

“The Bridge Builder”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 8, 2013**

Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 81:1, 10-16

New Testament Lesson – Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

A poem by Will Allen Dromgoole, titled “The Bridge Builder:”

An old man, going a lone highway, came, at the evening, cold and gray, to a chasm, vast, and deep and wide, through which was flowing a sullen tide (a river). The old man crossed in the twilight dim; the sullen stream had no fears for him; but he turned, when safe on the other side, and built a bridge to span the tide. “Old man,” said a fellow pilgrim, near, “you are wasting strength with building here; your journey will end with the ending day; you never again must pass this way; you have crossed the chasm, deep and wide; why build you the bridge at eventide?” The builder lifted his old gray head; “Good friend, in the path I have come,” he said, “there followeth after me today a youth, whose feet must pass this way. This chasm, that has been naught to me, to that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be; he too, must cross, in the twilight dim; good friend, I am building the bridge for him.”

The old man in this poem is building a bridge to safety for those who come after him. Like the writer of Hebrews in our New Testament lesson today, this older, more experienced traveler knows that all people need a little help getting a solid footing along life’s path.

In Hebrews, that foothold is established firmly upon specific practices, spiritual practices embraced by the Christian community. Today, we’re going to look at four of them – four spiritual practices on the road to successful living.

First, show hospitality to strangers, because, says Hebrews, “you may be “entertain[ing] angels without knowing it.” As Christians, we don’t pretend to be holier than Thou (despite often acting that way down through the centuries).

No, as Christians, we know that only God knows the true heart of another human being. And knowing this, we are called to treat all people, friends and strangers with dignity and respect, offering what we can to welcome the stranger and to help those in need.

The real challenge with this one is, sometimes the stranger is in our own families, or it’s the person living next door to us, or the teacher or coworker or salesclerk who we see everyday or once a week, including that one day or one week when they look particularly down and could use some encouragement. Our job is to give it, to offer an encouraging word.

The second spiritual practice for today is “remember[ing] those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them.” Here, Hebrews is pointing us toward empathy and compassion for those who are trapped.

Maybe it’s an actual prisoner in jail, or maybe it’s someone who can’t get around as well anymore, someone who is stuck at home most if not all of the time, or in a care facility. Or maybe it’s someone trapped in an emotional and spiritual prison, or a prison of physical illness or disease.

Anything we as individuals can do to ease that sense of isolation we ought to do. It’s the Christian thing to do, it’s the compassionate things to do, and it’s something that will help that person along life’s path. We all have the “ground go out from under us” from time to time. We could all use a sympathetic and compassionate visit. And you and I can be that friendly visitor for someone.

Third, if you’re married, work on your marriage; if you’re not, you can still support and live into the essence of such God-given institutions and commitments. “Let marriage be held in honor by all,” says Hebrews.

One of the strongest images for the relationship between God and humankind is marriage. We read in scripture that Jesus is sometimes seen as the bridegroom and the church as his bride. God is married to humanity, and we are married to God. So what Hebrews is saying is *honor your commitment to God*, and in that, honor your commitments to one another.

This does not mean that relationships are easy, even and especially the relationship between God and humankind. But it does mean that our most sacred, holy relationships are eternal. Even in divorce among a man and a woman, the relationship is eternal. All meaningful relationships go on in one form or another.

In our relationships with one another, God calls us to the same level of faithfulness that God shows to us through the ancient Israelites, a faithfulness that hung in their even when the Israelites turned their back on God to pursue their own misguided interest.

God calls us to the same faithfulness that Jesus displayed on the cross, giving all that he had – body and soul – for his love of humanity. Even though we would batter and beat him emotionally, spiritually and physically, Jesus rises to a higher sense of commitment. Jesus demonstrates what true faithfulness can overcome, even the most horrific and injurious things that can happen in one’s life.

Emotional & physical injury – and even death are not the worst thing that can happen to us. Faithlessness is, because faithlessness leads to suffering. Hebrews says, “God will judge fornicators and adulterers,” those who are unfaithful in their most sacred commitments. These are not punishments, but consequences.

It couldn't be clearer in the Bible and it couldn't be clearer in the world today: When a covenant is broken, people suffer, and some suffer quite undeservedly.

Better that we do everything humanly possible and then some to uphold our sacred covenants, our deepest commitments to one another, those promises we make as families, whether biological, through marriage, or as a Christian brother or sister. When we work to uphold our sacred promises to one another, God will see us through.

Jesus said, as we read in Hebrews today, "I will never leave you or forsake you." That promise is as certain today as it was when Jesus walked the earth more than 2,000 years ago; actually, it's more certain, for those who follow his way, now that Jesus is with us in Spirit.

