

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25 (NRSV)

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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Last week, we looked at the story of the Widow's Mite, and we were a little surprised to discover that in this story that we always thought Jesus used to lift up the exemplary stewardship of this poor widow lady, Jesus was also criticizing the values and behaviors of the religious community of his day. Today, we learn the same lesson in the opposite direction – how positive values of the religious community are reflected in habits and motivations of stewardship and giving. And we learn this lesson from the letter to the Hebrews. You may want to look at the reading as we go along.

First, a word about the letter to the Hebrews. This New Testament epistle is a document that not many of us are very familiar

with. It is anonymous – no author claims credit for it and while some think Paul the author, it is not grouped with the Pauline epistles. It is a long sermon to a somewhat troubled congregation. In the reading today we find that attendance is falling off, that the community is “neglecting to meet together.” In other places, the preacher says that the community needs to hear “the basic elements of the oracles of God (5:12),” that it needs to “pay greater attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift away from it.”

But the basic problem is that the congregation is tired and discouraged, tired of waiting for the promised end of history, discouraged with how hard it is to live in a world that doesn't make much sense and which doesn't seem to be going away. You see, the young church shared the same expectations that are embodied in the Gospel lesson for today – the Temple would be thrown down, nation would rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom, the Son of Man would come in glory and put an end to business as usual. But what seems to be happening is more of the same old same-old.

The preacher captures the dreariness of it all in the first line of today's reading – “every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.” He's talking, of course, about food and grain sacrifices in the Temple 2,000 years ago, but if you let your mind wander a little, you can imagine he's talking about worship services that you've been to, services of going through the motions, services that lack the joy and freedom and discovery of a community that is united around the table, around the love of God and the love of each other, about the excitement of being the people of God, called to spread the love of Christ throughout the world. The community addressed by the preacher in Hebrews couldn't keep that excitement, that enthusiasm for 50 years after the Resurrection. How can we expect to keep it nearly 2000 years after the Resurrection?

Well, the preacher has some fairly traditional ideas and he also has some fairly novel ideas. First, we come into the sanctuary with *confidence*. The language he is using here is evocative but can be

distracting – he talks about “the new and living way” that Jesus opened for us “through the curtain” and what he’s talking about is how the high priest used to enter into the heart of the Temple, into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement once a year. A curtain separated the Holy of Holies from the other Temple spaces and all sorts of rites of purification were required to enter the presence of the living God. But in Christ, we meet God in a new and living way, and as an assembly it’s easy to forget just how world-shaking this access is through Jesus, our great priest over the house of God.

And so we *approach* with a true heart in full assurance and we *hold fast* to the confession of our hope, not because we are faithful but because God is faithful. This is the reason that the baptismal font is right at the entrance of our sanctuary – to remind us of the promises made at our baptism, that we are freed from bondage to sin and death claimed by God for God’s work in the world.

These are all words that we have heard before, although it never hurts to hear them again. But now the preacher offers some novel advice – that we should “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” *Provoke* one another to love and good deeds. What an interesting phrase! And “provoke” here, just as in English, has both a positive and negative sense, both “motivate” and “irritate.” Get in each others’ faces, get in your grille, get your tushy in gear. And note that this is not the pastor’s job (thank God!) but rather the job of each of you. In fact, I now have a new scripture verse to say under my breath during and after those phone calls and meetings where I have been “*provoked* to love and good deeds.”

The preacher urges us not to neglect meeting together to worship, “as is the habit of some” – you know who you are – but instead to encourage one another. *Encourage* one another. My friend Anna Kitzmiller, our administrator, “provokes me to love and good deeds,” by noticing all the things that we *don’t* pray for. We seldom have prayers of celebration and thanksgiving, and this would add another category to our prayers of the people, prayers of *encouragement*. We can and we should should pray for ourselves

and others to use our gifts and graces rather than to fix our weaknesses and shortcomings.

At Nancy Campbell's writing group, we were talking about some of the things we like about living in a congregation, and one of them is that we can encourage one another, encourage one another to live well, to speak well of one another, not to beat ourselves up all the time. Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard and a great preacher, points out that we may live for the rewards of success, but "when success eludes us, as it often does, so do the rewards. We may live 'for' rewards, but we live 'by' encouragement, which we need when things go well and especially when things don't go well."

So, what does this all have to do with Commitment Sunday, with pledging our time and talent and treasure to the ministries of this congregation and the larger church? What stewardship advice can we take from the preacher's advice to the congregation of the letter to the Hebrews?

First, and most obvious. We like to think of our pledge of time and talent and treasure as a personal matter between us and God and it certainly is that – it is a deeply personal expression of thanksgiving and worship and love. But it is also an expression of how we understand the values of this community of which we are a part. We said last week that the Widow's mite described the values of a community gone a little wrong – the model of stewardship seemed to be to grab hold of those few saints who are moved by God's will and take them down to their last penny.

What's a model of stewardship in a healthy community? The consistent witness of scripture in both the Old and New Testaments is that God wants us to have rich, beautiful, abundant lives and that God has given us what we need to have those lives. God has given into our hands all kinds of resources – strength, intelligence, compassion, perseverance, empathy, yes and money – and if we use these resources rightly and we encourage each other to use them rightly, we will live well. The role of the community is to encourage and even

provoke the right use of these resources. In community we discuss and encourage and provoke each other about how we use our gifts and how we can use them better.

What is that better use? This is an on-going task of discernment. About 15 years ago, Linda and I went to a seminar on stewardship that we found very helpful, and it offered an idea about money that isn't very complicated – I introduced it at the children's sermon. Think of the money you have as God's money, that God has given to you to use, and as you approach purchases, ask yourself, "Is this purchase a good use of God's money?"

Now, sometimes the answer will be, "Yes." God doesn't want you to starve. God doesn't want you, or anyone, to live in poverty. God understands that even though we don't live by bread alone, we do need bread to live. But we also know that some things we purchase would not pass the test, that they would not be a good use of God's money, or that we can certainly think of ways that God's money might be better spent. This task of judgment, of discernment is an ongoing task and it never gets any easier.

But we have help, we have support in this community, both in how to make this judgment and in learning and knowing that it needs to be made. And so we enter the sanctuary with confidence, knowing God's unconditional love, encouraged and provoked to love and loving deeds by our sisters and brothers. In a few moments we will make our commitments of time, talent and treasure to each other, to this congregation and to the larger church and we will do it as we should, together. Amen.