

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 17, 2024, The 26th Sunday After Pentecost/The 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

I Samuel 2:1-10, Hebrews 10:11-25

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE IN 2024

Introduction to Hebrews 10:11-25

This morning's New Testament Lesson is Hebrews 10:11-25, found on page 224 of your Pew Bibles if you would like to follow along. The author of the book of Hebrews is unknown, but what is known is that he was writing to people whose families and ancestors and community had been raised in the Jewish faith back to the beginning when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. This letter is filled with images that come from the people's Jewish past and present, so it is helpful to give you some background information before you listen to this morning's lesson.

Since those earliest days when God set priests to rule and guide the people, the priests had offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. Only the priest could go into the holiest part of the Temple on behalf of the people, and there in the Holy of Holies sacrifices would be offered for them. People needed the priests to stand between them and God.

The author of Hebrews now reminds the people who are followers of Jesus that they no longer need someone to offer sacrifices over and over on their behalf. In his death on the cross, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for all time, for all the sins of the people, throughout all of history. "Once and for all" Hebrews says; Jesus' death on the cross forgives our sins "once and for all."

The people now no longer needed a priest to stand between them and God. They now no longer needed a priest to go in their place into the sanctuary to stand before God offering sacrifices over and over again. In Jesus gift of his life for the world through his death on the cross, he once and for all ended the need for repeated sacrifices.

This is the hope and good news that this author is reminding the people of. He writes that since Jesus has made a way for all of us to come before God, and Jesus is now the only great priest we follow, we can live with hope and encourage each other in the life of faith.

Listen now for the word of God.

"Hope." We use this word in a lot of ways, don't we?

Did you pass the test? I hope so!

I hope my faith is strong enough to make it through the next few days.

I hope this package gets there on time.

I hope the doctors can figure out what is wrong.

The hope in me was just crushed when she said that.

It's just too hard to have hope these days.

Fingers crossed, here's hoping.

And the verse 23 of Hebrews 10 reads: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering for he who has promised is faithful. (10:23)

Holding onto hope. I have been thinking about our hope this week and at first, I was feeling a bit discouraged because sometimes it is hard to hold onto hope.

It's hard to hope because there can be a lot in our lives, and a lot in our world, that make hope seem just too hard.

But the more I spent time with this passage from Hebrews, I was reminded that as Christians we have a different kind of hope.

Our hope isn't something we can muscle into being. We can't really manufacture hope. We can't keep hope going all the time, no matter how cheerful or strong-willed or persistent we are.

Because hope is more than a feeling, it is bigger than us; true hope comes from outside of our lives.

Ultimately our hope isn't based on trying really, really hard to feel hopeful. Because our hope isn't a feeling, it's Jesus and the gift of his life, death and resurrection that he has given to each one of us. That's our true hope! Our hope isn't based on ourselves, it isn't based on whether good or bad things happen in our lives, our hope is based on Jesus. Jesus is our hope.

So, when the author of Hebrews calls us to hold onto the confession of our hope, this is actually something we can do in good times and bad times. Because our hope isn't based on our lives, our hope is based on Jesus' life that he gave to each one of us.

And Jesus gives us love and hope that are stronger and more permanent than anything we could ever create for ourselves. Our hope is based on Jesus, and the gift of our salvation we have in him choosing to walk the way of the cross for us.

Hope is a gift and we can rely on this gift, given to us by Jesus, because Jesus is always faithful.

I've often seen people living out this kind of hope in hospitals and nursing homes. Sometimes as the patient battling a serious illness, sometimes as the loved one sitting beside the person battling illness, or dementia, or a serious surgery.

In those moments I've watched people in what may seem like hopeless situations holding onto Jesus with all their might because they know Jesus is faithful and present with them. In what they do and say they make it so clear that they know that in Jesus' love they are not alone, and can even be so brave as to be hopeful.

I've watched this kind of hope in clergy colleagues serving conflicted congregations where a small group is trying to get rid of the pastor and making life unbearable for the pastor, and those in the congregation who support the pastor. I have watched clergy friends continue to have hope for the church they are serving, even as their hearts are breaking. It is a hope beyond human hope.

I've seen this kind of hope in parents whose teenager or young adult is addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. When many people have given up on their child, they continue to have hope in Jesus that healing can come to their broken child. It is hope that defies logic, it is hope grounded in Jesus' love for them and for their child.

The author of Hebrews has more to say to us this morning, not only do we have hope, but we are responsible for others who walk with Jesus in hope. He writes: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds."

Here in this family of faith in East Moline, and in the family of faith we have with other Christians, we are called to be provoking.

And yes, this word is as edgy as it sounds.

