

November 18, 2018
Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Series: We Are One

Mark 13:1-8
Hebrews 10:19-25

Provoke One Another

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 we see the Day approaching. – Hebrews 10:24-25

*Let us
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*-Hebrews
10:24*



The second reading this morning is from the New Testament book of Hebrews, chapter 10. Listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church.

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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray silently.

Well the NBA made it official on Monday. The Lakers' Brandon Ingram received a four game suspension and Rajon Rondo had to sit out three. Houston's Chris Paul got two games for his part in the fourth quarter altercation in Los Angeles Saturday week. Rondo protested that he was provoked into throwing a punch after Paul poked a finger in his face.ⁱ

How well I know. I have two younger sisters. At times in our childhood it seemed as if they came into the world for the sole purpose of provoking me— particularly that middle one. When we were kids she would poke, pester, prod and provoke me until, of course, I would *do something*. Then she'd run crying to Mom, and I would get it.



Maybe she couldn't help it. Maybe provoking me was the natural defense of a smaller child. Animals do it. Bear cubs wrestle; puppies growl and nip at one another... No, I don't think so. She was the

devil. Maybe it's the result of original sin, our fallen human nature that causes humans to constantly provoke one another. I don't know.

I do know that provocation has reached a new and chilling level in this country. Hate crime increased by 17% last year according to the FBI.ⁱⁱ Early this week NPR aired a story about a class of high school students from Wisconsin who had their Junior Prom picture taken making Sieg Heil, the Nazi salute. The boys said that their photographer urged them to do it. There is some dangerous provocation going on around us.

Young people too often provoke one another to do dangerous or damaging things.

So when we read the New Testament book of Hebrews telling us to "provoke one another to love and good deeds" it seems odd, almost a joke, a silly turn of phrase. But in reality, the Greek verb *paroxysms* [pearo-ox-ee-mos'] shows up rather often in the Bible. It literally means to "call out." In English we translate it "provoke" or "stir up" or "incite." Deuteronomy 9 and Judges 2 talk about what happens when God runs out of patience with human faithlessness. Human sin provokes God's anger.ⁱⁱⁱ First Corinthians 13, Paul's magnificent hymn to love, says, "Love is not irritable,"^{iv} literally, "love is not easily provoked." Ephesians 6 warns that parents should not provoke their children.^v I really think it ought to be the other way, too.

Here in Hebrews, the use of the word is different. The Hebrew writer tells us *to provoke* one another to love and good deeds. We are to call out love and kindness from one another. We all know that's possible. We see the negative side of provocation all the time. So why not provoke one another for good? That's what the writer of Hebrews wants.

So how do we do that? Let me give you an example. This is provocation in the macro.

It happened on an airplane. A Catholic businessman named Bob Macaulay, then the founder and CEO of AmeriCares, was on a flight to Mexico with Mother Teresa, now St. Teresa of Calcutta. It was dinnertime, and as the flight attendants began to pass out the meals, the two asked how much the airline would donate to her charity if she returned their dinners. When the attendant returned with the answer, they soon had everyone on the flight, including the crew, asking to return their dinners.

When they landed in Mexico City, Mother Teresa asked if she could actually *have the dinners* to feed to the poor. The airline said "yes." Then she asked if she could borrow one of their maintenance trucks to deliver them.^{vi}

That's provoking – inciting one another to love and good works, stirring up one another to imagination and generosity! Most of us are not Mother Teresa, but together we are strong. Together we can provoke one another to love and courage.

Listen to verses 24-25 again.

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.

The Bible says that our ability to stir up love and good works in each other is directly related to our regular habit of meeting together for worship. *This* is where we receive our goodness from one another. As much as we like to think of worship as a private matter, it is not. Worshiping God and loving one another are organically linked. According to Hebrews, one provokes, stirs up, incites and inspires the other.

What we are doing here, right now, is essential. I love what Adam Hearlson says in his new book on worship called *The Holy No*. He wrote:

“The first end of worship is worship. Worship is its own intrinsic good. If we were to enter into worship and completely forget what happened the moment we stepped out of the sanctuary, it will have been worth it. Worship is still good, absent the positive effect it has on the worshippers or the world. It is good when God is praised [at the same time] worship needs to be connected to the world that it might change the world. This is the second end of worship: transformation...Worship is simultaneously its own good and good for the world in need.”^{vii}

Many disagree, and that is a huge problem. I ran into a man I know in the grocery store the other day. He’s not a Woods member, but he used to worship here on a fairly regular basis. A lot of people used to worship God – here and elsewhere – they used to worship God on a regular basis, now they don’t anymore. They tailgate, or read, or go for a run. As a pastor friend from New York famously said, “Our competition isn’t the evangelical church down the way. Our competition is a well-toasted bagel and the New York Times.”^{viii}

The man in the grocery store and I talked a while. I told him that we miss him at Woods. He looked sheepish, then he gave me a long list of thin reasons why he can’t make it on Sunday mornings, and he finally got to the real point.

