

Talk Is Cheap

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus tells a parable about taking the lowest seat at a banquet. He teaches us that in God's kingdom, humility and hospitality go hand-in-hand – the exalted will be humbled, and the humble will be exalted. True honor comes not in seeking recognition, but rather from serving others. Especially those who cannot repay us. The same theme runs through the final chapter of Hebrews, where we hear practical instructions for living in Christian community. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Hebrews 13:1-16. **Read Hebrews 13:1-16.**

They say talk is cheap. Have you ever heard that? If you hear nothing else this morning hear this – our epistolary lesson today provides a portrait of a church shaped by love, hospitality, faithfulness, and worship that pleases God. That's the gist of what we're going to talk about, and explore how this text guides us in living out our faith, not only in words, but also in action.

"Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters," (Heb. 13:1), the chapter begins. Or as your Chair Bibles read, "Let mutual love continue," (NRSV). It's a simple command. But it's a tough commandment to keep. The Greek word used for "loving one another," or "mutual love," depending on which version you're looking at, is "philadelphia" and literally means "brotherly love."

Bound Together in Christ

In Christ, we're bound together as a family. Love is not optional. It is the foundation of Christian community. For the early Church, this was a radical idea. Back then, the believers came from different ethnic groups, different social classes, and backgrounds. Yet they were called to love one another as family – or to use an old-timey word that I've been seeing used more recently in Methodist circles – to love one another as kin.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once said, "The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness." Holiness is never private. Our faith is tested and proved in community. To "let mutual love continue" means we nurture patience, forgiveness, and compassion, even when it is hard. It means that the Church isn't a social club for the like-minded, but a family of grace.

The author of Hebrews continues, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it," (verse 2). The command to extend welcome to the family of grace expands outward. Love isn't limited to those inside the church building – it is supposed to be expressed

even to strangers. As Americans, we have a warped sense of hospitality. We usually don't welcome people who aren't like us. But we're supposed to.

Different Views of Hospitality

Hospitality in the Biblical world wasn't about inviting friends over for dinner – that's what we equate it with today – no, friends. Hospitality meant opening your home to travelers, foreigners, and the vulnerable. When I hear this verse, it reminds me of an Old Testament story found in Genesis 18. In that story, Abraham welcomes three strangers – one of whom is the Lord – and finds out he's given the promise of a son by Sarah within a year.

In Wesleyan tradition, hospitality has always been central. Methodists organized societies, schools, and missions to welcome the poor, the orphan, and the outcast. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome Christ Himself. He tells us in the Gospel, "I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in," (Matt. 25:35). And later, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me," (25:40).

In today's world, us showing hospitality might mean listening to someone whose story is different from ours. It might be us welcoming immigrants. Inviting people who don't look like us, or think like us, to come along side us and show them they're beloved children of God just as much as we are. It may mean inviting people who are homeless as far as church buildings go, to come join us in worship. In short, hospitality transforms strangers into friends, and friends into family in Jesus Christ.

A Call to Empathy

"Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering," (Heb. 13:3), the writer tells us next. Christian love goes deeper than kind words – it requires us to stand with those who suffer. The early Church understood persecution. They lived it. Many of them were jailed – even killed – for their faith.

The writer calls the Church to empathy – not just to pray for those who are imprisoned, but to imagine themselves in their place. This is challenging. In our context, imprisonment may not often be for our faith, there are a lot of people who are incarcerated and forgotten. John Wesley regularly visited prisoners. He preached the Gospel behind bars. He believed Christ's love reached even to the darkest of cells.

To "remember" means to act. We must advocate for justice, we must visit the lonely, and care for the abused. And friends, it's not just the pastor's role to do visitations. All Christians everywhere are called to visit their siblings in Christ. Christian love doesn't keep a "safe distance." It steps into the pain and suffering of others.

Fixating on a Single Sin

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral,” (verse 4), we’re told next. Here the writer turns to faithfulness in relationships. Marriage, as a covenant, reflects God’s covenant love for the Church. To honor marriage means to treat it as sacred. It’s built on fidelity, respect, and self-giving love.

Sexual immorality is destructive not only to the individual caught in it. It’s also destructive to the spouse, to the rest of the family, and to the entire community. The Church in America really fixates on sexual sin – if it’s non-traditional. That’s what split the Methodist Church. The issue of homosexuality. But what about the straight folks who are just “shacking up?” That’s sin, too. Paul, in one of his letters, tells us, “ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Rom. 3:23).

Instead of focusing on one particular type of sin, we need to be more adept at seeing our own shortcomings, and then repent – and keep showing other sinners the love of Christ! Wesley taught that holiness extends to every part of life – including our relationships. Our culture often treats commitment lightly. The Church is called to witness to covenant love. Honoring marriage isn’t about avoiding sin – it’s about nurturing love that mirror’s Christ’s faithfulness.

Be Content

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my Helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5-6). Here the writer shifts our attention to possessions and trust in God. Money itself isn’t evil – but the love of money leads us astray (1 Tim. 6:10). The antidote to the problem of loving our money – our possessions – is contentment.

We should be content with what we have – whether that’s a lot, or just a little. Our contentment shouldn’t be grounded in possessions at all, really. Rather, it’s rooted in God’s promise to never abandon us. He’s with us in every valley. That should give us much comfort and peace!

Wesley preached frequently on money. He urged Methodists to “gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” That’s an updated take on it, but it’s the gist of his thoughts on money. His main focus was on stewardship. Our confidence doesn’t rest in wealth, but in God’s provision for us. He takes great care of us – He proves it at the cross. Fear often drives greed. Fear of scarcity, fear of losing status. Faith drives generosity. If the Lord is our Helper, we can live freely, without any anxiety over possessions.

