

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 11.18.2018



## **An Attitude of Gratitude**

**The Reverend Pen Peery**

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

And 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.

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Last week at our church retreat in the mountains of North Carolina, our retreat leader, a musician named David LaMotte also served as our preacher. David is a deep thinker and a profoundly compassionate man. He is the kind of person who chooses his words carefully – when he talks, you want to listen.

At the end of the worship service, David gave us a benediction – which, of course, literally means “a good word.”



He said, “as you go from this place, do not forget that God loves you, and that God needs you, and that God loves you, and that God is active and alive in the world, and that God loves you, and that God is found in the face of your neighbors, and that God loves you...and that God loves you.”

David knew enough about people to realize that it bears repeating.

Because, no matter how often we hear it, it’s hard to trust, isn’t it?

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I was talking with a friend this week – a friend and a fellow pastor – who told me that he had been doing some spiritual reflection – and he realized that, for a variety of reasons, he had spent most of his life feeling guilty.

Feeling guilty about the privilege he had that he didn’t earn.

Feeling guilty about not doing enough.

Feeling guilty about not spending enough time with the people he loved.

Feeling guilty about things he had done and things he had left undone.

Feeling guilty all the time.

And then someone asked him,

“I know you preach about it a lot, but did you ever consider that God loves you too?”

I see it in your eyes, sometimes.

When we hurry past each other around town – or at the grocery store – or the little league field.

I know the look.

Have I done enough?

Am I faithful enough?

Am I worthy enough?

I know that look because I carry it.

It’s so hard to trust, isn’t it?



Today's New Testament Scripture from the book of Hebrews begins with a feeling that we've all probably shared. Trying, day after day, again and again, to do things that make us seem worthy in the eyes of God.

New Testament scholar Tom Long says that the book of Hebrews is written to be something like a sermon – and in the passage we read this morning – the preacher of Hebrews gets right to the main message:

by Jesus laying down his life, we are made worthy once and for all; that is, for all time.

We no longer need to worry about whether we have done enough.

Or whether we have believed enough.

Or whether we are enough.

Because not only does God love us that much – but Jesus' sacrifice has that much power.

The book of Hebrews talks a lot about sacrifice.

And it has a lot of references to blood and flesh.

It may be difficult for the squeamish – but the references were meant to help the early followers of Jesus adjust to a new reality – full of good news.

At the time the New Testament was written, the faithful believed that the presence of God resided in the heart of the temple. They called it the Holy of Holies – which had once held the ark of the Covenant that contained the Ten Commandments. The room was separated from the rest of the temple by a curtain. One day a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would enter the room to sprinkle the room with blood from a sacrifice.

But now, according to Hebrews, we are invited into the place where God is present – because Jesus himself is the curtain – and there is no more separation.

Our hearts are made clean.

Our consciences are cleared.

We are free from guilt and free from worry.



And we can spend our time and energy – not focused on trying to earn God's love – but in showing it; living it; sharing it.

It's just about enough to make one grateful – which is why we chose to read this passage on the Sunday before Thanksgiving.

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Thursday of this week most of us will find ourselves around a table piled up with food – and family.

I don't know all of your families – but I have one – and sometimes, when we get together, well...things can get interesting.

We don't always agree on the issues of the day.

Some people share their opinions graciously – while others tend to be a little more vocal.

When family gets together there are often old stories that get told – and sometimes there are old arguments – and old hurts.

Grown siblings, who should know better, sometimes regress into adolescent behavior and roles that remind their parents why the empty nest is so wonderful.

It's almost like we just can't help it.

When that many family, with that much history, gets together in one room, around one meal, what often happens is that we provoke one another.

We've learned the buttons to push, and so we push them!

And then there are the comparisons.

Thanksgiving is a nice time to show up to see family in your brand-new car.

Or, after a renovation, to agree to host because you have just a little more space.

And we compare culinary skill –

whose sweet potato casserole is most exquisite,

whose cranberry sauce is the healthiest,

whose method of turkey preparation is most intricate.



Some of us compare ourselves to each other by way of our kids and our parenting strategies.

In extreme cases, I've known Thanksgiving to be a time where there is a straight up contest – usually football – where all these comparisons and unspoken competitions get worked out on the field. Which can be a good idea – or not.

