

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, November 15, 2015

Hebrews 10:11-14 [15-18] 19-25

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. [And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.]

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.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

Let us pray...Amen.

I don't know about you, but I found this morning's readings to be a bit of a challenge. Both readings are about the 'End Times', what we call Apocalyptic scripture. Often, these kinds of readings are difficult to interpret, difficult to understand, and difficult to incorporate into our faith lives. If you found them a bit confusing, disturbing, or challenging, you are not alone.

In Apocalyptic literature, the images tend to be frightening, bloody, smoky, and filled with dire predictions of earthquakes, wars, and dread. If you've spent any time worshiping with us here at Fairmount, you know that that is not really our style of Christianity: we tend to focus on the daily activities that can help our faith lives...we tend to keep the Apocalypse in our minds as a faraway metaphor for the time when Jesus returns again, of we tend to not think about it at all. Personally, I try to avoid them, try to avoid preaching about them at all costs...

Yet other faith traditions have a long history of preaching and singing and praying about the End Times. The idea of the End Times for them is present, real, inevitable, and it affects much of how they approach their faith. Perhaps, for some here today, this is true. How cool that we can have such widely divergent theological perspectives and yet still worship, and share in the Lord's Supper together!

Well today, we have scripture that speaks about these End Times, so we have little choice but to dive in, to try and put the concept into some kind of perspective.

Beginning with our first reading, from Hebrews, I found the most powerful part of that reading to be the last phrase: "... 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.”

So if we could put the images of the Christ’s enemies as footstools, or of Christ’s blood away for a moment, (as vivid as they may be), and take a look at the practical suggestion of how a faith community should act as they wait for the ‘Day’ to come, I believe we’ll start to see what the author wanted us to see.

Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Most of the time, we try to figure this out ourselves, trusting that our sisters and brothers will figure this out for *themselves*, but it seems like we are being encouraged to consider actually being more aggressive in getting others to love and do good deeds. Ok, let’s keep that one on the back burner.

Let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another. Again, we generally take the approach that that who gather with us to worship know how to manage their time and their faith lives, so we leave it up to them to decide. But our scripture seems to be telling us that neglecting to meet together isn’t a good thing, that we should be encouraging one another to meet regularly, that maybe meeting together for worship and fellowship isn’t optional, but necessary... Ok, let’s keep that one on the back burner as well...

Our gospel lesson is the frightening story of Jesus telling the disciples that one day, the very foundation of the temple, along with the massive stones that support it, will be thrown down. That earthquakes and wars between nations and kingdoms will not signal the end, but instead the birth of a new beginning.

Is it true that Jesus is telling us that the signs we interpret as the end, is really just the beginning? That what we see as death and destruction is the

beginning of something new? That when these things take place, like they are today, and yesterday, and every day since Jesus ascended into heaven, that we should not be alarmed? I'm sorry, but I *am* alarmed! Enough of the violence, enough of the war, the petty squabbles over borders, and over who owns what land, and what resources...enough over which faith is the right faith, I'm not just alarmed, I'm exhausted over the violence that humanity visits upon itself.

And I say that so it can be distant from my heart. But the violence in Paris isn't distant, because it's all over the world, it's in the US, it's in the state of NY, and it's in Syracuse, and Camillus...whenever someone hurts another person on purpose, it's a violation of our commandment to love one another. But what do we do about those who don't care to follow that commandment, don't believe what we believe?

Time and time again, we've seen how laws, rules, physical barriers, and all sorts of tools fail to protect the most vulnerable in the world. It may very well be the only way for us to protect ourselves from the violence that pervades our world is to provoke one another to love and do good deeds, and to encourage each other and others to meet together in worship and fellowship. Because if we can build on those two things alone, then I could be convinced that we would be part of the Birth Pangs of new life that Jesus was talking about.

This Apocalyptic stuff is hard! That's why I usually skip it, and choose other scripture!

Many of you know that I've been away from ministry for a few weeks, recovering from spinal surgery. But that doesn't mean I haven't been busy!

After a few days, I started to feel restless. I had wanted to propagate some Christmas cactuses that Dotty had given me. The plant was robust,

healthy, and had many segments. I looked up how to start new cactuses, and the instructions said to break off individual segments, and let them sit for a week or two. They said that in that time, the segments would wilt, and start to look dead, but that the time of drying was important.

So, I broke off a bunch of segments, laid them out for a week and a half, and then planted them all in potting soil. And sure enough, after a bit, they all are starting to put out new growth on the top, which according to the instructions, means that they are putting out new roots on the bottom! From what looks like death comes new life. It was true when Jesus told us about his resurrection, and it's true today.

It's true in our faith lives, and it's true for our church building: things come to an end, and then there is new life. We need not be alarmed about this cycle. We can, however, be alarmed at the violence that happens around us. We can counter the violence by propagating our faith, by encouraging new root growth and new blossoms in others, by encouraging those around us to see that meeting together *is* important, even if it's not convenient. We can counter the growing sense of dread around the institution of the church by becoming more vibrant in our love and good deeds, by taking what has been laid out to dry for a bit, and planting it in rich potting soil.

I have 20 new Christmas cactus plants, just starting to put out new growth. I can't keep 20 new plants, I will have to give them away, so that others can have new plants, and so that others can choose to break off some segments and start new plants from what looks like dead pieces of cactus.

We will have to find ways to share the new things that will come from FCC UCC, segments of love and good deeds. So that we will be able to encourage still others to meet in worship and fellowship. This is how we honor the Birth Pangs. By having the courage to start new things when the

signs tell us something is dead or dying. The stones of the foundation of the temple may fall, there may be wars and earthquakes and violence, but those things can't stop us from propagating new life, new faith, new love, new fellowship, new deeds of generosity. Those things *compel* us to respond with love, and acts of kindness, just as Jesus would.

May our fellowship today lead to the propagation of many more times of fellowship and love. Amen.