Sermon for the 25th Sunday after Pentecost

November 14, 2021

Hebrews 10:11-25

I remember hearing once that the job of children is learning how to navigate the world, and the job of parents is to provide a safe environment for them to do so. Because it can be hard to learn the rules of how to navigate our world. It can be frustrating. We have to learn, often through painful mistakes, how to make good choices.

Eventually, if we’re lucky, we understand enough so that we can navigate our daily lives, anticipating the ways others will behave.

But for the last…almost 2 years now, it feels like there’s a new rule book that none of us have seen. And that has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and discontent, frustration and fear. The sorts of things that make it easy for us to harden our hearts toward one another.

The people Mark the Evangelist wrote for lived in a similar kind of atmosphere. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed after the Romans brutally ended an uprising among the Jews, who just wanted to be able to rule themselves.

In that chaos, it’s understandable that people would be wondering how they could know if God was still present among them

Jesus doesn’t offer them much in the way of comfort, but his instruction to them is an important one for us, as well — don’t let anyone lead you astray. In other words, find a way to stay true to your faith. Find a way to remember the promises of God and don’t let anyone distract you from them. Don’t let anyone or anything cause you to doubt that God is with you always. Or to doubt that God loves you, extravagantly and unconditionally.

Because we are all emotionally and perhaps even physically exhausted at this point in the pandemic, it is easier for us to grow frustrated with…well, pretty much everybody and everything.

That frustration is borne of our inability to feel like we can anticipate with confidence how other people will behave, which can make us feel unsettled and uncertain. Our “normal” disappeared suddenly, without our permission. And we don’t have a very good idea of when things will feel “normal” again.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews has some advice for us: hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, and consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Essentially, we’re instructed to trust in the promises of God and to love one another. Not try to fix one another, to convince others to behave the way *we* want them to behave.

We do not provoke one another to love and good deeds by scolding them, shaming them, or trying to control them. We provoke love and good deeds with *our own* love and good deeds.

And our own love and good deeds are the fruit of our faith, our trust in the promises the writer of the letter to the Hebrews speaks of.

Hebrews reminds us of the good news that God doesn’t just *forgive* our sins. God *remembers them no more.* As the late Mary Oliver wrote so eloquently, “You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Placing our trust in that promise has the power to free us from a lot of our fear. Learning to let go of the fear that God will abandon us, learning to silence that awful little voice that tells us we are inadequate in God’s eyes, goes a long way to allowing us to learn to love one another, rather than try to control one another or fix one another. And it frees us to grow into who we were created to be and encourage the same in others.

Learning to live into this promise takes a lot of time and a lot of effort, and it’s not always a straightforward path.

But it is loving one another — not fixing or controlling one another — that is the holy work to which each of us is called.

Just as our old ways of navigating the world, understanding the world around us, seem to have been tossed out the window lately, we might also find that our old spiritual habits, our old ways of experiencing God’s presence in the world, are no longer adequate.

It was that realization that led me to my little sabbatical last month. To borrow from the Psalmist, my cup was far from overflowing. It was nearly empty. I needed to allow myself to be led back to the pastures and the still waters, so God could fill my cup again.

Because what used to fill my cup, when the world was relatively predictable, was no longer sufficient.

When your cup seems empty, it’s hard to provoke others to love and good deeds. It’s hard to trust that you are doing enough, that you are good enough, in God’s eyes. And that can lead to responding to the world in less than graceful ways, as our fears lead us astray.

So I took some time away. And I tried a lot of things, to see which ones might be helpful. I’ve kept up with some and set others aside. Along the way, I came to understand that even though God is with us always, we don’t always perceive God’s presence in the same way. Which makes sense, because we are not stagnant creatures. We are works in progress.

I can’t say that I feel like my cup is full again yet. But it does not feel as if it is on the verge of being empty.

Whether it’s those in Mark’s original audience, who were afraid amidst the chaos of the oppression of the Romans, or us today, in the midst of the chaos of a global pandemic, it can be easy for our fears, for our shame, for our frustration, to lead us astray. To convince us that God is absent from our lives. That we are not good enough in God’s estimation. That we are in danger of losing God’s love.

When we can trust in the promises that there’s nothing that can make God love us less, we can learn to live into our holy work of loving one another, because we feel less pressure to be something we’re not. And then we can offer that grace to others, and allow them to be who *they* are, with our love provoking them to be the best version of themselves.

Ultimately, there is only one rule in our rule book: Love. Love extravagantly and unconditionally, because that is how God loves us.

May that love so fill your heart that you can let go of your fears that you are inadequate, that you are somehow *not enough,* for *you* *are loved extravagantly and unconditionally* by the God who not only forgives your sins, but remembers them no more.

Thanks be to God.

1. “Wild Geese”, from *The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)