

“Being Church”
Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
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CCUMC
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Before Scripture

We’ve been on a journey through the book of Hebrews the past couple of months. We’ve learned about the virtue of digging deep into difficult texts to uncover truth for our lives; Hebrews isn’t easily understandable to the casual passer-by. We’ve learned about Jesus as our high priest, a central motif in this book—a priest who intercedes on our behalf in a way superior to any priest of Levi. We’ve learned about the community of Hebrews, and their experience of persecution and the problem of waning zeal for the gospel. We’ve looked at a variety of spiritual practices that Hebrews opens up for us. First we practiced how the Word of God comes alive through *lectio divina*. We looked at a couple of kinds of prayers, from the prayer-cry that comes from the heart, to what it means to pray for others through intercessory prayer. We looked at the practice of generosity and of worship. Today, on our last day of this series, we’ll look at what it looks like to practice Christian community.

Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16

This last chapter of Hebrews ends like a letter to the congregation, offering the people a set of ethical instruction on how they are to be as church together.¹ The author is trying to exhort them on how to live as a community of faith in an indifferent or hostile world.² He writes to them in verses that contain couplets of thoughts—pairs of related instruction.

¹ Brian Whitfield “Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16,” workingpreacher.org.

² James W. Thompson, *Hebrews* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 277-278.

In total, this instruction in our verses for today offers six fruits of being in Christian community. Of course, the author of Hebrews not only teaches his people who were living in the midst of a crazy, hostile world long ago, but us as well. We will briefly contemplate each of these fruits of what it means to be church.

1. Mutual Love

The first fruit is mutual love. Appropriately enough I have an apple to represent each gift of being in community. (set apple on altar) The word used in Greek for mutual love is *Philadelphia* (from which we get the city of brotherly love). It means, quite literally, to have love for your brothers and sisters. In this context, it means to have love for your brothers and sisters in the faith. In the church, we are all family. We are one another's brothers and sisters—and we are called to love each other in community. Such mutual love especially applies to people who irritate you within this community---especially if that person is the pastor. We are called to love each other. This is what it means to be church.

The other part of this couplet, though, makes clear that we are also to love strangers. The Greek word here is *philoxenia*, and it means to love the foreigner in your midst. This practice is hospitality. The early church in Hebrews would have had to entertain itinerant preachers and sojourners in the spirit of the Christ whom they followed, who lived a life extending and receiving hospitality. We are called to love those who are strange to us, and through that we receive new life, new possibilities; we entertain angels unaware. In a few weeks we will host Las Posadas, a Mexican tradition of worship. We will go to houses in the neighborhood seeking hospitality as Mary and Joseph. Then we will return to the church for a festivity with tamales and hot chocolates. I pray that this occasion, where we will both receive and offer hospitality, might be an opportunity of *philoxenia*, of loving the stranger and of being brushed by angels' wings.

2. Compassion

The second gift of community is compassion. (apple on the altar) For the author of Hebrews, we are members of a body of faith who have a high priest who intercedes for us. Out of Christ's graceful intercession for us we are to intercede for others. We are to be with those who are in prison and those who are tortured. We are to act in full solidarity with those who suffer, which requires us to be present to them in body. We are to provide food, clothing, for needs by our very bodies to the bodies of those who hurt. Compassion is not something you can participate in by absentee ballot; such a practice requires our full selves.

3. Fidelity

The third gift of being the Christian community is fidelity. The Jews had high regard for marriage, as is demonstrated by the commandment against adultery in the book of Exodus. Christians are to uphold the practice of faithfulness in marriage. The author uses the language of the cultic sacrifice—to be undefiled—referring back to the undefiled animals to be brought for sacrifice for sins by the Jews. He is trying to show that infidelity isn't a private matter; it weakens the bond of the whole community. Being church means that we honor and support the marital bond.

4. Contentment

The fourth practice of the Christian church is contentment. (apple on altar) We are to be satisfied with what we have, without seeking more to secure our lives. The author of Hebrews quotes Deut. 31:6 that "God will not leave us or forsake us" and Psalm 118:6 that "God is our helper." Both of these quotes from the Old Testament affirm that we can trust in God's promises and protection. We can let go of greedy desires for more, because we are cared for and sustained by the grace of God, which is ever abundant.

5. Constancy

The fifth fruit of being church is the constancy of Jesus to us. (put apple on altar) “Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Jesus is always present to us, working out redemption and salvation for us. Jesus as our high priest will never reject nor abandon us, but holds us always in his loving grace. In a world of dramatic change and technological transformations, Jesus is always our Savior. Being church means we can trust in the one whom we follow for always.

6. Generosity

The last fruit is generosity (vv 15-16). (apple on altar) As we have received extravagant generosity from Jesus , so we are to extend grace to others by doing good and sharing what we have. We honor our generous God by living with open hands—without clinging to our resources in the face of uncertain futures. We share what we have as divine gifts entrusted to us as part of God’s bounty.³ We make a “sacrifice of praise” with our lips in worship and with our whole lives by doing good and “sharing what we have.” By so doing our lives become infused with the love of God. We are fruitful with love by generosity. This is what it means to be church.

Especially on this Thanksgiving Sunday, we pause to offer gratitude for all we have received in Christ. On this Consecration Sunday, in which in just a few moments we will lay our pledges for 2013 on altar, we are to offer our fruits, our financial gifts, in return for what we have so abundantly received. These little yellow cards represent a “sacrifice of praise to God” and chance to “do good and share what we have.” This is being church.

If you remembered to bring your pledge card with you of what sacrifice you can offer to the church this coming year, beautiful. If not, there are extra cards in the pews. I

³ David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 527.

am going to invite us into a spirit of prayer, to reflect first on these six fruits of what it means to be in community. Then we will move to offering a sacrifice of praise on our altar.

Let us pray:

God, we thank you for the fruits of being church—for mutual love, compassion, fidelity, contentment, constancy, and generosity. We would pray now silently for the fruit we need most to cultivate in our own lives. Which fruit are you calling us to harvest more in our lives on this Thanksgiving Sunday? (silence)

Gracious God, who lavishes us with extravagant generosity, be with us as we go forward to offer our pledges for 2013, and to practice generosity in return. May these cards represent in some way how we are to do good and share what we have, how we are to make an offering to you to help us to be the church. We offer now a silent prayer over our card and our commitment for giving to this church this coming year. (silence) (transition with joy)

CONSECRATION OF PLEDGES

I now invite you, as you feel led, to bring your card and place it in the offering plate on the altar. I can assist any who need help. Come ye thankful people come. Bring the fruits of harvest home

PRAYER OF DEDICATION OVER PLEDGES

Thank you God, for being so extravagantly generous to us. Thank you for all these signs of generosity back to you. Bless each of these commitments, O God. May they be used for the upbuilding of your church and the spread of your love. In Jesus name, Amen.