

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Jim Capps**  
**April 12-13, 2008**

**“Continuing Fellowship with God”**  
**Hebrews 10:19-25**

This week I read with interest that Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State might be interested in becoming John McCain’s running mate. A couple of years ago, I had asked her pastor, Gareth Icenogle, of the National Presbyterian Church whether he thought Condoleezza was interested in running for president. At that time, he said she had no interest in running for president but that she would love to be the Commissioner of the National Football League.

In the August 2, 2002 edition of the Washington Times, in an article entitled “Walking in Faith,” they share these words from Rice given to her Sunday school class at National Presbyterian Church:

“Although I never doubted the existence of God, I think like all people I’ve had some ups and downs in my faith. When I first moved to California in 1981 to join the faculty of Stanford, there were a lot of years when I was not attending church regularly... I was a specialist in international politics, so I was always traveling abroad.... [One] Sunday morning, I went to Menlo Park Presbyterian Church [in Palo Alto]. The minister that Sunday morning gave a sermon I will never quite forget. It was about the prodigal son from the point of view of the elder son.

It set the elder son up not as somebody who had done all the right things but as somebody who had become so self-satisfied; a parable about self-satisfaction, and content and complacency in faith [and] that people who didn’t somehow expect themselves to need to be born again can be complacent. I started to think of myself as the elder son who have never doubted the existence of God but wasn’t really walking in faith in an active way anymore.

I started to become more active with the church, to go to Bible study and to have a more active prayer life. It was a very important turning point in my life.”

Since the beginning of the year, we have been studying together and preaching on the subject of “Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the will of God.” Henry Blackaby’s workbook which has now been studied by millions of people around the world has been our guide.

Today, we are looking at the 12th and final chapter about how we can have a continual fellowship with God. If our study has given us more information and lots of stories of people who have experienced God in their everyday lives, but it doesn’t translate into practice, then it has been just a nice little series with little lasting value. We may be like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son who Condoleezza Rice describes as being self-satisfied, content, and complacent.

Today, we are going to look together at Hebrews 10:19-25, a wonderful passage in which the writer talks passionately about how we can experience a fellowship with God on a continual, ongoing basis. It comes at the end of some rich teaching about how we can have a constant access to God through Jesus, who has become our Great High Priest. This is where the “rubber meets the road.” This is the practical application of all that he has written.

Listen as I read Hebrews 10:19-25. Please notice the 5 exhortations which begin with “Let us...” In these passionate statements, we find great help in knowing how we can grow in this continuing fellowship with God.

### **First Exhortation: Let us draw near to God.**

Since Jesus, our Great High Priest, by His sacrifice on the cross, has won us instant access at any time to the very presence of God; we must draw near to Him on a continual basis. We must have a hunger to know God better.

The Greek word used here has the idea of approaching with boldness and confidence, knowing that the Great God who created and sustains everything wants to spend time with us. It's even greater than if the President of the United States said, “Here is my personal cell phone number. You can call me any time. I will feel badly if you don't call.”

With this confidence in our standing with God, we can be certain God wants us to know that we are forgiven for all those things that plague our consciences. God wants us to have a clean slate so that nothing is keeping us from experiencing God the way He wants us to experience Him.

Our fellowship with God is compromised and broken so often by that sense of guilt that we have for those things we know we have done wrong. We must draw near to God and know that He wants to delete our sins.

There was a man who made an airline reservation online for his wife to take a one way trip to see her sister in Dallas. He checked that he knew it would be non-fundable and non-transferable and that this credit card would be charged. He was really feeling good about himself and his cyber-prowess, when he noticed that as the confirmation was being printed, the reservation was in his name.

He quickly called the airline and they told him there was nothing they could do about it, but that he should call Travelocity. He was panicking at his costly error as he waited for 10 minutes to talk to a live person

Finally a service representative named Jacob came on line. After explaining in great detail what he had done, Jacob said, “No problem, I'll delete the transaction here. You can go online and redo your reservation.”

The man said in disbelief, “Really, Jacob? Just like that? No penalty or anything?” “No problem,” Jacob said.

Dear friends, we can draw near to God with boldness bringing all the garbage of our lives and know that if we are sincerely sorry, our sins are forgiven and deleted. Our fellowship with God does not need to be broken.

### **Second Exhortation: Let us hold unswervingly to hope.**

As a people with a faith in Jesus Christ, we have hope for the future. Hope for Christ's presence with us in all the circumstances of this life. Hope that when this life is over and we exhale for the last time, we will have an eternal home in what the Book of Revelation calls a “City of No More Tears.”

We don't have to be paralyzed by the fear of what is going to happen to us in the great unknown of the future. Because of what Jesus, our Great High Priest did for us; we are a people

with a living, lasting hope.

Now if that hope is based on just my word and my wishful thinking, while well-meaning to be sure, we are in big trouble. Notice what verse 23 has to say, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.” Our hope is solidly based on the faithfulness of God supremely expressed in Jesus.

I’m reminded of the old gospel hymn:

“My hope is built on nothing less, than Jesus blood and righteousness...  
On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

Dear friends, when the fear of the unknown creeps into our minds and our fellowship with God is threatened; when there is so much that is out of our control; when we have difficult decisions facing us; when we hear gloom and doom heralded from every side—“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

Notice that the next exhortation moves us from the personal to the communal or corporate.

