

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

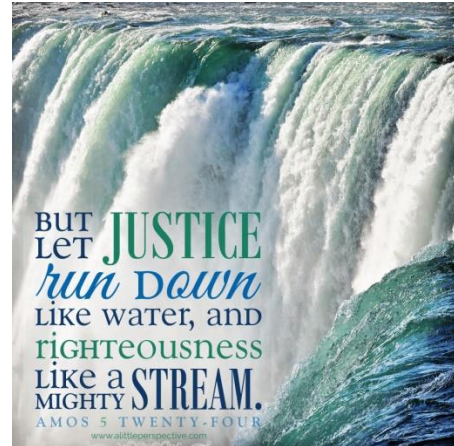
September 1, 2019

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Amos 5:1, 18-24

Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

Keeping Up with Jesus



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As we close our summer of 2019, I begin reflecting on the many trips and events that took place in our Youth Ministry. I think about the youth who built houses in New Jersey this summer and the adults who volunteered their time. I think about the youth who traveled across the country to grow in their Faith. I think about the youth who volunteered in Philadelphia to grow a stronger understanding of poverty and homelessness. These trips have inspired our worship service for today centered on justice.

At this point of my time here at Woods, I have shared with you a few ways in which my childhood and adolescence were highly influenced by my faith, whether it be my choice of Contemporary Christian music or being a part of youth group every week. Christ's influence applied even on the playground...yes, the playground. I truly was a Bible thumping, yet unassuming little pistol. If we revisit 2nd grade Elizabeth, you'd find me on the tall tower of the slide when I noticed a bully bothering a girl over in the field. I swooped down the slide and walked over with assertiveness. I could see the smaller girl was bothered by how she was being treated, so I inserted myself and said plainly, "I am her lawyer, so you can speak directly to me." (If you didn't know, both of my parents are attorneys.) From that day forward, I stood as the lawyer of the playground and refused to tolerate bullying during recess. A seven-year-old stomping around the playground making appointments for other children was probably a hilarious sight for the teachers with playground duty! But what would the world look like, if more seven-year-olds stood up to bullies for justice? What would our world be like if we stopped turning a blind eye to the injustices of the world?

Let's hear from the Letter to the Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16, to the Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem. Listen for the word of God:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence,

*“The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?”*

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This letter was written to a group of early Christians who were being persuaded to go back to their old way of life before Jesus because it was...simply....easier. And so, when we read the entire letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is on center-stage as the One who will guide our lives, the One whom we need. In the final chapter of Hebrews, the writer describes in very practical ways the power of a life with Jesus. Life with Jesus is a life of love. Jesus thought it was so important that he said, *Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples* (John 13:35).

From the beginning, Christianity was built around a love for strangers. In the first century hospitality was a practical virtue, because inns were dangerous places. There were no Motel 6s, no Best Westerns, no Hiltons. Hospitality meant “love for strangers.” Christ said, *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.* He also said that if we throw a banquet we shouldn’t just invite our family and friends but we should *invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed* (Matthew 25:35). In 1 Peter 4:9 we are told to be hospitable to one another without complaint. We act more like Martha rather than like Mary. You can read in numerous books about how we act more like Martha when the world consumes us with busyness, and that we forget the simple virtue of being hospitable.

We can even find examples of radical hospitality in the Old Testament. Does anyone remember the story of Abraham? Not just the part where he almost sacrificed his son for God or lived to be 175 years old. But remember the extraordinary moment of his life when Sarah and he extended generous hospitality to three visitors who came to them by the oaks of Mamre. Semi-nomadic life in the country would often bring people from different families into contact with one another. Canaan was a natural bridge between Asia and Africa, which made it a popular trade route. In the absence of a formal law for hospitality, people living in cities and villages had a social obligation to welcome strangers.

So, when these three men visited Abraham in search for drink and food, he learned that these are not just men, but angels. The angels predicted that judgement would fall on Sodom and Gomorrah, and that Sarah would have a son within the year. This story provides the background for this text in the letter to the Hebrews, *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Later when the Law was given to Israel, there was one commandment that was repeated several times, “to deal kindly with

strangers;” for the Israelites were once strangers in the land of Egypt, and so they knew how vulnerable strangers were in a foreign land.

William Barclay, a New Testament scholar said that, “Christianity was, and still should be, the religion of the open door.”

I’ll be honest, we are facing troubling times. As I retreated on the summer Woods mission trips, I prayed over this worship service...because I have seen more and more news stories of the horrendous way the immigrants have been detained...the number of lives taken by mass shootings and gun violence is outrageous...just yesterday in Mobile and in Odessa... and knowing that one in five women in college will be sexually assaulted is despicable. A few weeks ago The Presbyterian Outlook posted a prayer exclaiming to God, “Enough, Lord God, enough.”

How is it that when 13 people contract E. coli, all romaine lettuce is pulled from the shelves, but when 35 people are killed in a mass shooting, nothing is changed?

How is it that in a country where 70% of the citizens identify as Christians, and yet hospitality is the last priority extended to immigrants, who sit in detention camps and children are forced to be separated from their guardians. Weren’t our ancestors of the Old Testament immigrants, strangers, and yet even with little they still extended hospitality to strangers?

What would the seven-year-old lawyer on the playground say about all of this?

I’m afraid we are turning a blind eye toward the injustices of today and not keeping up with Jesus.

This sermon title is based on a popular reality TV show called “Keeping Up with the Kardashians.” This show, while most think is completely ridiculous, is about the daily events of this celebrity family. I think that the author of Hebrews wanted his letter to be just that, a day-time show that reminded the reader to keep up with the teachings of Jesus.

In order to keep up with Jesus, brotherly love must continue (Hebrews 13:1).

This is mentioned elsewhere in Scripture:

1. Jesus tells his disciples in John’s Gospel, *This I command you – to love one another* (John 15:17).
2. In the Gospel of Matthew he tells us, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself* (Matthew 22:37-39).

But we tend to keep strangers, the crippled, the lame, gun violence, immigration, sexual assault...at arm’s reach. We have our high fences, automatic garage door openers (so that we don’t even have to talk to our neighbors), our security systems, just to ensure strangers stay outside. Taking in strangers is “invasive” and “inconvenient” in our culture. We often avoid hospitality because we are so busy, or so tired, that we just look the other way when we know there is a need.

In a world where things are changing rapidly, where the fast pace of living has become hectic, and a world in which values have been compromised, and society seems teetering on the brink of moral collapse, it is vastly important to know that there is a compass that points to the one true God.

The Word of God is clear and consistent. When we follow it, our moral compass will remain constant. Today's sermon title isn't just a play on words making fun of a TV show, but a charge for each of us.

We must read Scripture to keep up with Jesus and his teachings.

This passage ends with one of the most powerful verses in all of Scripture, *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever* (Hebrews 13:8).

If Jesus is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, then surely His moral and ethical teachings do not change. And if that is true, then our values and ethical principles should reflect Christ and not change! We must stand up to the bullies of the playground; have a stance on gun violence not just because it is a 2nd Amendment concern, but because we are facing issues with the 2nd great commandment...love your neighbor as yourself. We must find solace and hospitality to strangers and treat them as guests at our banquets, and find safety for those in danger of being assaulted.

Showing hospitality to strangers and standing up for the injustices of the world are not things that we do in order to earn our way into heaven, but are earmarks of a true believer that set us apart from others. Jesus told us that people will know we are Christians when we show love to one another. Go forth into this world being the example of brotherly love and hospitality. Amen.