

A Community of Love

Part 3 of Sermon Series: *Gifts of Love*

a sermon based on

Hebrews 10:11-25

and delivered on

November 18, 2018

26th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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As we continue this sermon series “The Gifts of Love” where the gift that we encounter is “The Community of Love,” can we go back to that passage from Hebrews that Keith read a moment ago?

Throughout Hebrews – we hear that Jesus is the new high priest. This letter was written to Jewish Christians to help them reconcile their lives as Jews and now as Christians, as well. It also allows non-Jewish/Gentile Christians to appreciate the continuity in the faith.

So the passage started out, “And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.” (Heb. 10:1) This wasn’t to mock that ritual. In fact, it was quite the act of faithfulness.

Twice a day – morning and evening – a priest would make meat offering, a grain offering and a drink offering in the temple on behalf of all the people. They’d rotate service – different priests on different days – because it was so much work. Then there’d be the special sacrifices like on the day of atonement, etc. They were following the instructions that Moses had handed over to them after receiving them from God.

These were mostly devout (there’s always a few that squirrel their way in) – these were devout – but imperfect men offering sacrifices to restore brokenness between humanity and God. They did it day after day, partly because people kept sinning day after day, and partly because – although they were offering the best they could – their best wasn’t perfect.

♪♪ It was the rite that wouldn’t end.¹

Yes it went on and on my friend.
Every morning make a sacrifice...
And then again at night.

Tomorrow do it o’er again
Because the priest was just (eh) alright.

(Repeat 1X)

♪♪ Then Jesus came with his one sacrifice
Now it really is all right...

So we don’t need to pretend,
We can finally comprehend.
God’s love is really vast.
And together we’ll holdfast.

I know that sounded a little silly. {aside} You might be getting used to that. But I hope that that silliness can help us to appreciate the futility of trying to make ourselves right. St. Anselm explained it centuries ago (this is definitely a paraphrase) that we can’t do anything to make up for our sin for the simple reason that we’re supposed to do good all the time. Every good thing we do is what we’re supposed to do. Because of that, we can’t offer an extra to undo our sins. The consequence of sin is death. But Jesus never sinned. He didn’t have to die. So his death really was an extra.

Think about it. The priests would sacrifice the best unblemished lambs on behalf of the people, but God offered up himself through his Son Jesu Christ on our behalf. And it wasn’t because people had been so good that they earned it. It was because we had and continue to have this capacity for sin and he didn’t even want that to prevent us from knowing how much he loves us. That’s good news!

So his sacrifice is different. It doesn’t have to be repeated. Once is good for all time. The frustrating futility that sometime leads people into rote repetition can be set aside. The frustrating futility that can make one say, “Why bother?” But at some level, except for the most

depraved personalities (and maybe even a sliver there), people still grasp that there is a need to bother. There is a need to be and do good for its own sake.

When Jesus was preparing to die, in John 14:26, he said, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” That word *Advocate*, in Greek, is *Paraclete*. It’s a military term for a partner in battle, the one who would stand back to back with you so that no one could sneak up on you. So the Holy Spirit has come to humankind to remind us that God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – God in the fullness of his being has our back – and that for all our failing that we can’t undo – we can still do some pretty wonderful things.

So why do we hold back? I think for a lot of us it’s a sincere sense of inadequacy. We don’t feel up to it. It’s not that we don’t want to do good things, but we know our own failings – our own sin. We know that other people – even if they don’t know the details – can see right through us and know that I’m not really the good person for the task. But because Jesus has offered the perfect sacrifice, you don’t have to be perfect for him to do amazing things for you.

The reason we don’t experience that greatness nearly enough, is because we limit ourselves. We don’t claim the power to do wonderful things in God’s name nearly enough. As a Bears fan it sort of pains me to quote Vince Lombardi but when he was trying to get his team worked up he said some pretty powerful things like, “Winning is not a sometime thing; it’s an all the time thing. You don’t win once in a while; you don’t do things right once in a while; you do them right all of the time. Winning is a habit.”

Being a Christian is not a sometime thing. It’s an all the time thing. It needs to be a habit, that we’re fired up about. Let me go back to that passage from Hebrews. In verses 23-24, it says, “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.” Some translations say “to encourage one another;” but I looked it up in the Greek – the word used there *παροξυσμον* (paryxmo) means “to work up into a frenzy” to get the other excited not just encouraged.

The gift of the Church – the gift of the Community of Love – is that Jesus has given us to one another to fire each other up. Not just lackadaisically offering encouragement, but claiming the full power of God – and the grace of Jesus Christ for one another so that we join together with the Holy Spirit as one another’s *paraclete* to have one another’s back so that none of us are inhibited by our own sense of unworthiness. For that reason, that passage in Hebrews continues, “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.”(Heb 10:25)

I’m preaching to those of you who are here, when I repeat that passage “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,” but many of us fall into that habit at times. I’m pretty sure Lombardi didn’t approve of missed practices. Not just from a discipline perspective, but because it inhibits each player’s ability to be the best that he could be, it prevented him from receiving the encouragement of his teammates. It’s like that with Sunday church services. These are our opportunity to come together, to get fired up and to fire each other up for a week that lies ahead when you’ll have more than enough people telling you that you’re not good enough. This community love is a gift to remind you that Jesus has made you good enough, because of him you are perfectly able to do a world of good by his power. AMEN

¹ Sing to “The Song that Never Ends” from *Lamb Chops Sing Along, Play Along*.