

November 3, 2024

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Psalm 37, Hebrews 13:15-16, 20-21

*Grounded in Hope: Commitment*

This morning we hear from the last chapter - chapter 13 - of the letter to the Hebrews. The first ten chapters of Hebrews are alternating proclamations and exhortations - urgings and encouragements. Hebrews proclaims that Christ Jesus is the one whom God has spoken through and that Jesus is the Great High Priest whose death on the cross was the complete act of salvation for humankind. The exhortations encourage the audience to remain faithful to the work and person of Jesus, even if they face dangers and persecution. We heard from chapters 11 and 12 over the last two weeks about our call to faith - to be faithful - just as those who have gone before us - that great cloud of witnesses - has been faithful to God. The final section of Hebrews begins midway through chapter 12 focuses on how we can live in peace with each other. With that context in mind, hear now these words from the conclusion of Hebrews, chapter 13 verses 15-16 and 20-21

Through him (that is Christ Jesus), then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, as he works among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever. Amen. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

In 1986 I had the privilege to attend the PC(USA)'s national meeting - the General Assembly - as a Youth Advisory Delegate. At that meeting the Rev. Benjamin Weir was elected to be moderator of the PC(USA). Weir had been a missionary in Lebanon for almost 30 years when he was kidnapped off the street in Beirut by Hezbollah. He was one of seven Americans taken hostage in Lebanon during the mid-1980's. Weir was held captive for 16 months - most of that time in solitary confinement.

At the General Assembly meeting, Weir made a point to come meet with the Youth Advisory Delegates. I was impressed by this action, since as Advisory Delegates, we had voice but no voting power. I was also deeply moved by Weir's words. And while I don't remember all of the specifics of what Weir said, I do remember he spoke of hope. Hope for peace in the Mideast. Hope for the future of the church. Hope of the already and not yet. As I was watching news reports about the recent military actions in Lebanon, I remembered Benjamin Weir and his hopes.

Weir died in October, 2016, just over eight years ago. One of his friends, James Caulkins, recounted part of Weir's experience as a hostage, saying "Weir was placed in a cell without light, [with just] a straw mattress and a bucket. He saw no one. Bread and water were passed through a small opening in the door once a day. Every three or four days an empty bucket was exchanged. He was there for over a year. He had no contact with his family or anyone else in the outside world. Each day he would make a mark on the wall indicating another day in confinement. Each day he would save a corner of the bread given him. Later he would use it for communion that he observed each day. Weir attributed his ability to maintain hope and experience God's faithfulness to these practices."<sup>1</sup>

What are the practices that ground you in hope? What are the practices that allow you to experience God's faithfulness, day after day, long night after long night, week after week, year after year? While the audience to which the letter of the Hebrews was written may not have been actively imprisoned, like Rev. Weir was, they could anticipate a future with a similar shape and dynamic. And what does the author of Hebrews tell these people living in anxiety and fear about what they may face tomorrow? People living with the day to day reality of persecution for their faith. Rather than a focus on self-preservation or storing away more retirement savings or securing their home with more arms, chapter 13 opens with these words: "Let mutual love continue." The chapter continues with what one my Bible notes as the "the contours of Christian life" and "service well-pleasing to God". We are to offer hospitality to strangers, remember and care for prisoners and victims of torture, remain faithful to our spouses and partners, avoid the love of money, not be swayed by strange teachings, and instead be strengthened by grace and trust that God's promises are with us. This section ends with the words we heard from verses 15-16:

Through him (that is Christ Jesus), then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

These words from Hebrews echo the words we heard Rebecca read from Psalm 37: "Trust in the Lord and do good; live in the land and enjoy security. ... Commit your way to the Lord; trust in the Lord, and God will act."

