

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

This is now the third Sunday on which we have had a reading from the Book of Hebrews, and we will have one more next week. I haven't taken the opportunity to speak to you yet about this New Testament book, but I think now might be a good time. The Letter to the Hebrews, as it is called, was probably written late in the first century, as the second generation of Christians was spreading to places far beyond Jerusalem and the Jewish homeland. We don't know who wrote it, or where exactly, but we do have some good guesses about why it was written and to whom. Now, Bible readers usually think of Hebrews as a book about faith, and faithfulness, and certainly that is one of its themes. The author writes about the faithful lives and acts of Old Testament heroes and characters, relating how their faithfulness brought them favor from God. But the author always adds this disclaimer: These historical figures, faithful as they were, did not receive the full salvation of Christ; they couldn't see the bigger picture; they did not have the full presence of grace. Why, you might ask...well, because the Christ, the Messiah, had not yet been sent to Earth to liberate the faithful from sin and death, so the preaching went.

So, the Book of Hebrews seems to have been written to early Christians who were feeling the tension between themselves and the traditions of Judaism, the heritage of faith in the one true God. Remember that Jesus himself grew up in the Jewish faith, as did all his disciples and his inner circle, and that the scriptures they used to worship and understand God's nature were from the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. And, as we know from Paul's letters, there was an ongoing controversy about whether or not one had to first be an observant Jew before one could truly be a follower of Christ, the Jewish Messiah. So, imagine that you were one of these early Christians, and were caught up in this controversy. You might go to the village synagogue on the Sabbath, that is Saturday, like all your friends and neighbors, and hear the scriptures read from scrolls and hear the leaders preach about the faithfulness of the Bible characters, but then on the next day, Sunday, which the early Christians called "the Lord's Day", you would take your family to a gathering of your Christian friends, probably a Eucharist. Now, the rabbi at your Saturday service would preach against your Christian church, and if you wanted to get up and tell about your belief in Jesus, you would probably have been told to leave. This had apparently happened; Christians, despite their Jewish backgrounds were expelled from synagogues in large numbers. Likewise, if you wanted to get up on Sunday and praise the ancestral Jewish ancestors, you'd better qualify your praise by saying that those heroes never really made it into heaven. They had not been saved by Jesus, at least not yet.

Such controversies began to drive a wedge between the traditional Jewish institutions and the newer Christian communities, a wedge of exclusivity and intolerance. Now, imagine that you were forced to make a choice between the authority of all that Jewish scriptural history and the loose-knit, disorganized, evangelical church you had been convinced to join. Especially if that church were being persecuted by the Roman government and Jewish leaders alike. And especially if your church belief was primarily based on incredible stories of resurrection and miracle healings by an itinerant preacher named Jesus back in your parents' or grandparents' day. And then you had been promised that Jesus would soon return in the flesh to protect and glorify you. But that hadn't happened yet, and you were bearing the brunt of persecution and ridicule and anger. What would you have chosen? Well, there is some evidence that the initial passion of the early church was wearing off, that the church was losing members, or at least their unqualified loyalty. The Letter to the Hebrews, to the Jews who had accepted that Jesus was the long expected messiah, was intended, we think, to warn the faithful to stay the course, to be true to the Christian message, and to encourage them that better days were coming and that their faithfulness would be rewarded, much more so even than were the ancient Hebrew heroes.

The Gospel of Luke was written at about the same time as the Letter to the Hebrews, maybe a bit before, and it too speaks to these tensions between Jewish tradition and Christian passion. In today's reading, Jesus again faces complaints that he is doing inappropriate healings on the Sabbath. This is, in fact, the fourth time that Luke mentions this particular controversy. As the faithful are praying and learning in the synagogue, Jesus heals a woman with a long history of illness and brokenness, and, again, some self-righteous leader stands up and says "Hey, wait just a minute...you're breaking the law! You can't work like that on the Sabbath!" Now, Luke recognizes full well that these incidents, these complaints, are mostly meant to discredit Jesus, but he shows, too, how Jesus is able, brilliantly, to turn the controversy into a teaching moment. Remember that the Sabbath, from the story of the seven days of

creation, is the day God blessed the practice of resting after the week's faithful accomplishments. Remember that the Ten Commandments, given to Moses in the Book of Exodus, include the insistence that Sabbath Day be kept "Holy" ...not just a good idea, not just a useful suggestion, but Holy!

