

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
August 28, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!
Amen.

The congregational council of First Lutheran gathered for a meeting to discuss declining worship attendance, lack of involvement by the members who remained, how to pay bills they were behind on, and overall how to move forward. As they walked in the pastor noticed the faces on many lacked any sort of joy. In fact, she noticed they didn't even look at each other or greet one another. They simply strolled in, found their place at the table, and hunched down in their seats. Before the pastor could even try and open the meeting with a short devotion and prayer the silence was broken and quickly the meeting escalated out of control. Accusations began to be hurled that so and so wasn't doing enough or it was so and so's fault there were all these problems. They had come with a host of answers to upright the ship that had capsized quite some time ago. The typical responses – we have to get a big praise band, surround them with flashing lights and put up huge screens that flash lovely pictures uplifting our spirits. The pastor is a fine preacher but maybe she should focus a little less on the Bible and and rather deliver motivational sermons that make us feel good about ourselves. One person had noticed the church across town having movie night every Friday drawing in a lot of people so that must be the ticket to success. Fingers were pointed, idea after idea tossed to and fro, feelings were hurt, and after nearly 2 hours seemingly nothing had

been accomplished. They knit picked about every little thing they could think of and failed to look at the most obvious thing that was limiting their vision to see God's will for them: mutual love for one another.

How many times do we fall into the same trap as First Lutheran did? Don't get me wrong; indeed, we can certainly learn from what our brothers and sisters may be doing at another community of faith and how God is at work in and through them; however, all too often we perceive if it is works there it has to work here and fail to realize God may be doing in and through us something totally different than what God is doing at another community of faith. With that said, indeed, God's mission has at its core ... elements central for every community of faith such as: proclaim the gospel, bear forth the love and forgiveness of Christ to the world, respond to God's grace through service to our neighbor, and worship God through which the Spirit feeds us, strengthens us, and equips to be sent out into the world. Too often, when we are confronted by declining worship attendance, poor attendance at Sunday school, or tumbling budgets we look for the quick fix. We look to what is working somewhere else and think that has to be the solution. We try to fix a leaky pipe with some duct tape and hope it holds knowing full well in time it will once again burst open.

And often the fix isn't due to using the wrong model of Sunday school or switching to a different curriculum. Often the fix isn't reinventing worship and making it appealing to the masses. No, often the fix is right before our very eyes that so often

become clouded due to the inherent brokenness in human nature. What we do in times of stress, hardship, and uncertainty is often turn on one another. We point fingers. We play the “should” game and say, “You should be doing this” putting the blame elsewhere and failing to take ownership of our call to discipleship.

Perhaps, the author of Hebrews was addressing similar concerns, fears, frustrations, and emotions to the community of faith he was writing to. Most certainly, it was a group of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. It was a group of differing backgrounds and viewpoints. It was a group struggling on how to move forward. It was a people wondering how to be the body of Christ in a world that beat to a different tune. In some ways, it’s not all that much different than what the church continues to experience today.

And what is at stake for the author? He doesn’t conclude his sermon with words such as, “Hey, go copy that home church around the corner. They have it all figured out. He doesn’t say, hey, let’s just pretend all is well and dandy and cover it with some catchy music and flashy lights.” No, he gets to the root of what it means to be church. He gets at what is most important; yet, often so hard to live out. If they want to move forward in the midst of all they are experiencing then what is at stake is love. It’s the heart of who God is. It’s the heart of why God became incarnate in Jesus. It’s the heart of why He suffered, died, and rose again on Easter morning. Love is the guiding principle for the church of Christ.

“Let mutual love continue” begins our passage. It’s as if the author is saying yes things will change around you. The world will change. Indeed, the church will change and yes, even the community of faith you are part of will change. People will come and go. God will continue to reform, reshape, and make all things new; yet, through it all one thing must continue and that is mutual love for one another. And the author goes on to state, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” There is not enough time to get into a discussion on whether or not we believe in angels; however, if the concept of angels is the presence of the Divine in our midst then indeed we are surrounded by angels on a daily basis as Christ promises to come to us through one another. In fact, we ourselves are those angels when we “let mutual love continue” and respond to God’s amazing grace by being vessels of Christ’s love to all we meet. When we fail to welcome the stranger or talk to another sister or brother then we limit ourselves in encountering the presence of Christ among us.

Too many times as a young pastor I have failed in responding to God’s love with that same mutual love and for that I am deeply sorry and seek your forgiveness and I, too, have been on the other side of hurtful words and actions and have struggled to respond with the mutual love Jesus reveals and gives to us each time we turn from him, put a nail in his side, or fail to trust in Him. We are a sinful and broken people who come each Sunday as beggars in need of God’s mercy, as Luther described. We come

heads bowed, hands open – a state of humility knowing we all need to be healed and forgiven and we receive it. That free gift of love. That ultimate offer of forgiveness. That extravagance of grace. Whatever the challenges our community of faith experiences. Whatever the anxieties we encounter. Whatever the fears we face. Through it all we need look no further than Christ's love. We need look no further than praying to God and seeking God's assistance to share that mutual love with one another, with our neighbor, and with the world as we live out that love through words and actions of justice, compassion, mercy and kindness. Amen.