

26th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Hebrews 10:11-25

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. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds',

he also adds,

'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

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.

I've been in many families during my life. The most impactful, obviously, has been my biological family. My mom, my dad, my sister, my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They have shaped me, and continue to shape me, into the man I am today.

I've also known many church families. The first church family I knew was my home church, First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia. Since then, I've worked at a lot of different churches from big to small, liberal to conservative, urban to rural.

I've known friends long enough to call them family. Needless to say I am, as we all are, parts of many different kinds of "families."

These families look and act very differently from each other. Each has their own set of values, norms, behaviors, quirks, and peculiarities. However, one characteristic binds them all together: every type of family is a "work in progress."

Sometimes we like to think that the work has come and gone, that the repairs have been done and the job completed but the truth is that the work is never really done; we are all works in progress!

We are in the process of concluding our Stewardship season. If you have submitted your pledge already, thank you, thank you, thank you from the bottom of our hearts. If you have not yet had a chance to submit your pledge, please do so as soon as possible before the craziness of the holiday season fully sets in!

The conclusion of our Stewardship season is not an end, really, but a beginning. As we look forward to 2019 and all the blessings and challenges that will come along with it, we are reminded this day that we, as a congregation of faith, are a work in progress.

The gifts that we celebrate, the gifts that come only from God's steadfast blessings in our lives, are given to equip us to do the ministry that God calls us to do.

Today's passage in the book of Hebrews tells us just that. Today's epistle lectionary passage essentially tells us two things: who it is that we serve and how it is that we serve.

To answer the first question (of who it is we serve), Hebrews uses the analogy of Christ as the great High Priest who supersedes all other regular priests. You see, back then, a priest served as an intermediary between God and the people, kind of like how Moses traveled up and down the mountain between the Israelites and God. The Temple was divided into two main areas, the larger area where the common people sat and then what was called the "Holy of Holies," which is where the ark of the covenant was kept and sacrifices were made. A curtain separated the people from the Holy of Holies and only the priest could enter this special section in order to make daily sacrifices on behalf of the people to appease God.

However, in the book of Hebrews, the author establishes Christ as the true and great High Priest who now serves as the intermediary between God and God's people. Hebrews establishes some very important differences between Jesus as the Great High Priest and other human priests:

First of all, unlike human priests, Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully God.

Secondly, the sacrifice that Jesus makes is done once and for all. Unlike the normal priests, who have to make sacrifices day after day after day for the people, the sacrifice that Jesus makes is done once and it is good enough for everyone in all times past, present, and future.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the sacrifice that Jesus made is not some animal, not some turtledove or cow or sheep, but rather *himself*.

Today's passage from Hebrews reminds us that these pledges we dedicate are not given to serve us, or to serve Beaumont Presbyterian Church, or to serve simply to satisfy "the bottom line," but that these gifts are given to serve Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate priest for us.

We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, who invites people to this table.

We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, in whose name we are baptized.

We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, in whose name we pray.

We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, that offered a single sacrifice for all sins.

Because Jesus Christ serves as our High Priest, because he made a single sacrifice for all sins, we have confidence to approach God not as pitiful creatures but as empowered disciples seeking to be commissioned to serve God's purpose in the world. To use the words of today's passage, "let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

The second part of the question (that is, how it is that we serve) is this: we are called to serve by provoking one another to acts of love. Now, this verbiage can be rather weird. The verb "provoking" can have some negative connotations. If I "provoke" someone, it typically would be understood that I am doing so out of spite or maliciousness. However, in the context of today's passage, when we provoke one another in acts of love and good deeds, it is kind of like we are poking one another, challenging one another to hold ourselves accountable to go above and beyond to do these acts of love and good deeds and not just talk about them. Remember what we learned in the Book of James about not just being hearers of the Word but *doers* as well?

Here's a rhetorical question for us to ponder: what if, prior to every decision we make as the people who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church, we paused to ask ourselves how this decision is or is not provoking acts of love and good deeds? Would that change any of our actions?

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we are all works in progress. We will not apologize for being a work in progress. Rather, we embrace it and are thankful for it. We are thankful that we are always reformed and being reformed. We are thankful for the pledges given to this congregation that allow us to be a work in progress and to make progress in growing together as disciples of the Risen Christ. I am thankful and I hope you are as well! Let us respond with thanksgiving and get to work provoking one another to do good deeds and acts of love. So be it!

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen!