

Partners With Those So Treated

We are drawing toward the end of our journey through the Epistle to the Hebrews. Before I offer you my thoughts on this latter half of chapter 10, I want to take just a moment to review a few of the salient points of what we have discerned in the weeks of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany so far. First, let's remember to whom the anonymous author of this sermon-slash-letter is writing. It is quite clear from the way his or her argument is constructed that the original audience consisted of Jewish Christians. There is also pretty good evidence that these were part of the growing church in Rome and that the Temple in Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed. The timing, therefore, is likely during the persecution of Christians by Nero, when both Peter and Paul are believed to have been killed in Rome. Our brother Wim Mauldin, who'd not heard my previous sermons due to his travels, was surprised last week when I matter-of-factly named Priscilla as the likely author of this book and indeed that is speculation on my part, although several commentators have mentioned her as a strong candidate. But it's easier to write about the book if one assumes an author and, in this time when the world's women are still striving for justice and equity, I confess to enjoying the possibility that part of our New Testament canon comes from a feminine perspective.

Priscilla, if it was she, has carefully set up for her Jewish Christian sisters and brothers a series of arguments as to why their faith in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah has fulfilled their faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah. Jesus, she has told them, is greater than the angels, greater than God's great servant Moses because he is the Son of God. He alone can lead them into the true rest promised to God's people by God. Jesus is also their great high priest, greater than the sons of Aaron because his priesthood is without end and his sacrifice is of his own life, rather than the life of an animal. In making the perfect sacrifice, in fulfilling the intent of the Old Covenant, Jesus has brought on the New Covenant, as he is remembered saying, in his own blood. This is the gift to those who trust his life and words as well as the challenge to them to live life in the love and liberty of God.

“Therefore, my sisters and brothers, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” I am picking up this morning in the midst of chapter 10. As I mentioned last week, the first half of this chapter is very much of a piece with chapters 7, 8, and 9, in which Priscilla explores how the death and resurrection of Jesus fulfills the old sacrificial system for wiping clean the slate of sin. I hope you all will hear this point carefully. Remember, Jesus is remembered as saying that he came to fulfill the Law not to abolish it. The new covenant fulfills rather than abolishes the old. That is why we still share the stories of Torah and the Former Prophets. That is why we still find wisdom and challenge in what we call the Old Testament. God's promises to the Children of Israel have not been abrogated; indeed, they have been extended to those of us from the many nations that are blessed by Abraham's trust in God which we now share.

Like those sisters and brothers in first century Rome, we are invited to approach the throne of God with full assurance, because thanks to the work of Christ Jesus our hearts, indeed the whole of our selves, have been washed clean in the eyes of God. This is an important message for us to remember and to share. It means that in the new covenant reality we can be bold enough to do

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anything in the presence and will of God. Because we are so empowered, Priscilla lays out some challenges for us. “Let us hold fast,” she writes, “to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” Those Jewish Christians in first century Rome were beginning to wonder if Jesus was going to keep his promise to return. They had been experiencing trouble for some time by now. They’d been expelled from Rome under Claudius, allowed to return, and now were being persecuted by Nero. But, she assured them, God and God’s Christ are faithful. Perhaps sometimes we feel those same doubts. Perhaps we feel pressured by the world, forgotten by God. We are assured, my friends, by our Scriptures and by our experience, that God is faithful.

“...let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,” Priscilla writes, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” Sometimes, we forget how much we can influence one another by our simple presence. This is as true today as it was in the first century. When our friends, inside the church and out, see or hear about the steps we are taking to help heal our world, they are encouraged to do the same. Even more elementary, when we come together on a regular basis to hear each other’s stories, to rejoice together or to weep together, we are giving our friends the gift of our time and our caring. I have often told Connie that even after nearly 13 years as your pastor, I still find it hard sometimes to drag myself out of bed and out of the house early enough on a Sunday to be here as early as I need to be. But when you all start coming into the building and I hear the joyous sound of your voices, it energizes me. I know I can look forward to a couple of hours with my friends, people I care about and who care about me. Do any of the rest of you get that energy boost from being with this family of faith? If you do, would you say “Amen?”

