the other.

So this week as provoking was on my mind, my friend's call reminded me that we can provoke one another to love and good deeds by gently reminding one another to listen.

Provoking, stirring up, spurring one another on to love and good deeds by taking the time in our so busy and often angry world to offer God's love in quiet listening and understanding ,not assuming, but opening ourselves to understand one another.

Listening, understanding, hearing folks is such hard work!

And it does not always bear fruit immediately, or at all.

I'd much prefer to decide what someone needs and do it and check it off my list. Good deed done! Check!

But we are provoked, stirred up to do good works, and those words imply some energy from us, some energy of love, that may cost us much. But in offering love, in listening we follow the one that the writer of Hebrews knew and shared with others, our savior, our brother Jesus.

I'd like to end this sermon with a prayer for our veterans. This is an adaption of a prayer from the Book of common Prayer.

Let us pray:

O blessed Lord, we come to you offering thanks for all of the veterans in our country, for all who have served in our armed forces, for their care and service to our country, and for the sacrifices they and their families have made.

Loving Jesus, We remember that you ministered to all who came to you: Look with compassion upon all who through injuries in war to body, mind or spirit, have lost their health and freedom. Restore to them the assurance of your unfailing mercy; remove from them the fears that beset them; strengthen them in the work of their recovery; and to those who care for them, give patient understanding and persevering love.

*We lift up all these prayers in your love and mercy,
Amen.*