Again, much of the time we just can't help it. Family is the place where most of us began to figure out what makes us tick – and we do that by bouncing off each other – comparing ourselves to one another.

But – hopefully – there are also those moments when we gather with family – where we appreciate our history – and our connection. Where we draw strength from the ties that bind. Where we positively reinforce the values that we've learned from those who might not still be sitting around the Thanksgiving table – but whose impact continues.

Family is often all of that – the dysfunctional and the functional – at the same time.

And it's that way with the church, too.

All of these books in the Bible near the end of the New Testament are written with the church in mind. Sometimes they are addressed to a particular church – other times, like in our Scripture today from Hebrews, they are addressed more generally to the church at large.

But they all are addressed to a group – to a congregation – to a body of believers who gather with one another for worship.

And yes – whenever you get a group of people together – just like family, things can get interesting. And it has been – from the earliest of the churches of Jesus Christ to this one.

Sometimes we push each other's buttons.

We can't help but to compare.

We bounce off each other trying to figure out who we are in our faith.

But what I love about today's passage is the clarity that the preacher of Hebrews has about how we might also spend this time we have together:



By provoking one another to love and good deeds.

By encouraging one another along the way of this journey of faith.

When we gather together as a family of God...

knowing that we are redeemed by Christ...

free from having to spend our time, day after day, again and again, proving the we are worthy – that we are enough in the eyes of God...

We have this opportunity to come into this holy space – into this time of worship – where hope can flourish in spite the headlines and where we can affirm our trust in the truth of God’s promises about what the world will be –

And here – we can provoke one another for good – and encourage one another.

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Lorna wasn’t the kind of church member that looked feisty – but looks can be deceiving. She was a retired social worker with a PhD who dressed modestly, was quiet, and sat in the third pew on the right side every Sunday. She was married with no children – and spent a lot of her week caring for her terminally ill husband who was confined to the house.

Through her work, Lorna knew a lot about the prevalence of mental illness – not just in the homeless community, but in every sector of life. She had heart for those living with mental illness – not just because of her work – but mainly because of her faith. And she would tell you. Even the people who are hard to love and understand are made in God’s image – and we are called to minister to them, and advocate for them, and welcome them.

Lorna served on the mission committee. She was an Elder. Never missed a meeting – getting caretakers to sit with her husband when she had things to do at the church. There was a lot on the agenda at those meetings – mission partnerships, our feeding ministry, our efforts in affordable housing, our outreach to the chronically homeless. I was the staff person assigned to the committee – and before every meeting I would get a note – or a call – or an email from Lorna: could we please put advocacy for the mentally ill on the agenda.



Occasionally, Lorna taught adult Sunday school. Every time she did – she picked a topic that had to do with her passion around lifting up the mentally ill.

We had an incident in worship one day when a mentally ill person acted out in ways that weren't dangerous, but that made the members of that church nervous. Lorna saw it as an opportunity. She gathered us in small groups; talked about how to respond. And how to create an environment that balances safety with radical hospitality for those whose days are more difficult than we can imagine.

Now that church serves as a host for support group for those who have family who are mentally ill. Whenever a new city ordinance is up for discussion, the church is in the conversation to make sure the needs of the mentally ill are considered. The feeding ministry has a social worker to consult with and refer the guests whose mental health is fragile.

In her own – deliberate – consistent – faithful way – Lorna provoked and encouraged her church family to care about people who are so easily dismissed.

I think that is holy – and that it is what God intends when we come together as family.

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Sometimes, we misunderstand why it is we gather together in this sanctuary.

Sometimes we think if we don't come – God won't love us.

Sometimes we think if we do – we'll be protected and sheltered from the world.

Sometimes we think it is one choice among many others on a Sunday

morning – and that missing it every once in a while doesn't really matter.

But if I understand today's word for us from Scripture, it matters that we are here.

Because Christ gave us the gift of being able to come into God's presence – and the grace to know that we are loved unconditionally.

It matters that we are here – because when we gather – we remember who we are – and then we help each other to live that way until we gather again.



It's the gift of church.

God's family.

And every day – I am thankful that you and I belong.

