

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 25, 2009
Pentecost 21
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 59:1-19
Psalm 13
Hebrews 5:12-6:1, 9-12
Mark 10:46-52

For several weeks now you may have observed that our epistle readings have come from the book of Hebrews. While the epistle may have some features in common with other letters found in the New Testament, a deeper look reveals that this material is not a letter at all.

The main body of Hebrews bears all the marks of an early Christian sermon, what the writer calls a “word of exhortation” (13:22). Early Christian sermons were heavily influenced by the preaching that occurred in the synagogues, and the content and structure of Hebrews indicates that what you have here is a powerful, albeit rather long-winded, sermon!

The preacher here in Hebrews is addressing a very specific pastoral problem, one that may seem very contemporary to us. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired. Tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, and tired of being maligned in society.

Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12). Attendance is down at their church, and they are losing confidence (10:25). The threat facing this

congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction, for they don't have enough energy to charge off *anywhere*. The threat facing this group of believers is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and simply drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of these folks are thinking about "taking a walk," of leaving the community and falling away from the faith.

(Cf. Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*: Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989)

The preacher's response to this pressing problem is not what we would envision, and is too lengthy to discuss in a single sermon. Suffice it to say that he doesn't respond with practical pastoral suggestions like we might be prone to do. There is no advice about jazzing up worship services, or revising the congregation's mission statement, or starting a capital campaign. Instead, the preacher talks to the people about Jesus. He talks to them about *who* Jesus was, and what he has done as God's High Priest.

Our lesson today drops us down in the middle of this conversation, so we must be careful. On the surface, it might appear that the preacher is scolding the people or criticizing them, calling them spiritual "babies" who are immature and who need to grow up.

But in verse 9 the preacher says, "even though we are talking about this, we don't believe it applies to *you*." "We are confident of better things for you," says the preacher. "We are confident you will continue in your faith and love, and inherit God's promises."

Hidden behind this apparent scolding, though, is the word of encouragement or exhortation. The exhortation comes in this form: “let us stop going over the basics of Christianity again and again, and let us go on and become mature in our understanding.”

And the message here to these tired believers is at one and the same time a message for us, this morning. The message is this: in the Christian life, one is either moving forward, or one is drifting and moving backward. There is no neutral position.

Just as the natural tendency of fire is to die out, unless it is fed and nourished, so also Christian believers and congregations must be intentional about their own growth, about moving forward in their relationship with Christ. A teacher of mine said one time that “the reason why so many Christians fall away from the faith and the Church is because they stay too close to the ‘getting in’ place.” They lose their desire to move forward, to move ahead, to grow deeper into the things of God.

But behind this writer’s exhortation to this congregation is also a word of encouragement and Good News which I want you to hear this morning. To this group of weary pilgrims the writer says: “I know in your circumstances you might be tempted to let go of your end of the rope and give up. The option of letting go and just drifting along might look attractive. But that’s not *who* you are. That’s

not in your spiritual DNA. We are confident of better things for you, because God's love and power have been flowing through you as you've loved other Christians and ministered in his Name."

And to those of us in this tiny congregation this morning, a similar word shines forth. We're a small band of believers. We've had our share of struggles and obstacles to overcome through the years. We may occasionally become weary in doing good, and tired not only in our bodies but also in our spirits. We could very easily be tempted to let go of our end of the rope and to just drift away.

But into that situation the Holy Spirit comes this morning and says, "we are confident of better things for you, Epworth Chapel on the Green! You all are cut from a different piece of cloth, you all are resilient, you all understand that your faith and your love and your good deeds matter and are seen by our heavenly Father. We are confident that God is at work in you, and we are confident that you are going to keep on keeping on, loving and working, working and praying, so that the promises of God made to our forefathers and mothers will be part of your inheritance.

Without taking the writer's words too much out of context this morning, I want us at Epworth to hear his words as though they were addressed specifically to us: "We are confident that you (Epworth) are meant for better things, things that come with salvation." (v. 9)

As we come to the table this morning, let those words ring true in your ears. Let them find their way down into your hearts. Receive the grace Christ offers you. Then let us do what the writer instructs his hearers to do in a different part of this sermon, when he says: “let us not give up the habit of assembling ourselves together, as some are prone to do. And let us continue to stir one another up to love and good deeds, for in due time we shall reap a harvest, if we do not faint.”

May the Spirit of the Living Christ refresh and bless our souls with these words today.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.