

Sermon – August 28, 2022
“A Sacrifice of Praise”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, breathe afresh into our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that transforms us into Christ's image and guides us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! Let me provide a small update on disaffiliation as there was some development this past week. The Judicial Council, the high court of the UMC, ruled that the current path we are seeking to disaffiliate under, paragraph 2548.2, is not an exit path that can be used for those purposes. Their decision held, in part, that because the UMC does not recognize the Global Methodist Church as a denomination, use of that approach to disaffiliate from the UMC would not be appropriate. You can read more about the decision 1449 online if you want more details. The question their ruling leaves us with is, “What does this mean for churches who are currently working to disaffiliate on this path?” The legal guidance we received was that this ruling was anticipated and is not a key aspect of the request to negotiate a fair and equitable exit from the UMC. Our leadership will continue to monitor and dialogue with representatives from the National Center for Life and Liberty (NCLL) and will keep the congregation advised of developments.

I would like to take a moment and remind us of a few of the many opportunities over the last week we had to celebrate as a congregation. We had a wonderful time at the “Fun time at Afton,” playing games and enjoying fellowship and food with each other. I also want to thank everyone who helped with Wayne Lowe’s funeral. Wayne’s family was blessed by the kindness and love that the congregation extended to them in this difficult time.

Moving to the topic of future events, we are discussing restarting the monthly movie night where we come together to watch a movie, share pizza and popcorn, and enjoy a time of fellowship. And in the next few weeks, we will be starting our annual cycle to identify next

year's leadership for the church. Our Charge Conference is scheduled for early November. We should be praying about how Holy Spirit might be leading us to join the work of keeping the church engaged in Jesus' mission in this place in the coming year. Next week I will be on vacation and Kevin Mooers will be filling in. Please keep Kevin in your prayers as he prepares to lead next week's services for the Charge.

During August we have been blessed by the letter to the Hebrews. We have learned what faith is and might recall the definition found in chapter 11: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We encountered examples of ordinary people who lived out their faith in God, such as Rahab, who, through her faith that Israel's unseen God had given the land of Canaan to the Hebrews, protected the spies sent to Jericho and in turn placed a crimson cord in her window. Through her faith, she and her family were the only survivors of Israel's conquest of Jericho. We have learned that we have not come in fear to a mountain ablaze with fire, trumpet sound, and the thundering voice of God, but have come to the heavenly worship, where thousands and thousands of angels and believers are giving praise to God and the Lamb.

Today we have come to the closing chapter of the letter to Hebrews. In the letter format of the first century, the letter closing was a time for instructions and guidance to be shared with those the letter addressed. The letter to the Hebrews is no different, and in the closing section, provides no new material but gives directions for how to live in faith. This part of the letter is a transition from hearing and learning to going and doing. Let's look briefly at these summary comments for how to live out our faith in Jesus Christ in the now of our lives.

The first guidance we find is to have mutual love for other believers. Simply, we are to love each other. Daily living tends to get in the way of mutual love. We lose track of loving each other, getting lost in our disagreements, differing opinions, different goals, and different needs we all have, and as we do, we lose the mutual love for each other we are to have and be known for in our community. The point is, when we find ourselves struggling with a brother or sister in Christ over some issue or conflict that has come into our relationship, we are to stop what we are doing, look to Jesus, remember the cross, lay down our desires, take up our cross, and love each other as Jesus loves us. Don't miss that this love is mutual and not one sided. We are to extend love to each other, receive love from each other, and live in love with one another.

The next attribute we are to seek to grow in is hospitality to strangers. We are encouraged to develop this attribute, as by showing hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels. This means that we are to extend food and shelter and meet the needs of strangers who come among us. The Old Testament has two examples where those who extend hospitality to strangers actually entertain angels. The first is Abraham. When he sees three strangers coming down the road towards his tent, he goes to them and encourages them to rest and be refreshed. Abraham provides them with extravagant hospitality. Two of these three are angels who go on to Sodom where Abraham's nephew meets them and also shows these strangers, whom we know to be angels, hospitality. Lot invites them into his home and provides for them a place to stay out of the city square. The men of Sodom do not seek to extend hospitality but instead seek to gratify their own evil desires with these strangers. Lot and his visitors are saved from the desire of these men, but the city and people of Sodom are destroyed. In the first century there was guidance developed to determine if those who came seeking hospitality were men of God. They were to only spend one night or two if there was a great need and they were not to ask for money. They were to be sent out to the next town with only a loaf of bread for their journey. Those who did not comply with this guidance were considered false prophets. The Methodist Circuit riders were also those who relied on the hospitality of those with whom they shared the word of God. They did not carry supplies and were dependent on those they were sent to for hospitality for their needs. In today's society, we seem to have lost much of the concept of hospitality for strangers out of fear for who might arrive at our doors asking for help. We would do well to develop this gift, and I hope and pray we have experienced such hospitality in our lives and learn to give hospitality to strangers.

We are also to remember those in prison. The context here is to remember those of the believers who are in prison because of their faith. We are to remember them as if what is happening to them is happening to us. Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ across the globe are in prison for their faith in Jesus Christ. Voice of the Martyrs is an excellent resource to learn more about how we can pray for believers who are being persecuted for their faith. And while we are focused on believers in prison, we also are to remember those who are in prison and are waiting for someone to bring them the word of God and free them from their bondage to sin and death. Many today across the globe are also mistreated for their faith, and we are to think of them as if we also are receiving the same mistreatment. Every blow they receive we also are to feel.

