

For a little over a year, starting in March of 2020, we did not hold corporate in-person church services in this sacred space. It still seems a little hard to believe. The global Covid 19 pandemic meant that we completely had to re-think what it meant to be church. Certainly for me, this was a huge challenge, because my fundamental understanding of church was built around the community of faith gathered in worship. I knew I was part of a church, because I went to church on Sundays to worship with others---and that couldn't happen anymore. We initially thought this inability to worship together in this place might last a few weeks, then a few months, then it became evident this was going to take some time. Many clergy and church members alike feared greatly the impact this would have on congregations; how could any congregation of any size survive not meeting together in person for over a year and still be viable? We feared that many congregations would close their doors. It's true that a few did, and it's probably more true that many survived the pandemic, but have never quite regained their former vitality. But this church, like many others, actually weathered that period of time surprisingly well and come fully back to vibrant ministry and functionality. We discovered other ways to "be church" through virtual worship, online meetings and studies, and eventually, outdoor interactions. If anything, this period of abstinence caused us to recognize that we valued our ties of sibling-ship in Christ more than ever. What does this teach us about church? That the church is empowered by God's Spirit to be more resourceful, essential, and resilient than we previously may have understood. We learned that being a gathered community of faith in whatever form was possible was crucial to the practice of our faith and the well-being of our individual and corporate soul. We learned that coming together as church, however that happens, matters.

Our lesson from Hebrews this morning is about that very thing—the importance of coming together a church. It may be a little hard to realize that, given the rather formal, religious language about priests and offerings and sacrifices and such. But we hit pay dirt in the final verses of the lesson, including the last verse that urges us to not neglect meeting together, as is the habit of some, but to encourage one another. The writer of this letter of Hebrews recognizes that God is at work among the gathering of the faithful; both for the good of those who gather and for the good of the world around them.

Let's make our way first through the initial verses of the text, which set up a contrast between the old and the new. The old is the long-time Jewish practice of daily and weekly sacrifices and offerings being made in an attempt to appease God and to make the worshiping community more faithful. Such sacrifices and offerings had to be made again and again, the writer contends, because they had no lasting value or significance. In contrast, then, is the new: the death and resurrection of Christ. In His death on the cross, Christ became the once-and-for-all sacrifice and offering for sin, and provided a means for growing in faith for all who believe. The need for those incessant sin offerings and sacrifices has been done away with, and we have direct access to the grace and mercy of God. This means we can be confident that God welcomes us with open arms into a *life* of faith, a *life* of faith that finds inspiration and expression within a *community* of faith; aka, the church.

That this life of faith is *active* rather than *passive* is made clear by the use of some very vigorous verbs in the second section of our reading. Since we have confidence in our welcome from God, through the grace of Christ, we are to *do* three things: *We approach* God with a true heart in full assurance of faith; we *hold fast* to our hope without wavering; and we *provoke* one another to love and good deeds---all within that context of not neglecting to meet together, of being church together. So, we approach, we hold fast, and we provoke. An interesting assortment of activities for those of us who follow Jesus; let's think on this for a bit.

To *approach* God is our first action. I'd like to play with all the different ways we think about approaching God as church. The most obvious is to physically approach God through approaching this church building. We have tried, as a congregation, to make that approach as inviting and accessible as possible. We have added a handicapped ramp to our back entrance. We have added an elevator between floors. We use a railing to assist approaching the altar. We have handicapped accessible bathrooms.

We have also looked to make a *virtual* approach possible for those who benefit from that option. Our tech team has done amazing work to make our weekly church services available for live streaming or later viewing, so that one can approach our church without leaving home, if need be. You would be amazed at how many people utilize this option, from regular members who have suppressed immune systems from

chemotherapy to young parents who have a sick child keeping them home to people who may not be members but worship with us from all over the state, even the country. Allowing for this form of approach has made a huge difference for many.

And in terms of hospitality, we have ushers and greeters on the look-out to welcome in new people and long-time members, to assure that everyone has a place to sit and a bulletin in their hands, and that no one is left unwelcomed. Our *theology* is also one of inviting the approach of anyone who seeks to be here: what does every bulletin state? “Where ever you are in your journey of faith, you are welcome here”. And what is said every Sunday before Holy Communion? “This is not our table, it is the Lord’s table, and all are welcome.” We do everything we can to make that action of *approaching* as inviting and accessible as possible.