“The truth is,” he said, “I just don’t need it. I believe in God; I don’t need to go to church.”

I couldn’t help but think of Jesus’ own *spiritual practice*. His custom was to go to worship God in the sanctuary every Sabbath day. You would have been proud of me. I told the man we miss him, and I hope he will come back to church. I did not say, “Man, do you really expect me to believe you are spiritually stronger than the Lord himself?! You need to be here, Dude! More to the point, your family needs your leadership in this; the world needs you to be here.” This is what I’ve been kicking myself about – I wish I had said: “Church is not mainly about you and what you need. *Church is where you go to provoke others to love and good deeds*. These are tough times. California is burning. Mass shootings have become an everyday occurrence, floods and demigods rage. This world is a mess. We need the Savior. This world NEEDS Jesus Christ. There is no time for neutrality... a little bit Christian will not do. Today, you have to decide – are you with him or not? This is where we go to declare whose side we are on!” That’s what I wish I had said. Maybe not in the Safeway, but somewhere. Maybe it’s not too late.

Listen to the last two verses of this reading again:

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.

Speaking of good deeds in tough times, you may know that the so-called Letter to the Hebrews is not actually a letter at all, but an early Christian sermon, and a lot longer than one of mine! The preacher uses every idea and image available to show Christ and to strengthen and encourage the church. To say that they were facing hard times is an understatement. The Hebrew Christians were experiencing terrible persecution. The very next chapter describes some of what was going on, how some of the believers were:

Tortured... [others were] stoned to death ... killed by the sword ... destitute, persecuted, tormented.^{ix}

It goes on, recounting more grizzly details not appropriate for a PG sermon. Think Jamal Khoshoggi and you will understand. As a result of the persecution, people were leaving the church. They weren't neglecting worship because they didn't think they needed it. They were leaving because they were being arrested, tortured and killed for practicing the faith of Jesus.

And so the pastor pleads:

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.

Listen: It is nearly impossible to hold fast without the support of a church family.

Last week's observance of Veterans Day made me think of a film I saw years ago called *We Were Soldiers*. It's a brutally realistic film set in the early days of the Vietnam War. Mel Gibson plays Colonel Hal Moore, leader of the 1st Cavalry Division, 7th Regiment, at the time of the first major American engagement in Vietnam. What makes the film effective (for adults, please) isn't the endless violence but the too brief glimpses into the lives of the soldier's families left behind.

There's a scene that was unfortunately cut from the final version of the movie, but we have it here for you. It takes place on a Sunday at the base at Ft. Benning, Georgia. As the helicopters carrying the troops into the battlefield, their families are gathered at the base church. Watch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WomsNToa-YI>

One of the soldiers' wives is introduced by the pastor. She is to sing the solo. She begins tentatively, singing:

“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.”

Soon she falters, apologizes, and begins again. But again she stops, broken up, she cannot continue. After a couple of anguished seconds, you hear the sound of another woman singing,

“On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

It is the wife of Col. Moore singing with her. Soon the wives of the other soldiers, and then the entire congregation are singing:

“On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand; all other ground is sinking sand.”

Even if everything around us crumbles, we are standing on solid ground. Christ is the solid rock on which we stand...all other ground is sinking sand. Together we are strong. Together we find courage to face our terrors. Together we stand on solid ground. Therefore,

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 Adrian Wojnarowski, Brandon Ingram out 4 games, Rajon Rondo 3 and Chris Paul 2 ESPN, http://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/25047465/multiple-suspensions-lakers-rockets-scuffle

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/hate-crimes-fbi-2017.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 9:7-8, Judges 2:12

^{iv} 1 Corinthians 13:5

^v Ephesians 6:2

^{vi} *World Traveler Magazine* archives, November 1995

^{vii} Adam Hearlson, *The Holy No: Worship as a Subversive Act*, Eerdmans, 2018, 9-10

^{viii} Scott Black Johnston, from a presentation at the NEXT Church gathering, Indianapolis, February, 2011.

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