One of the interesting things I have observed since coming to the Northern Neck is that many here have been married for a great number of years. It is not unusual in these churches to find a couple who have been married sixty or more years. Marriage between a man and woman is God's plan for the gift of physical intimacy. The caution given in the letter to the Hebrews is to not commit adultery, which involves a married person, or fornication which covers all other sexual relationships outside of marriage. God is the creator of sex. It is a great gift, and God gives guidance for when and where that gift is appropriate, within the bond of marriage. To violate this guidance is to place one's own desires for self-gratification over the guidance of God.

The guidance found in the letter to the Hebrews to avoid love of money is related to the self-gratification of sexual relationships outside of marriage. The caution is not about having money, but guides us to use what we have in hand for our needs, the needs of other believers, and for the needs of others. Love of money can often be identified in a person because they express anxiety over having or keeping money. As believers, we are to trust God to keep His promises and to provide for us. We are to use the gifts God has given us in a responsible manner and seek to bless others from any abundance we have been blessed with by God. Those who are content in the blessings God has given them view money simply as a means of meeting needs rather than a driving desire in their life. We are to trust God to keep His promises and to provide for our needs. We are not to sit and wait for God to deliver blessings into our lap, but with mutual love, we are to use the gifts we have been blessed with to their fullest, trusting God to meet our needs.

Corrie Ten Boom shares a story from her youth that makes this point very effectively and was a life lesson for her. Her father was a Swiss-trained watchmaker and as a young girl, she witnessed her father live out these ideas of mutual love and trusting in God to provide. Her father had bills that were coming due with the bank and did not have the money to make the payments. Corrie shared that during this time she was in the shop with him one morning and a man came in and purchased one of their expensive watches, providing enough money to cover their bills. As the man was preparing to leave with his new watch, he made a despairing comment about another watchmaker whom Corrie and her father knew and who was also a Christian. The man had purchased an expensive watch from this watchmaker and it was not working. When her father heard the comment, he asked the man if he might see the watch and the man gave it to him. Corrie's father opened the watch, made a minor repair, and told the man

that it was an excellent time piece and would serve him well for many years. He then returned the man's money and took the expensive watch back. After the very surprised man left the shop, Corrie asked her father about the exchange and if he was not worried about the money he needed to pay their bills. He told her, "There is blessed and unblessed money," and explained that God would not be pleased with the ruination of another believer's reputation. God would provide, he assured her.ⁱ A few days later, a wealthy man came into the shop and purchased the most expensive watch made at that time. The money from the sale provided for the bills and paid tuition for Corrie to spend two years in Switzerland learning to make watches. God can be trusted with the promises He has given us. We are to show mutual love to each other, trust God, and use the gifts we have been given well.

Next, the guidance in Hebrews instructs us to emulate the leaders in our lives. A leader in the letter to the Hebrews is not one from the political or ruling class. Leadership belongs to those sharing Jesus Christ with others. They are our leaders. We should recall those who took the time to share the love of God with us and seek to emulate them in our lives, sharing the Good News about Jesus as it was shared with us. The question for us is who are we leading? Whose life are we working in to be one who leads? Think about the person or persons whose faith has been an example to us and lead others as they led us.

As we look at the last two verses of our text this morning, we discover there are two aspects of sacrifice we are to practice. Jesus fulfilled the need for blood sacrifice to cover sin and ended animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin by shedding his blood on the cross, but we are still to practice two types of sacrifice. The first is to offer a sacrifice of praise to God. We find this in Psalm 50:12-14, "If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High."ⁱⁱ We are to be those who are constantly praising God. From the rising of the sun to its setting, we are to be praising God for all that happens in our day. We are to turn our hearts to thanking God for the gift of salvation that exceeds all other gifts and to live our days in continuous praise. If we will practice continuous praise as a sacrifice, our hearts will benefit. Seek to praise Jesus from the time we wake up till the time we fall asleep. If we can't find anything in a difficult day to give praise to God over, then reflect on the free gift of salvation that Jesus has given to us and thank him for that gift.

The other sacrifice we are to make is that of good works for others. This is to be a way of life for followers of Jesus. We are to take whatever God has placed in our hand and put it to work for others. Look for an opportunity to serve each other and strangers in this manner. We may have to exercise discernment and seek wisdom to ensure that our intended good work does have that result, but this is a sacrifice that we should always be seeking to give to those with needs.

So, let's recap what we have on our list of attributes Christ followers are to have according to the letter to the Hebrews. They are to have mutual love for believers, practice hospitality to strangers as if they were angels, remember those in prison, think of the wounds of those who are mistreated as if they were our own, honor marriage, keep God's plan for physical intimacy, stay free of the love of money, lead others as we have been led, praise God from the rising of the sun to its setting, and do good works for others. The list is easy to compile from the letter but don't expect ease in getting the list fully implemented in our lives in a single day. It may help us to recall that Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever as we seek to grow this list in our lives. We may not get these all to be attributes of our lives the first time we try, but Jesus will help us grow into these attributes if we will trust him. Ask Holy Spirit to guide and lead us to step into these attributes and get started. If we fail, assess what went wrong and try again, asking Holy Spirit to help us grow and develop. The key is to take the first step in beginning the journey into life in Christ.

Pray with me: Jesus, we are those who want to be Christians in this place, at this time. Lord, send Holy Spirit to guide us into the development of any of these attributes that you would have us mature. Jesus, forgive us when we falter and strengthen us for another attempt. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

ⁱ Guthrie, George H.. Hebrews (The NIV Application Commentary Book 15) (p. 449).

Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Harper Bibles. NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (Kindle Locations 28684-28688).

HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.