

Provoking Love  
Mark 13:1-8; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25  
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In some ways, both of the passages we have read today may be showing us what it means to truly worship God. Chris talked about worship a few weeks ago, as we ended our Stewardship drive. Those of you who have come here today come for many different reasons and with many different needs. We come singing hymns and praying and saying words that we say week after week. Sometimes we may not even think about what we are saying. We just recite the words. And yet, here in this place and space, we come to be the Church together.

Barbara Brown Taylor has, in recent years, been named as one of the best preachers in the English-speaking world. To me, preaching and praying go hand in hand for pastors. And so I was very surprised as I read Brown's book, An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith this week and saw these words:

"I know that a chapter on prayer belongs in this book, but I dread writing it. I have shelves full of prayer books and books on prayer. I have file drawers full of notes from courses I have taught and taken on prayer. I have meditation benches I have used twice, prayer mantras I have intoned for as long as a week, notebooks with column after column of the names of people in need of prayer....I have a bowed psaltery – a biblical stringed instrument mentioned in the book of Psalms – that dates from the year I thought I might be able to sing prayers easier than I could say them. I have invested a small fortune in icons, candles, monastic incense, coals, and incense burners....I am a failure at prayer." (Brown, pp.175-176)

Maybe many of you can identify with Brown on this point. Maybe we feel like failures at prayer and at worship because we leave here feeling as badly as we did when we arrived. Perhaps we do not even know how to approach worship.

Presbyterian minister Tom Long identifies, from the passage in Hebrews, five ways in which we get ready for true worship (Long, pp.105-109). First, he says, we come together to worship as community. We do not come as strangers or as visitors, but as members of God's family. We no longer have to stand outside of the Holy of Holies while the priest goes in for us. Jesus' loving sacrifice opened for us the doors to God's house, and we can enter the inner rooms. We should not neglect to meet together, the passage tells us. While they are good things to do, we cannot find true worship at the beach, or with a book in front of the fireplace. Worship of God is a communal act.

Second, says Long, we come to worship as those baptized and forgiven ("our hearts sprinkled clean" and "our bodies washed with pure water" – v.22). The outer washing shows forth the inner cleansing, which leaves us "with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (v.22).

Third, he says, we come with hope in the promises of God. God has promised us such wonderful things as an end to all war, a day when all of God's creatures will live in harmony. God has promised justice that will flow freely for everyone, like the overflowing streams we have seen in recent days with over-abundant rains. God also promises us a time when there will be no more death or pain or mourning (Rev. 21:3). Christians see these promises only "in a mirror, dimly" (I Cor. 13:12) now, but we live in hope of seeing them fully one day.

Fourth, says Long, we do not come to this place just to sing and pray (although those are important elements of what we do here). We come also to love and do good deeds (v.24).

And finally, says Long, we come by gathering together with other Christians. Wherever we gather to worship, whether with two or three in a chapel, or 200 in a sanctuary or a temple or a mosque, on a hillside beside a lake with a large wooden cross, or even in a coliseum full of 11,000 faithful women, we come to an ordinary building, “an earthly tent.” But we always find ourselves in the company of others who also come to worship God. Christian worship thus gives us a foretaste of the kingdom to come, of the “Day approaching” (v.25).

In the Mark passage, which is very called “The Little Apocalypse,” Jesus warned of the destruction of the place that the Jewish faith saw as the center of worship, the Temple in Jerusalem. This would happen, he said, in the midst of war and natural turmoil. People keep trying to guess the date of that Day whenever our world is in turmoil. But this Day will not be an ending, Jesus told us, as much as the beginning, the birth pangs of something new and better. Jesus was the beginning of something better. Jesus replaced the Temple. The curtain through which only the high priests could enter God’s presence has been replaced by Jesus, and is available to all. God is present here and anywhere that we invoke God’s name in worship as God’s people.

The phrase that grabbed my attention the most as I read this Hebrews passage was in verse 24: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds...” We do not normally put “provoke” and “love” together. They seem opposite of one another. The Greek root, *paroxyno* means “to spur, to stir to anger, to make sharp, to sharpen, urge, stimulate,

irritate, provoke, to rouse to anger,” even “to burn with anger.” This same word is used in Acts 15:39, when Paul and Barnabas were at odds: “The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company.” It is also used in I Corinthians 13 (v.5) to say that love is not resentful, or provoked. Yet here, in a sermon that is called the Letter to the Hebrews in our Bibles, the Preacher urges us to “provoke love and good deeds.”