### **Third Exhortation: Let us consider how we spur one another toward love and good works.**

While fellowship with God is a personal, individual thing on the one hand, it is always strengthened by others in the Community of Faith. We were never meant to be alone. We are not islands unto ourselves. We are not “lone rangers” fending for ourselves in the often difficult, sometimes seemingly impossible world in which we live. We desperately need the Community of Faith.

We set an example for one another about what it means for us to be like Jesus in a practical way every day. When I see a sister or brother in the faith do an act of selfless love to another, I realize that I can and should do the same. When I see how a person of faith makes a tough decision to take an ethical stand even though it may be costly, I am given the courage to do the same. When I see other followers of Jesus give their financial resources in a way that is sacrificial, I am moved to do likewise.

One of the very best ways that we spur one another toward love and good works is being a part of a small group. In a group of 6-12 people you can share your lives together in a way that isn’t possible in a larger group. Next week, the pastoral staff is going to begin a series of messages on the importance of being a part of small groups. Small groups in a church like ours are not just a nice programmatic offering. Small groups are an essential for spurring each other on in love and good works. Using the terminology of education, small groups are not an elective they are a requirement if we want to be in a continuing fellowship with God.

### **Fourth Exhortation: Let us not give up meeting together.**

Here the writer is very probably referring to coming to together for the express purpose of worshipping our Great and Awesome God. Just as is true for us in our world today, there must have been people in the First Century A. D. who felt that it really wasn’t necessary to get together for worship. The writer states emphatically that meeting together to worship God is crucial.

Worship is not about the preacher; it is not about the music, the worship leaders, or the physical space. Worship is about coming together with other believers to join our hearts minds

and voices in praise of the Great God who created us. It's about taking our minds off of our puny selves, and focusing on the Great God who loves us with a never failing, everlasting love.

Maybe you have read of the churchgoer who wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. He wrote, "I've gone for 30 years and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So I think I have been wasting my time and the pastors have been wasting theirs by giving sermons at all."

You can imagine the response in the "Letters to the Editor" column. To the delight of the editor, the controversy lasted for weeks until this letter appeared:

"I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this: they all nourished me and gave me strength needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me those meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, If I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!"

### **Fifth Exhortation: Let us encourage one another.**

In the last "Let us..." statement they are called to encourage one another "all the more as you see the Day approaching." They believed that Jesus could return at any moment and life as they knew it would be finished. With all the trials and tribulations they faced, they needed to encourage each other. Without sisters and brothers cheering them on, affirming them, caring for them, and praying for them, it would be so easy to cave in and throw in the towel in despair. Mutual encouragement was a must.

Hear these helpful words from William Barclay:

"It is easy to laugh at men's ideals; it easy to pour cold water on their enthusiasm; it is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time a word of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer has kept a man on his feet. Blessed is the man who speaks such a word."

Are you an honest encourager or discourager? Do you build people or tear them down? Do you affirm or infirm people with your words for them. If we are going to be continually growing in our fellowship with God, we need the encouragement of others.

### **Application**

As I close this series on Experiencing God, I want to share story I read about Heidi Neumark, who while attending a prestigious eastern university took a year off to do volunteer work. She was sent to Johns Island off the Carolina coast—where she learned so much from the sons and daughters of plantation slaves who allowed her to listen as they sat around and told stories. Here are Neumark's words:

"The most important lesson I learned on John's Island was from Miss Ellie, who lived miles down a small dirt road in a one-room, wooden home. I loved to visit her. We'd sit in old rocking chairs on the front porch, drinking tall glasses of sweet tea, while she'd tell me stories..."

Miss Ellie had a friend named Netta whom she'd known since they were small. In order to get to Netta's house, Miss Ellie had to walk for miles through fields of tall grass. This was the sweet grass that the Sea Island women make famous baskets out of, but it also was the home to numerous poisonous snakes: coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins, and copperheads.

Actually, Netta's home was not that far from Miss Ellie's, but there was a stream that cut across the fields. You had to walk quite a distance to get to the place where it narrowed enough to pass.... Poor Miss Ellie, I thought, old and arthritic, having to walk all that way, pushing through the thick summer heat, not to mention the snakes.

I felt sorry—until I came upon the perfect plan. I arranged with some men to help build a simple plank bridge across the stream near Miss Ellie's house... I bought and helped carry the planks there myself. Our bridge was built in a day. I was so excited that I could hardly wait to see Miss Ellie's reaction... 'Look!' I shouted. 'A shortcut for you to visit Netta!'

Miss Ellie's face did not register the grateful, happy look I expected... Instead for a long time she looked puzzled, then she shook her head and looked at me as though I were the one who needed pity. 'Child I don't need a shortcut.' And she told me about all the friends she kept up with on her way to visit Netta. A shortcut would cut her off from Mr. Jenkins, with whom she always swapped gossip; from Mrs. Hunter, who so looked forward to the quilt scraps she'd bring by; the raisin wine she'd taste at one place in exchange for biscuits; and the chance to look in on the 'old folks' who were sick.'

'Child,' she said again, 'can't take shortcuts if you want friends in this world. Shortcuts don't mix with love.'"

Dear friends, so it is in our relationships of fellowship with one another and with God. There are no shortcuts. Therefore, let us draw near to God; hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, spur one another on toward love and good deeds; not give up on meeting together and encouraging one another. There are no shortcuts!