And think of the times you approach God through the act of approaching the altar area, doing so, as our lesson urges us, with full assurance of our faith. We approach to receive Holy Communion, as will happen shortly. We approach to receive healing and anointing, as will happen even more shortly. We approach to light a candle for All Saint’s Day in memory of loved ones, as we did a few weeks ago. That path of approach between ourselves and our Lord is wide open, and as we walk that pathway, we act out the first verb of our lesson: let us *approach*.

Next, we are urged: “let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering.” So, our next act of faithful gathering as a church? We *hold fast to* hope. This is no small ask. There is so much that steals away our hope. Many are deeply concerned about our country’s future, coming off a divisive election. Many are dealing with grief from deaths or other losses. Many are struggling to be healthy in body and in mind. The nights are growing longer, we know winter is coming, and it can all seem just a bit much. In fact, hope might begin to seem like a luxury we cannot afford. But that’s not so. Faithful people of all times and places, in circumstances much grimmer than our own, have held on to hope. Hope is what kept them going. During the recent pandemic, which at times seemed endless and scary, we held on to hope. We hoped for better treatment, for preventative vaccinations, for a time when we could safely gather together again. The fulfilment of our

hopes was not quick to come, nor perhaps entirely complete, but what we hoped for did happen. In the meantime, we prayed, we gathered virtually, we continued to not only support our own church financially but to support other outreach ministries generously, we did what we could. We held fast to hope. Our text adds the helpful clarification: “we hold fast to hope for he who has promised is faithful.” So, we hold fast to hope because even if we and the rest of the world are pretty sketchy at times, *God is faithful*. God’s faithfulness is the reason we hold fast to hope, and we do not let that surrounding darkness steal our hope away.

Finally, we are asked, as those who meet together to be church, to *provoke* one another to love and good deeds. Isn’t that an intriguing use of the verb “provoke”? Because what do we usually provoke in others? Anger. And what do others all too often provoke within us? Anger. Just this last Tuesday at our W/ELCA meeting we were discussing how often even family gatherings can turn ugly with people intentionally pushing each other’s buttons, provoking each other to anger. The definition of provoke is “to call forth or stir up a feeling or reaction”. That feeling or reaction doesn’t *have* to be negative, but sadly, that is most often how we use the word, probably because that’s most often what we do. We provoke others or are provoked by others to anger. I’m sure that was just as true in the 1st C. as in the 21st C., so our Scripture writer was using this word in a way that invites us to think about it, to take a second look. What if, instead of provoking others to *anger*, we provoked them to *love and good deeds*? What kind of a world would that be? Almost hard to envision, isn’t it? But, what if, instead of pushing buttons to give rise to an angry response, we found ways to give gentle or inviting nudges to love and good deeds? At lectio on Tuesday morning, I used the following example to try and flesh out this notion. What if, at the next Synod Assembly, should we again happen to win the Holy Cow award for our giving to World Hunger, I or someone from our congregation accepted the award in front of all the gathered congregations and said something like---“Hey, everyone---if we in Knife River can do great things to fight world hunger, so can you! Up your game a little, beat us out next year!” I thought this was a fine and Christian thing to do, as long as I didn’t add, ‘Na na na na na na’! Others present, however, thought I was going to far. Odds are, I won’t be saying that. But, I’m just offering it as an example that you can undoubtedly improve upon. Can we spur ourselves and others on to doing some good, to loving more deeply and broadly, to

glorifying God and serving our neighbor? Can we, who gather together as church, provoke one another to love and good deeds, as our Scripture writer asks us to do?

I am grateful for this community of faith, and I believe all of you are also. I am so thankful that we are here for one another, that we do not neglect to meet together, as instructed in this lesson. I do believe that here we discover God at work, for our own good, and for the good of the world around us. And so, as those who gather to be church together, maybe we can take these active verbs of encouragement to heart? To approach God with assurance. To hold fast to our hope. To provoke one another to love and good deeds. That's our calling to be the church that God dreams of in this time and place. Amen.