

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Provoking Good Deeds”
Thomas G. Speers, III
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Lessons: Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Occasionally people ask me what to call me. My usual answer is: Tom. Call me Tom. But my answer doesn't really answer their question. They want to know what my title is. How should they address me—the answer still really is Tom but our Presbyterian history has provided many titles including Teaching Elder, Pastor, Presbyter, Ambassador, Steward of the mysteries of God, even Bishop. If you have oversight of a flock, in the past you might be called Bishop. I like mentioning to my Episcopal and Catholic friends that I am a Bishop. They just smile and know better. But we haven't used the title Priest except perhaps in the sense of priesthood of all believers. So, for Presbyterians the Letter to the Hebrews is a little strange and even a little awkward. It spends lots of time talking about the priesthood, because it was written for a people who put great emphasis on the priesthood. There was, in that time, a great high priest, who by virtue of his cleanliness and holiness served as a mediator between God and the people. Lesser priests, day after day, offered sacrifices for the people that they might be forgiven. Commit some great sin, and the way to find forgiveness was to go to the priest who would offer a sacrifice and then you'd be forgiven. If you sin again, then you need to go back to the priest and he'll offer another sacrifice. What the author of this letter proclaims today is that Jesus is our new priest and Jesus made a sacrifice once and for all time and all people, so that we are forgiven and no longer need some other mediator to stand between us and God. Jesus gives us direct access to God. Jesus gives us forgiveness for all our sins. So you don't need to keep going back to the priest day after day to seek forgiveness. Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sin. The past is past and the future is something wonderfully brand new.

If you can get past all the priest talk in Hebrews, it offers a wonderful way to talk about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, to be a member of the body of Christ in the world today.

First it suggests, we are called to be confident, and I mean that in its original sense: *con-fide*, meaning *with faith*. This confidence is not based on *our* qualifications, or on *our* ability to be good, generous, honest, creative and caring. Sometimes we are, but we also know how mean and petty we can be. In the church, our confidence comes not from our competence; it comes rather from our faith in God. It comes from our faith that God is good all the time. It comes from understanding that we are forgiven, so we don't need to be held captive by the past, but rather God opens a whole new future for us. We've been taught that the past determines our future. Make mistakes in the past and they will follow you for the rest of your life. Grow up in a dysfunctional family and you're bound to create another equally dysfunctional one yourself. However in the Church of Jesus Christ we proclaim that our future is determined not by the past but by God who loves us exactly the way we are, and loves us too much to let us stay like this. Christians are confident in God.

We also recognize the reality of brokenness. When Jesus spoke of the temple being destroyed, he acknowledged that brokenness. He knew that there are terrible earthquakes in our lives and in our world. No one would choose to go through them, yet in the midst of them, God is still at work, giving birth to something new. We hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, this letter proclaims, for the one who has promised is faithful. When facing difficult times, have confidence in God. Remember that God is faithful.

We know all about brokenness. Too many wonderful people have died in recent days, folk in California in the fires; victims of gun violence and war; family members, long-time friends of this

church like Herb Hoeflinger. That hurts. And it is not the whole story. Otis Moss, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago suggests that this passage is about hope in the midst of despair and he quotes from Professor Eddie Glaude at Princeton that the African gift to America is to have taught the nation how to live in tragedy and not fall into despair. “Tragedy,” Moss writes, “still wanders around this New Testament community, but the great hope lifted in this text allows its members to face the tragic with one foot rooted in hope.”¹ Those of us in the church of Jesus Christ proclaim that brokenness is not the whole story. It was Eugene O’Neill who wrote that we human beings are born broken. We live by mending. The grace of God is glue. It is God’s grace that holds all our broken parts together. So, be confident even in the midst of incredibly painful times.

And the letter says, don’t neglect to meet together. It would seem that the recipients of this letter had the same problem that exists in the church today: there were all kinds of reasons not to make it to church. It is a gorgeous day. There are errands to be run. I can be present with God on a walk or sleeping in. That may be true, yet the most important activity of the community is its gathering to worship and to pray. It is here, when we gather, that we can encourage and provoke one another to love and good deeds. Anne Lamott says that courage is fear that has said its prayers.² So is here, in our prayers and in our praise that we can find that courage to live, and can share it with others. It is here in the community of faith that we remember that we are a part of something much bigger than ourselves.

Also provoke one another to love and good deeds. I love that use of the word provoke. So often it is used in a negative way: “He provoked me. She made me do something wrong.” Here we are exhorted to provoke one another to love and good deeds. What might that look like here? How might we provoke each other to love, to good deeds right here? How can I provoke you to be a little more patient with each other? How might I provoke you to be less patient with any idea, policy, or program that would question the priceless worth of another human being who is made in the image of God? How might we provoke our sisters and brothers in our beloved country to remember that whether you are a democrat or a republican, your far more important identity is as a child of God.

You don’t need someone special to act as an intermediary between you and God. You can go straight to the top yourself. And you don’t need someone to offer sacrifices or special words for you that you may know forgiveness. That forgiveness was won for you some two thousand years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem. The past does not define who we are; God does and God’s great desire is to give us a whole new future. So live a life full of confidence in God. Don’t neglect to meet together so that we may encourage one another. And finally, provoke one another to love and good deeds. That’s part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus today.

Let us pray: We give you thanks dear God for your steadfast love and faithfulness that hold us in all times and in all seasons. Help us that we might be faithful as you are faithful. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Otis Moss III, *Worship with Abandon*, November 3, 2009 © The Christian Century.

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. © 1999