The word provoke in Greek means that when Christians come together, we should be inciting and encouraging each other to love and good deeds;

Not causing discord and irritating each other about what separates us,

but pushing and prodding and provoking each other in the spirit of love we've been given, so that we are encouraging each other to live out the life of faith.

Now you may not think of yourselves as provoking people, or even thought it was good to be provoking. But this is already happening here in our midst. We provoke each other to love and good deeds in Sunday School and Sunday Worship when we share our lives, and learn the stories of faith, and talk about how to live the life of faith.

We provoke each other to love and good deeds in the mission projects we share together.

We provoke each other to love and good deeds during commission meetings, and in Session and Deacons as we talk about the mission and ministries of our church.

You provoke each other to love and good deeds when you walk with each other through good times and bad.

What I'd like to suggest this morning is another way for us to provoke each other to love and good deeds. I think we all need this connection right now. We need to share God's hope right now. So, I am going to invite you to once again setting your alarms to 10:45 a.m. so we can pray together.

While I was on Sabbatical back in 2015, we prayed for each other at 10:45 a.m. each morning.

It was something that I relied on for those four months.

What I would like to invite you to do is to return with me to 10:45 a.m. each day. When that alarm goes off on your watch, or your phone, or your clock at home,

Will you join me to pray for the mission and ministries of our church?

Will you join me in praying that we will find the very best ways to hold onto our hope in Jesus?

Will you pray with me that we will be faithful followers of Jesus in this Church Family and out into the world around us?

Will you pray with me for us to be hopeful, provoking people?

Will you pray that God will watch over and bless the members and friends of this church?

I can tell you first-hand what it meant to me to know that you were all praying for me each day at 10:45 a.m. I knew that we were together in the journey of faith. And I knew that the love of Jesus was connecting us and guiding us. I want that for us as a church family.

So, if you are willing, I'd like to ask you join me, beginning tomorrow morning at 10:45 a.m. praying for our church and our lives of faith. I think it will be provoking, and it will help us hold fast to the confession of our hope in Jesus who is always faithful. And I believe it will connect us and give us strength for this journey of faith, knowing that we are united together in prayer.

In conclusion this morning I'd like to share a way of praying that you may choose to use some days at 10:45 a.m., and hopefully other times as well. This is something I learned years ago when I was on retreat over at the Prairiewoods Retreat Center in Hiawatha, Iowa.

I'm going to invite you into a time of prayer and then ask you to think of some very specific people. And then for each of them we will pray the words you'll find on the insert in your bulletins.

Please take them out now. In this prayer we can insert the name of the person or group we are praying for, or we can pray this prayer for ourselves or for the world. The prayer is:

“May they know Jesus, may they know hope, may they know love,
May they live with peace and joy.” (repeat)

Holding onto the true hope that we have only in our Savior Jesus, let us enter into a time of guided prayer.

As we enter into this time of silent prayer, I invite you now to think of:

--Someone you love very much. Take a moment to see them in your mind's eye, feel the love you have for them and the love Jesus has for them. And when you are ready, silently pray the words on your insert, using their name:

May they know Jesus, may they know hope, may they know love,
May they live with peace and joy.

-- And now think of someone who was, or is, a mentor to you, a wise person in your life, a leader or teacher who has helped shape your life and faith. It may be someone you knew when you were young, or someone who is in your life now, or an author or teacher you greatly respect. Take a moment to see them in your mind's eye, feel the love you have for them and Jesus has for them. And when you are ready silently pray, using their name:

May they know Jesus, may they know hope, may they know love,
May they live with peace and joy

--Now I invite you to think of that person who is on your last nerve. Think of that person that when you think about them, or talk about them and say their name, your jaws are clenched and you immediately begin to spew to other people about who they are what they've done or not done.

Now take the difficult step of seeing them in your mind's eye, feel the care you have for them and the love Jesus has for them, and when you are ready silently pray:

May they know Jesus, may they know hope, may they know love,
May they live with peace and joy

--Now it is time to pray for ourselves, so take time to hold yourself in your heart for a moment, feeling the love Jesus has for you and when you are ready pray:

May I know Jesus, may I know hope, may I know love, May I live with peace and joy

--And finally, let us pray for ourselves as a church family of faith, take a moment and see all of us together in your mind's eye, here in the Sanctuary and at home by YouTube, feel the love that Jesus has for this congregation in your heart. Now will you pray with me the 3rd prayer listed on your insert, as we pray for our church:

Let us pray:

May we know Jesus,
may we know hope,
may we know love,
May we live with peace and joy

May we be provoking, In the name of Jesus, who is always faithful, Amen.