Those who understand and honor Christ's faithfulness need not be fearful of any unmet need, any struggle, and any rough patch along the way. Jesus assures us safe passage through the roughest stretches. But that means we have to hang in there, and follow his way.

And this goes for money and material matters, too, where Hebrews says "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have." When we let our natural longings for more money and more stuff take hold of us, we suffer. That's just the way of it.

A big, burly man visited a certain pastor's home – and not this certain pastor – and he asked to see the minister's wife. She was a woman well known for her charitable impulses. "Madam," he said in a broken voice, "I wish to draw your attention to the terrible plight of a poor family in this district. The father is dead, the mother is too ill to work, and the nine children are starving. They are about to be turned out onto the cold, empty streets unless someone pays their rent, which amounts to \$400." "How terrible!" exclaimed the preacher's wife. "May I ask who you are?" The sympathetic visitor pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, dabbed the tears from his eyes, and said, "I'm the landlord."

Now that's a man who has let his love of having money in his wallet lead to suffering in his heart of hearts. Turns out, it's not enough to know the right thing to do, like this guy does. You gotta do it. If you want to stay on a spiritually healthy path, you gotta actually do the right thing. Keep your commitments and maintain sound priorities in life.

Finally, No. 4, the last of the spiritual practice we're looking at today. Hebrews says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

Of all the spiritual practices we can take on to help guide us safely along the path of life, this is the biggie, the catch-all; it's the box that's marked "all of the above" on the test paper of life.

But Hebrews isn't exalting church leaders here. It's simply acknowledging the fact that those who tend to prosper spiritually are those who are worth emulating or copying in life.

This, of course, points us back to the spiritual check-ins we focused on during our sermon time last week. By coming alongside one another in mutual support along life's pathway, by being open to having a spiritual check-in from time to time, we can all better maintain a solid footing for the journey ahead.

**Hospitality – knowing that we're not called to be perfect, but that we are called to embrace one another regardless of our imperfections;
Remembering those who are in prison – visiting with and having compassion for those who are stuck or trapped by life's circumstances;
Honoring and maintaining our most sacred covenants in life, like marriage;**

And following the lead of those who have gone before us – these are four good practices to keep in mind, spiritual practices worth taking on and following. Hospitality; compassion; commitment and mutual support.

If we do more embracing and less finger-pointing, if we come alongside those stuck in a world of need; if we honor our promises and our commitments, particularly over and above any of our misguided wants and needs; and finally, if we look to those who have gone before, look to those whom God has raised up as spiritual trailblazers among us, then not only will we have an easier go of it, but all people will benefit.

“Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have,” says Hebrews, “for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Putting others ahead of ourselves is pleasing to God. And that which is pleasing to God becomes a blessing to us. That's how much God loves us.

As we go through the rest of today and into the week ahead, let us all find at least one way to bless the life of another person, even if it means taking that first step out onto an otherwise scary and uncertain path or bridge. We will encounter fears in life – stranger danger; we will grieve for those imprisoned by life's circumstances; and we all have needs that go unmet, and they feel like life-or-death needs.

But what scripture tells us and what Jesus has achieved for us is the assurance that through it all, we have one who will never let us down. When it comes to our relationship with God and one another, Jesus is our bridge builder.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” We know what it is that we're shooting for Christ like living. We know the choices to make and the way to go. Our only job is to step out in faith and to do what's right and to go where God would lead us. And so let's go that way, together, as a brother or sister in Christ. Let's honor that commandment above all others. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal One, always loving and forgiving, always compassionate and affirming, we bring our prayers to you. We know, too, that you always listen with great care. In your way and in your time, you respond to us! Help us to be ready, open and always attentive.

Eternal One, in these days, our lives seem to be so full and uncertain. We feel like we have far too much to do. Settle us down; help us to center upon you and your will. Calm our spirits and refresh our energies.

When we are sorrowful and troubled, send your comforting Spirit. When we are lonely and isolated, send your encouraging Spirit.

When we are lost and perplexed, send your guiding Spirit. When we are sick and ill, send your healing Spirit. When we are confused and filled with doubt, send your faithful Spirit. When we are worn out and hassled, send your calming Spirit.

We also pray for our world. Where there is tension and discord, send your peaceful Spirit. Where there is war, in places like Syria and Afghanistan, send your loving Spirit of reconciliation, and give comfort and restoration to those whose lives are torn apart.

For your Spirit is always available to us and for us, Lord. Teach us that all we need to do is simply ask for your Spirit to come upon us and over us. Now, Spirit, now come, come in the name of him who first sent the Holy Spirit among us, Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.