As she did in chapters five and six, Priscilla sandwiches a message of confidence in God’s love around a warning to her flock not to deliberately abandon the faith. As I said a few weeks ago, I think this is consistent with her maternal approach to the group she obviously knows so well. As I suspect was true for many here, I grew up with parents who believed that to spare the rod was to spoil the child. Parenting is different now, I think for the better, but I think we can still hear the love behind the admonition, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” I will leave it to each of you to decide whether negative or positive reinforcement is more powerful in your life. I don’t respond particularly well to negative reinforcement but I understand that it is important for some and I respect that.

The last seven verses of this chapter ring especially relevant on this weekend when we celebrate the memory of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Verses 32 through 34 speak to those of us in the majority culture in the United States in 2018 in a very direct way. Listen to those words again: “But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.”

Let’s first of all be honest with each other and with ourselves that this passage is going to speak in different ways to various ones of our number. Many of us, perhaps all, have had the experience of having “a hard struggle with sufferings.” Suffering comes in different ways to

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different people but it is almost certain to come. For some, it is the experience of losing a spouse or a child. For some, it is the more “expected” suffering of the loss of parents. In our modern culture, the loss of a job or the halting of a career can be as demoralizing and difficult as any other loss. Sometimes, that kind of loss can be more than economic; it can be the ending of a lifelong dream. In the spirit of the weekend, I would offer on that score a quote from Langston Hughes and his poem, “Harlem:” “What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore-- / And then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or crust and sugar over-- / like a syrupy sweet? / Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?” On some level, all of us have known suffering.

But few of us have experienced suffering at the level of the original audience of Hebrews. When we speak of the persecution they endured, we are not just talking about people saying ugly things to them or keeping them out of jobs for which they are qualified. They, like all Jews, were forced to flee Rome sometime between AD 41 & 54 by an edict of the Emperor Claudius. Many of them lost everything – home, business, possessions. When they were able to return, some did, only to have to start all over. Then, in AD 64, Nero blamed Christians for starting the great fire of Rome. Now they were subject to execution, often in dreadful and humiliating ways. Still, they exhibited both compassion and joy. Could we say the same?

We have seen in recent days how the powers that be of our time respond to those who have experienced persecution. Like the Roman Emperors of evil memory, those at the pinnacle of our government would expel the unfortunates who fled here to escape injustice and persecution in their own countries or simply to seek a better life for themselves and their children. The current inhabitant of the Oval Office has abused these good people with language that would have gotten my mouth washed out as a child. As I said of Priscilla and her flock earlier, I have no doubt that my mother loved me... but I can still taste that soap. Meanwhile, political voting districts continue to be gerrymandered to empower white voters in places where they are actually in the minority and our black and brown sisters and brothers are kept down by these political shenanigans. Voting rights in many states are being suppressed just as they were in the bad old Jim Crow days with ridiculous requirements for ID cards that are seemingly only available to white citizens. As the so-called “War on Drugs” kicks back into high gear, innocent people have their property confiscated because they have allowed an addicted relative to sleep in their home and for-profit prisons remain full of brown and black men in grossly inequitable numbers. There is real persecution still going on in our country but it rarely touches those of us with primarily European heritage.

But if, as Priscilla points out, we are not being called by God to bear up under persecution, then we are being called to be “partners with those so treated.” We must train our hearts to be alert to the persecutions around us, the suffering over and above the private injuries of common life, no matter how heartfelt. We must learn to spot the systemic evils of racism and sexism and classism and all the rest and we must learn to combat them. We must learn to eradicate them from our hearts and lives and we must learn to speak out against them, using the personal power of persuasion that we have gathered through living lives of integrity to convince our neighbors that there is something deeply wrong in America but that it can be righted. We must speak out. Dr. King has been credited with the remark that “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” It is an important word, even if he did not say it – a

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quick search did not enable me to find any but secondary attributions. What he demonstrably said, and he was quoting the work of the executive committee of Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, was “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” He said that in a speech at Riverside Church in New York City, a church founded by Baptists, exactly one year before his assassination.