But what is it exactly that Jesus does when the community gathers like they do on the Sabbath? Listen to what he says, how he characterizes what God has done through him: "ought not this woman, who has been bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" He is setting her free! He is liberating her! She no longer needs to think of herself as a victim! Her brokenness, her disability, no longer needs to be a cause for her not to be able to look God and her neighbors in the eye. Now, these miracle healings in the Gospels may be true, but what might be even more important is the promise that neither illness nor disability can confine a soul from the good life that God intends for us all. The important thing which Christ can accomplish is liberation, the restoration of the law of liberty. That's the way I personally like to think of these miracles. And it is, in fact, a miracle that brokenness, in God's kingdom, in God's holy intention, cannot trap us or imprison us. We can be set free to be the loving, optimistic, cheerful creatures God's dream has meant for us. No wonder that, as Luke reports, "When Jesus said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." And even on the Sabbath. Maybe especially because it was the Sabbath!

Now, over the centuries since the days of Luke, many, many *wise* people have written about what Sabbath, or Sabbath-time means, but let me tell you what it means to me...(wait, that didn't come out quite right!) I think of what we do here together each Sunday morning as a family reunion. A family reunion when we deliberately recognize God's blessings and are thankful together for them. I so look forward, with longing and glee to these weekly reunions! They lift my spirit...they drain the sap out of me, but I am revived and liberated by them. And not just Sunday mornings, either, but anytime this family gathers to pray and worship. What a time to count our blessings together, tell the family stories, share a meal, and know that God's presence is strong and faithful among us! Family reunions can be a time for healing brokenness, for showing forgiveness, for making new plans, for cementing relationships, and like those folks at the synagogue in today's reading, for rejoicing in all the wonderful things that Jesus is doing. And we take the time, as one does at family reunions, to remember those who for one reason or another can't be with us. And despite all our various disabilities, we can look one another in the eye and see the love that God has placed there. And, think of it, those who are here at this family reunion have actually *chosen* to be a part of this family.

The ancient prophet Jeremiah, preaching just before and even during the exile to Babylon, had plenty to say about family reunions among his people. Val has read to us from the introductory verses from the preserved Book of Jeremiah, and there we find information about his holy calling and his commission from God. Jeremiah did, by the way, according to scripture, have a fetal soul! Imagine that...yet in the womb God already had assigned him a destiny and an identity. Before he was born he was so much more than just a mass of indistinct cellular material. Now, that raises some uncomfortable questions for me, but maybe best not to ask them here and now...Anyway, at his people's family reunions, even on the Sabbath, the God of scripture has commissioned Jeremiah to do six things, as we heard: "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." That doesn't sound much like a fun reunion, does it?! Gale and I and the grandchildren will be spending some family time at the Jersey shore this week, and I'm certainly hoping that it won't be a, pulling and plucking reunion. But if reunions are planned just for nostalgia and reminiscing, they die out over time. They run their course, and even if you try to stick to an annual or even weekly schedule, attendance drops and people lose interest. They've been there and done that, I guess.

And the pandemic certainly hasn't helped. Looking around, I don't see a choir, for example, or a Sunday school. These times have dealt their share of destruction and pulling-down, it seems. But Jeremiah also prophesizes that God can get behind positive changes, too. The last two of the six charges are "to build and to plant." I guess I wish the translation had added prefixes, so that the words were "re-build" and "re-plant." This certainly seems like the kind of holy work which would be permitted and encouraged on the Sabbath: to "re-pot" ourselves and our church family, putting Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to work as new soil and new spiritual fertilizer for the sake of our growing relationships and our mission together. Whether it is our family cousins or our church family, nostalgia can't be sustained for very long, and it doesn't really help us with our new ministries. It's fun, and I would be the last one to discard it, but I have to ask: What is the faithful thing to do today? It's a puzzling question, but also a liberating one. What is the faithful thing to do now? I pray that we can make that question our continual sidekick. Amen