

Hebrews 13:1-16

1 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 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. 4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5 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.” 6 So we can say with confidence,

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

13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them. 10 We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have

no right to eat. 11 For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. 12 Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. 13 Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. 14 For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. 15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

CHRIST AND CULTURE

What is distinctive about those who call themselves disciples of Jesus Christ? How do we define the Christian faith?

Ever since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, many have defined Christianity as a religious expression of the state.

Long ago the Romans made Christianity the official religion. Christians went from being persecuted by the state to those that were in charge of the state.

That was a mixed blessing. Yes, no longer were Christians persecuted. But, the content of the faith was changed to accommodate the needs of the state.

The cross was turned into a sword. The Christian faith was made to fit in with the values and ideas of the Roman world. And this continued for many centuries in many different cultures and countries.

The abuses of this cozy relationship between the church and the state caused much social upheaval for many years. Reformations and counter reformations attempted to bring the Christian faith back to what it was intended to be.

In our own country we have emphasized freedom of religion in an effort to overcome this unhealthy relationship between church and state.

And the struggle continues to this day. The relationship between church and state is still a hot topic. Witness all the consternation concerning the mosque that might be built in New York City.

Some people want to say that our country is a Christian country, founded on Christian principles. Others believe that faith has no role to play in public life. What we believe is purely a private and personal

matter. What should our attitude be? What is the relationship between Christ and culture?

A famous theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book on that topic and summarized the relationship between the church and state in three memorable phrases: Christ of Culture, Christ Against Culture, and Christ Transforming Culture.

In other words we can change the message of Jesus to make him fit in with our culture (Christ of Culture).

We can say that the world is totally evil and withdraw from the world in the name of Jesus (Christ Against Culture).

Or finally, we can bring the message of Jesus to bear on the world. We can transform the world in the name of Christ (Christ Transforming Culture).

I'm not so sure any these models adequately describe the role of the Christian in the world. Certainly we don't want the content of our faith to be dictated by the world, although, to be honest, quite often we do allow just that to happen.

And withdrawing from the world doesn't seem to be the answer either. The Bible tells us that God sent

his Son into the world to save the world. It doesn't seem like an act of faith to close up shop and wait for Armageddon!

That leaves Christ transforming culture. Now I believe that Jesus is in the process of changing the world. I believe that one day there will be a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

But, the difficulty with this model is that we sometimes put ourselves in the place of Christ. We proudly think that we have the mind of Christ when it comes to social issues.

We often lack humility.

And so our effort to transform the culture using Christian principles can degenerate into nothing more than partisan politics. Cynical politicians can use our Christian faith as a wedge issue that divides not only our country but also the church.

We are blinded by our own sin, and we will always be imperfect representatives of the Christian faith.

So what are we to do? What does it mean for us to be a Christian in the world today?

IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

We are challenged to be in the world but not of the world. We are challenged to live in a way that is different from the world's way.

And we do this to worship God. We do this as a way of pointing beyond ourselves to the One who has come and is coming.

In a way today's lesson is a continuation of last week's lesson on acceptable worship.

We worship God in the church with a sense of reverence and awe. We worship God in the world by the way we act. Our lives are a witness to the power of God's salvation.

So, exactly how are we different?

How will the world know that we are Christians?

In a world that is hostile to Christianity or thinks that what we believe is irrelevant, how can we make a difference?

What sets us apart from the world?

MUTUAL LOVE

That old song that we used to sing at camp is a good beginning. They will know we are Christians by our love. Mutual love is the distinctive trait of the church.

We read in our lesson for today “Let mutual love continue.” (13:1)

The Greek word translated love refers to the love between brothers and sisters. The church is not first and foremost a political action group or a social service agency.

The church is more like an extended family, a family of faith.

I don't know about your family, but my family is quite diverse. We disagree on politics, sports, child rearing, and the best way to cook a turkey at Thanksgiving.

But, we are still family. We love each other. We have a common bond that transcends our differences.

In the same way the Christian family has a common bond that transcends our differences. Yes, we

disagree about many things. We have many different views on Scripture and what constitutes faithful worship and service.

But, we have one thing in common. We have the same Savior. We have all been adopted into the same holy family and “when push comes to shove” that should transcend our differences.

In the world those who differ with our viewpoints are often demonized and disparaged. In the church we are not allowed to do that. We are not allowed to make it personal.

The Bible calls for tolerance. We are to bear with each other in love. We are called to be a community in which forgiveness is a reality. (Colossians 3:13)

HOSPITALITY TOWARD THE STRANGER

And love, Christian love is not just for insiders, for those that we already know. Christian love is always trying to create a wider circle of faith.

Throughout the Bible there is an emphasis upon the Christian virtue of hospitality. (13:2)

In the ancient world there were no Ramada Inns or even Motel 6s. And so out of necessity people took travelers in for the night.