Dr. King spoke out on behalf of his persecuted sisters and brothers of the Black community. He spoke out on behalf of the poor – we should remember that when he was killed, Martin Luther King was engaged in the “Poor People’s Campaign,” having said “I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights... we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.” Dr. King spoke out on behalf of those whom America had declared to be our enemies, as I just mentioned. We’re pretty good, we Euro Baptists, at hailing Martin Luther King as one of our own, an American Baptist who did us proud. Are we as good at following his example? Or are we as silent as the good White Christian folks he called to task in his “Letter from the Birmingham Jail?”

Priscilla also lauds her friends for having “compassion for those who were in prison.” I have spoken before about the findings of Michelle Alexander regarding the systemic injustice towards people of color in our justice system as published in her book, The New Jim Crow. Let me remind you of just some of the basic points. Although the book is now eight years old, I’ve not read anything to suggest that the overall trends have changed.

- We imprison more people than any other country
- The U.S. has over 2.4 million behind bars, an increase of over 500% in the past thirty years
- We have 5% of the world’s population; 25% of its prisoners
- People of color represents 60% of people in cages
- One in eight black men in their twenties are locked up on any given day
- 75% of people in state prison for drug conviction are people of color although blacks and whites see and use drugs at roughly the same rate. In New York State, 94% of those imprisoned for a drug offense are people of color.
- The number of drug offenders in state prison has increased thirteen-fold since 1980
- 5.3 million Americans are denied their right to vote
- 13% of black men are disenfranchised
- Over the past two decades, state spending on prisons grew six times the spending of higher education
- From 1997 to 2007 the number of women in prison has increased by 832%
- Nearly \$70 billion is spent annually on prisons, probation, parole and detention

Remember, a growing portion of this enormous amount of money is going to for-profit prison corporations. Meanwhile, schools in impoverished cities and counties and social service programs of all sorts are being starved of governmental funding. America’s lust for bondage is denying our children an education and our poor and elderly the basic needs of life, from Meals on Wheels to affordable housing to, if some in government have their way, Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security.

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The roots of this systemic evil must be attacked and we must ally ourselves with those who are imprisoned by educating ourselves and speaking out. If you have not already done so, read The New Jim Crow so that you will understand what is going on. But we must also have compassion upon those who are already imprisoned. Many of you know our friend Rev. Ricky Barlow, former interim pastor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Baptist Church in Renton and regional representative of our American Baptist Foundation, the managers of our own little church endowment. Some of you may also know his wife, Rev. Lydia Flora Barlow. I was honored, along with Connie, to represent you all nearly two years ago when Lydia was commissioned as an American Baptist Home Missions Society missionary to prisoners. Lydia not only visits prisoners with educational programs and the good news of God's love, she is also a major player in organizing accredited educational programs in prisons, helping those who are incarcerated to earn GEDs, Associates degrees, and even a limited number of Bachelors degrees. She is also currently co-producing a documentary, "Since I Been Down," in which prisoners tell their stories of incarceration and spiritual liberation. Lydia is motivated by her own family's experience with the horrors of incarceration. Her beloved cousin, Fabian, was a victim of our unequally applied justice and of his own despair as a result. Lydia and her ministry deserve our support, in prayer and in funds. To learn more about her work and to support it, I encourage you to visit her website, fabiansfund.org. As a reminder, the address is in your bulletin. And if you think that prisoners in our country are beneath your compassion, take a hard look at the icon on the front of your bulletin and on our communion table this morning. It's modeled on the real life jailhouse "mug shot" of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

My sisters and my brothers, we have been blessed by God with the free gift of God's love. By the life and work and death and resurrection of Jesus, we have shown our path to a life which frees us from fear and anxiety about anything. By Christ's work, we are empowered to live in the Beloved Community with confidence, encouraging one another and reaching out in love to those who are staggering under the weight of hatred and injustice. Let us not ignore God's love for us and shrink from the good we can do in the world but let us display our faith and love and salvation to the world, for we are among those who have faith and so are saved. Let us remember on this week and for all our lives that good and faithful servant of God, Martin Luther King, Jr., and let us honor him by faithfully following the One whom we serve together. In Jesus' name, Amen.