There is a Prayer of Confession in our Book of Common Worship that has long been a part of our liturgy in the Presbyterian Church. We have used this prayer here from time to time, so it may be familiar to you. It starts like this:

“Almighty and merciful God, we have erred and strayed from Your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against Your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done....”

In other words, we come confessing that we are self-centered, and that we do not live the way God calls us to live. Our consumeristic society teaches us to put ourselves and our needs first. Yet God calls us in a different direction. The God who was willing to lay down his only Son for us, to suffer and to die for us, not only asks us to love, but shows us how to love. Maybe we do need a little provoking to get us up out of our comfy arm chairs to go serve at the shelter, or to skip golf one day to help at the Habitat build.

Henri Nouwen, in one of the best little spiritual books ever written, Life of the Beloved, talks of the worshiping life, the spiritual life, as equivalent to 4 words – “taken, blessed, broken, and given.” Nouwen gets these four words, of course, from Jesus’ actions of taking bread, blessing it,

breaking it, and giving it to the disciples. It would be hard to do justice to the book in a few words (so I recommend it to you to read). But Nouwen talks about how so many of us do not see ourselves as “taken,” or “chosen” by God. The first step in approaching God, he says, is to realize that we are the Beloved. Such a realization can be life-changing. For once we acknowledge that we are taken, or chosen, we will recognize that we are “blessed” by God. We can count our blessings, keeping a gratitude journal, as Dave Pottenger recommended to us earlier in the year in his stewardship message. Nearly all of us can identify with the “broken” part of this equation, as we have all had times in our lives that seemed to bear us down, times when we felt that God was far away. Once we can see even our brokenness as falling under the blessing of God, then we can be “given” to reach out and share God’s love with others. None of this movement is easy. Nor is it quick. Realizing that we are the Beloved may take a lifetime.

And yet the need for God’s love for others lurks around us at all times. The homeless on the corners nip at our consciences. The violence on the news shuts our ears as we try not to hear. And we close ourselves off from love because to love means to risk getting hurt. So perhaps we do need to “provoke” one another to love and do good deeds. Perhaps when we bring back our Share Your Christmas gifts, others will be spurred to do the same. Maybe someone’s delicious “holy casserole” to one in need will incite the recipient to cook for someone else at a later time, when all is well again in their household.

If we took as seriously as the early Christians did the message of God’s incoming kingdom, of Christ’s second coming, we might do better at provoking one another to love and good deeds now. If we could see the

need for God's love in our world as urgent, we might be better roused to loving action.

The truth is that the needs ARE urgent, and beyond our wildest imaginings. Our world does need to know the goodness of God's love in the midst of all the evils that occur. It might be easier to roll over and ignore them, to look the other way and feed our own pleasures, so that we can better cope with a harsh world. And yet God calls us to prod, to urge one another on to acts of love. The Church is precisely where God's Kingdom breaks into our world, and we are the ones bearing the sledge hammers of love needed to break through the thick core.

In her quest for prayer, Barbara Brown Taylor visited Greek Orthodox worship, a Reform synagogue, and a Muslim prayer meeting. She concludes:

“All of these visits have aided my sense that there are real things I can do, both in my body and in my mind, to put myself in the presence of God. God is not obliged to show up, but if God does, then I will be ready. At the same time, I am aware that prayer is more than something I do. The longer I practice prayer, the more I think it is something that is always happening, like a radio wave that carries music through the air whether I tune in to it or not.”

She has put together an altar in her house, with candles and icons, pictures of Jesus and Mary, and a brass box for the names of those for whom she prays. And in her own way, she prays there. In fact, she finds that “prayer overtakes” her there.

God's love is like the radio waves. It is there whether or not we tune in to it. I'd rather tune into it, myself, to benefit from it, and to share it with others. How about you? Will you provoke yourself and others to love and

good deeds, in Jesus' name? Then God's love could be freed to overtake the world. Wouldn't that be lovely?

In the name of the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit, AMEN.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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