Our circumstances are different but hospitality still plays a vital role in the church. We must learn to welcome the stranger. We must learn how to take people into our homes and our hearts as a practical demonstration of God's love as revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

The writer reminds us that when we are hospitable we too receive gifts.

We entertain "angels without knowing it." In the Old Testament there are several stories where angels, messengers of God came to God's people in disguise. (See Genesis 18, Judges 6 and Judges 13)

In the gospel of Matthew we read that when we welcome needy people into our lives and care for them, we also welcome the very presence of God in Christ. (Matthew 25:31-46) Indeed our lives will be judged by our willingness to reach out and love in this way.

Hospitality is not an optional extra for the Christian. Hospitality is at the very heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Hospitality is the very lifeblood of the Christian faith; it is the engine that powers mission. It is the opportunity that leads us into new avenues of life and service.

In my experience effective mission in the church does not always come from goal setting and five year plans, as helpful as those things can be in some cases.

Mission often springs from a single act of hospitality. And from this one act of compassionate love opportunities for service and witness are often born.

SHARED SUFFERING

The mutual love of the Christian community also means that we are willing to share in our sufferings.
(13:3)

In the early church that meant supporting those who were imprisoned, tortured and even martyred for the faith. In some parts of the world there are Christians who are still persecuted for the faith, and the love of Christ compels us to help them.

Christian love is compassion in action.

Just as Jesus our great high priest identifies with our tests and shares our vulnerability (Hebrews 2:14, 18; 4:15) so we should identify with and share the vulnerabilities of our sisters and brothers in Christ.

FIDELITY IN MARRIAGE

However, mutual love also requires mutual responsibility. In our culture people say, “How I live my life is my own business. Nobody has the right to judge me in any way.”

In the church we disagree.

I think there is a difference between being judgmental and promoting a responsible lifestyle. The Christian community promotes the virtue of fidelity.

In the ancient world fidelity in marriage was not a virtue. In fact our pornographic society doesn't have anything on the immorality of the ancient Greek and Roman societies.

And that's why you see so many references in the Bible to the importance of being faithful to the commitments made in marriage. This stance was different from the sentiments of the larger society.

Faithfulness in marriage sets us apart from the broader culture today as well. In the Roman Catholic Church marriage is even seen as a sacrament.

In the Protestant Church we don't go that far, but do believe that marriage is the cornerstone of the Christian community.

And infidelity is never a private matter. It weakens the fabric of community, and those who are faithless bear responsibility for the destruction that such unfaithfulness brings.

Almost every family in our congregation today has suffered because of this problem.

We must love each other enough to work against the epidemic of infidelity that plagues not only our country but also members of the community of faith.

Did you know that recent statistics suggest that the divorce rate in the church is just as high as the divorce rate in the general population?

It shouldn't be that way. We are called to be different.

TRUST IN GOD, NOT MONEY

Another significant way that the Christian community is called to be different from culture is in our attitude toward money.

I'm not going to spend much time on this one because we've discussed it quite a bit these past few weeks. Suffice it to say that the source of greed is a mistrust of God's promises and protection.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us once again that God will not leave us or forsake us.

We have "In God We Trust" printed on our money. We need to make sure that the God we trust is not the money itself! In this way Christians are quite different from the society at large.

THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST

Finally, the Christian community is charged to help each other live up to the high calling that is ours in Christ Jesus. We are to follow the example of

Christian leaders as they follow the ultimate example of faithfulness, Jesus, the one who “the same yesterday and today and forever.” (13:8)

The writer mentions “strange teachings” about dietary restrictions that are troubling some members of the church. He reminds the church that they are nurtured by grace and not by overly restrictive and picky laws about things that don’t matter that much.

In thinking about this problem the writer of Hebrews comes upon a way to illustrate how the Christian faith is different from the ways of the world.

When the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness they had a Tabernacle where they worshipped God. It was a sort of like a portable Temple.

And once a year as they worshipped in this Tabernacle they would make atonement for their sins.

The priests would offer a bull for their sins, and they would offer a goat for the sins of the people.

The blood of those sacrifices would be sprinkled on the altar in the Holy of Holies, and the meat of the

sacrifice would not be eaten. It would be burned outside the camp.

For the writer of Hebrews this was a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ. He was crucified outside the city. Outside the city he died for the sins of the world, once and for all.

And so as disciples of Christ, we come to him outside the city. That is, we dare to live a way that is outside of what the city, the culture of our time believes.

We dare to be different.

We dare to willingly take the rejection and persecution that may come our way. We dare to make the sacrifice because the ultimate sacrifice has already been made for us.

Our home is not in the city. We are citizens of a city, a kingdom that comes.

And so, we live by a different standard.

We bring the sacrifice of praise to God.

We share our life together in his name. We hold a different standard of love and hope.

May God help us be faithful to this high calling.

May we have the courage to do the right thing and
proclaim his Word of Truth.

And may they know that we are Christians by our
love.

Amen.