

“Let mutual love continue”
14 Pentecost C

HELP US LORD TO BE SO CONNECTED TO YOU THAT WE MIGHT BECOME THE SERVANTS OF OTHERS. TAKE OUR LIPS AND SPEAK THROUGH THEM, OUR MINDS AND THINK THROUGH THEM, AND TAKE OUR HEARTS, AND SET THEM ON FIRE. AMEN!

In this last sermon on Hebrews we read some last instructions for the Christian church. The instruction begins with love and ends with Jesus Christ. That’s a story with a good ending!

The book of Hebrews begins with Jesus Christ as the Son of God and how much *HIGHER* he is than the angels and *HIGHER* than the Old Testament priesthood. He is *BETTER* than these because his sacrifice was able to make others *PERFECT* through HIS *SUFFERINGS*. He is a *GREAT HIGH PRIEST WHO NEVER CHANGES* and we can count on him to be the *SAME, YESTERDAY, TODAY AND FORVER*.

This week in Vestry we talked about the mission statement from our prayer book on page 855. It’s a generic statement that says the mission of the universal Church is “*to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.*” We grappled with the meaning of “restore all people to unity,” not a simple phrase to remember let alone understand! Trinity needs a simple statement to hang its hat on. The one printed on the cover of your bulletin under the Mission Statement could be the one: “*TO KNOW CHRIST AND MAKE HIM KNOWN.*”

Knowing Christ and making him known is a lifelong pursuit worthy of any person or church. It’s easier to remember. The writer of Hebrews ends his letter with a similar simple phrase: “Let mutual love continue.” This simple teaching contains everything that Jesus stood for. It was Jesus who took the teaching on the law and the prophets and summarized them with the Great commandment. “Love the Lord your God...Love your neighbor as yourself.” In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we read in the 13th chapter the qualities of true love. And here in Hebrews the writer explains his meaning about love continuing.

Hospitality to strangers! What a perfect test for love! It was a duty in ancient times to entertain strangers. In many passages of

scripture we read of the favorable treatment of strangers:

Deuteronomy 10:18, 19: God loves the **strangers** providing them food and clothing and his people should love the **stranger** for they were **strangers** as well in a foreign land; **Psalms 146:9:** The Lord watches over the strangers; **Romans 12:13:** Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to **strangers**, **3 John 1:5:** Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are **strangers** to you.

One of our families here at Trinity has on several occasions invited strangers to stay in their home: people that are homeless or in recovery. Some of you know of or have been foster parents to children. Some of you have remembered the prisoner through the Rock County ministry of Iris Guelker. Lazarus House and Living Waters bring in strangers who are in recovery programs into a safe place. Though we may be unfamiliar with torture, no doubt you've read about the persecutions of people in this century whose faith was unacceptable to those in power. Loving them doesn't become real for most of us until we meet and hear for ourselves.

In basic training for chaplains we met and heard from Retired Navy CAPT Dick Stratton, who on January 5, 1967 was captured by the North Vietnamese when his A4E "Skyhawk" crashed into a small village. He survived 2, 251 days of confinement and torture. What I remember most from his talk was the type of torture and that the torture was not selective and if we as chaplains were caught by an enemy we too would suffer the same fate. "Let mutual love continue" is the power of Jesus Christ to forgive those who tortured or wrongly imprisoned you.

This past week headlines spoke of Mother Teresa, a modern saint, whose brokenness was shared with the whole world when her letters detailing her struggle with faith were released. Her doubt concerning the existence of God and the spiritual "darkness" she felt for fifty years continued until she died in 1997. Her words are inspiring and as one priest said paradoxically, "Exciting." We remember the words of Jesus upon the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Teresa continued in mutual love despite her self doubt and feelings of abandonment. The great need before her gave her reason to keep going. Wow! Fifty years of wondering if there is a God yet doing God's work!

There is an irony and mystery! In the struggle to be free of the "love of money" and possessions that Teresa certainly accomplished

in her life living among the poorest of the poor, in the painful “dark night of the soul” when she could not pray and God seemed dead, the words of Jesus in the book of Hebrews ring true: “I will never leave you or forsake you.” And his words are true even when our hearts refuse to confirm them. Wow!

And so my brothers and sisters, in our brokenness we struggle to find the faith to say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.” When life gives us few reasons to believe in God, if “darkness” literally tortures our souls and when we have no strength to love those in need around us, we can say in faith, “Let mutual love continue.” And then we get out of bed the best we can and bring some relief to those whose darkness is greater than our own. Wow! Jesus. He is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He loves us still. Let mutual love continue. Amen.