These are tall orders under the best of circumstances. I can imagine it must have felt daunting to the communities hearing these admonitions. And I can also imagine that it felt liberating and freeing as the people understood that no matter the circumstances, they were being called to commit to a life focused on God and caring for each other. A life recognizing that our ultimate security and our ultimate allegiance is to God. And from that allegiance –

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<sup>1</sup>Synod of the Trinity. PMM director recalls assistance with Ben Weir hostage release in 1985. Posted October 18, 2016 in Featured News; <https://www.syntrinity.org/featured/pmm-director-recalls-assistance-with-ben-weir-hostage-release-in-1985>

that love of God – we love our neighbor. Not easy – not in the least. Yet a life with a clear center and focus, with praise and gratitude flowing upward toward God and a posture of service flowing outward toward others. It is an urging and encouragement – an exhortation - to commitment. An encouragement and an urging to keep our focus on God and to be grounded in hope, especially when our individual lives seem to veer in unexpected directions – a diagnosis, a missed opportunity, a splintered or shattered relationship, a financial setback. An encouragement and an urging to keep our focus on God and to be grounded in hope, especially when the world seems to be veering toward chaos rather than order – wars and threats of wars, ever worsening disasters heightened by climate change, political polarization that has pitted neighbor against neighbor and family against family and has seen some of the most hateful rhetoric ever spewed in a campaign.

Through him (that is Christ Jesus), then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Do not neglect to do good and share what you have. This is the commitment we are asked to make as followers of Christ. As followers of Christ who know that “doing good” means we show up and help out. We feed the hungry through meals at Loaves and Fishes and Advent House, we walk or sponsor walkers in the CROP walk; we sponsor a Thanksgiving basket, we add food to the grocery cart in Fellowship Hall. We welcome the newcomer with blankets, support their education and help make Christmas a little brighter. We care for each other here at PCO, through acts big and small. Through prayer when someone is ill or having surgery; a card sent in support. We “do good” when we build community – when we include our children and youth as worship leaders; when we share our gifts of music and teaching and caring for our facility; when we address each person using their preferred pronouns because we value each individual as part of our family no matter what others in the world say; when we ensure that all can find a place at the table – at the communion table and the fellowship table when we provide options meeting dietary needs.

The impact of all of these of small acts is so much greater than the sums of the individual actions. The impact is a strengthening and deepening of faith so that praising God for all that God has done becomes as natural as breathing; the impact is of a love so overflowing that it spills into every crevice of the dry gluten-free bread so all that you taste God’s grace, unmerited and so freely given. The impact is of a hope – a hope so profound that you can’t help but be changed – to dream big dreams and laugh deep laughs and smile just a little bigger. A hope that remembers that scripture offers us not one but several hopes for the future. There is the hope of freedom after slavery. There is the hope of homecoming after exile. There is the hope of reconciliation after estrangement. There is the hope of community being formed from strangers. There is the hope of the outcast being welcomed to the table.

There is the hope of new life after death.<sup>2</sup> Yes – there is the hope of Easter morning – that what the world thought was the end of the story, was in fact just the beginning. The beginning of the community we call home here at the Presbyterian Church of Okemos.

On this Sunday we live out these hopes as we join our voices together, as we will in final hymn, remembering that God has called us each by name and that today we come to commit ourselves responding to God’s claim on our lives.<sup>3</sup> We live out these hopes when we gather around the table and share the bread and the cup, remembering Jesus’s word that we eat and drink in remembrance of him – in remembrance of the one who healed so people could return to community; who taught so that we might know a better way to live; who forgave so that we might learn to forgive others; who made the sacrifice of death on a cross so that we might know new life.

We live out these hopes when we elect the next spiritual leaders of the church who have been called by God to guide us in our next chapter. We live out these hopes when we place our pledge cards and time and talent sheets in the basket with others, committing our time and talents and treasures as a witness to the abundance we have received from God. As a testimony to God’s impact on our individual lives. As a recognition that we belong in life and in death and in life after death to God.

The letter to the Hebrews ends with this benediction: Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, as he works among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever.

May we always remember that the God who brought the Hebrews through the most trying of circumstances, through persecution and hardship, will surely bring us through as well. May we commit to being a people grounded in hope. Join me in prayer.

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<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from Shirley C. Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 1994.p 384.

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrase of verse 1 of *Lord, When I Came into This Life* by Fred Kahn. Glory to God Hymnal #691. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013