The Walk's Gotta Match the Talk

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith,” (Heb. 13:7). The writer reminds the community to honor spiritual leaders here. And notice the criteria. It’s not because of charisma, and not because of success. The litmus test is their faithfulness. Are they growing into better image-bearers of Jesus? Or do they slap the reporter for asking why they fly around in private jets during the interview of that old televangelist back shortly after COVID?

The walk’s gotta match the talk! “Consider the outcome of their way of life,” we’re told. A faithful leader’s legacy isn’t wealth or popularity – it’s a life shaped by Jesus Christ. In the Wesleyan tradition, leaders are called to be examples in holy living. Wesley himself lived simply, gave generously, and died with little material wealth. The man died with only a few coins in his pockets.

For us to “imitate their faith,” means we follow the pattern of Christ-like humility, service, and perseverance. Next, we read probably the most memorable verse in this chapter. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” (verse 8). It’s the anchor for the whole chapter. Jesus doesn’t change. Leaders come and go, circumstances change, but Jesus is constant. His faithfulness is the same across time.

This truth should reassure us in seasons of turmoil and upheaval. Our Wesleyan focus on the assurance of faith finds its root in this verse. No matter what we face, Christ’s love does not, and will never, change. Our salvation isn’t secure because of our stability. It’s secure because of His stability, His consistency.

Salvation – By Grace Alone

“Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat,” (verses 9-10), we read next. Here the writer warned the community – and us today – that they shouldn’t buy into false teachings that focus on external rituals over grace. See, there were some early Christians who were tempted to return to the Old Testament dietary laws or temple rituals. The writer makes a clear point here – our hearts are strengthened by grace, not by rules!

This echoes John Wesley – and other reformers in the Protestant tradition – that salvation is by grace alone. Works of piety and mercy are essential, but they are the fruit – not the root – of salvation. See, they’re the evidence that it’s happened for us, not the way that it happens. And the altar being talked about is Jesus. Our altar is Christ Himself. He’s the once-for-all Sacrifice who fulfills and surpasses all the Old Testament Laws. We’re nourished by His grace – not by following rituals and regulations.

Notice what comes next in our passage:

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore, (Heb. 13:11-13).

This is a throw-back to more Old Testament stuff. See, the original audience knew the Old Testament probably better than we know the Gospel. The writer's talking about a holiday in the Jewish calendar – Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. This was the one day each year when the high priest went behind the veil into the Holy of Holies – the throne of God on earth. The high priest sprinkled the blood of the lambs on the horns of the altar for a sin offering and the dead animals were taken outside the camp and burned.

Called to Suffer with Christ

Jesus, likewise, suffered outside the city gate. He was rejected by the world. The call being extended to the ancient Church – and to us – is to meet Jesus “outside the camp,” and share in His suffering. This is a radical call.

We don't like to suffer. But if we're following Jesus, we have to be ready to leave comfort, privilege, and security behind to stand with the rejected and the marginalized. Wesley urged Methodists to “go not only to those who need you, but to those who need you most.” Following Jesus means we bear others' reproach, we embrace the cross, and we find holiness in the company of the suffering.

What we find next, is the idea that Christians are pilgrims. We're told, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come,” (verse 14). All the kingdoms of this world are temporary. Our true citizenship is in the city of God. We talked about that some last week. Having this eternal perspective keeps us from clinging too tightly to the things which give earthly security.

Wesley reminded the early Methodists that they had to live as stewards – not owners – of the world's goods. Our hope can't be in political power or material gain. Anytime in history, when the Church and the politicians get together, the Church always loses. That's why it's so important to keep politics out of the Church. Our focus, our hope, has to be in the coming kingdom. When the Church lives with this vision, it becomes a sign of that future city, here and now.

Offer Sacrifices of Praise (Through Service)

The writer concludes our passage, saying, “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess His name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices

God is pleased,” (verses 15-16). Basically, it refers to worship and action. The sacrifice of Christians is no longer animals. It’s praise. It’s us confessing Christ openly. And yet worship cannot be divorced from service. “Do not forget to do good and to share with others.” True worship of God overflows into generosity towards the people around us.

Our United Methodist social principles are rooted in the idea of love of God and neighbor. Works of piety such as prayer, worship, and Scripture reading, along with works of mercy like feeding the hungry and visiting the sick, are both means of grace. One without the other is incomplete. What I’m saying friends, is that worship can’t be confined to Sunday mornings. It continues throughout the week – in every act of love.

In closing, our epistolary lesson this morning offers a vision of Christian community that is humble, hospitable, faithful, generous, and hopeful. It begins with the call, “Let mutual love continue,” and ends with the reminder that our praise must be joined with doing good and sharing. In Luke 14, Jesus calls us to humility at the banquet. In Hebrews, we’re shown what that humility looks like in daily life – welcoming strangers, remembering prisoners, honoring marriage, rejecting greed, imitating faithful leaders, trusting in Christ, avoiding false teachings, suffering for following Christ, seeking the city to come, and offering praise through lives of service.

This is the life of holiness into which our Lord and Savior calls and invites us. It’s not holiness in isolation, rather it’s holiness in community. And so, we live as the family of God. We offer our lives in love, until that day when we enter the Eternal City “whose Architect and Builder is God,” (Heb.11:10).

Prayer: Faithful God, You have called us to live in mutual love, to welcome the stranger, to remember the suffering, and to trust in Christ – who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Strengthen us by Your Spirit to offer lives of praise through acts of mercy and generosity. Keep us looking for the City that is to come, where Christ reigns in glory, and where Your love never ends. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.