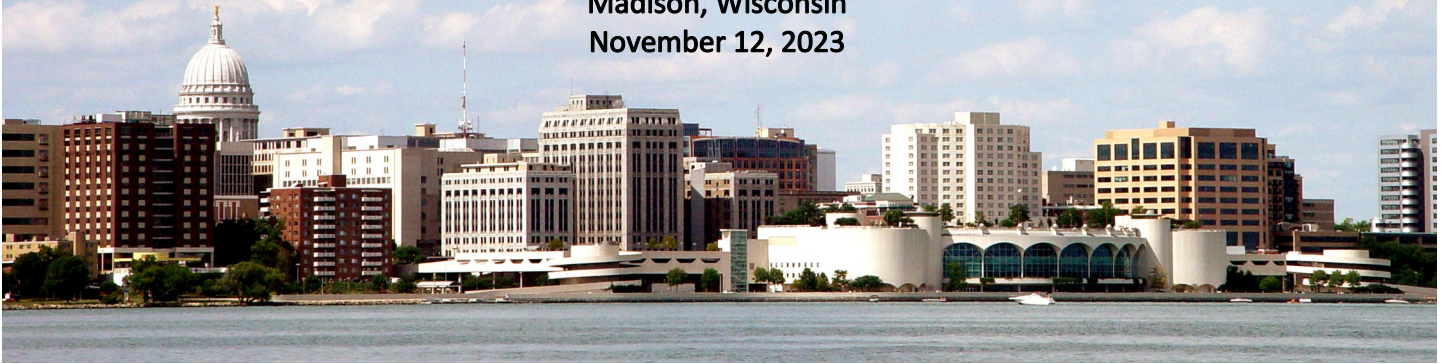


Love, Hospitality & Prisoners

Hebrews 13:1-3

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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

As our tradition has been for several years now, we'd like to start this morning by sharing the good news that God loves and he sent his only Son to this earth to save us. He lived a perfect life, he died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up alive on the first day of the week. We respond to this good news by believing the message, by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And we have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from the Green Hills congregation down in Mount Juliet, Tennessee. They say, "All glory to God. We welcomed a mother and son as they became our brother and sister in Christ today. God is good!" And that's all they say, we don't have any names, but good news from Tennessee this week!

And then we have an update from Columbus, Ohio, where my friend Brandon Edwards serves as a campus minister. Earlier this week, he posted online and he says, "Tonight was a special night - welcome to the family, Caleb and Hunter! Two of our local Ohio State students, and friend to one of our Buckeyes for Christ students, joined us this evening for Bible class and left as brothers-in-Christ. God is good. Truly, truly, good." Brandon's grandfather, Earl Edwards, was one of my favorite professors at Freed-Hardeman University, and it's so good to see Brandon following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. Brandon's mom, by the way, was one of my babysitters down in the Chicago area. But good news from Ohio!

And then we have one more, this one from the Lord's church down in San Marcos, Texas. They simply say that they are "Rejoicing with James Castellaw. Our new brother in Christ." It looks like this one might have been a challenge, but God's people have a way of getting it done, and we are thankful for good news from Texas this week! We share these examples to emphasize the good news, and if you would like to know more, please get in touch.

This morning, we come to the very last chapter in our study of Hebrews! So I want to invite you to be turning with me to Hebrews 13, and when you get there, you may notice as you skim through it, that Hebrews 13 almost looks like a random assortment of exhortations! Up to this point in the book, we've had some major sections; we've seen that Jesus is better, and we've had some major themes under that heading, but now we come to the end, and we have this rapid-fire smattering of seemingly random instructions. Since Jesus is better, Hebrews 13 is what this means for us. And every command in this chapter, every demand, ultimately goes back to what we've learned up to this point.

This morning, then, let's jump into one of the most practical chapters anywhere in scripture. This is Hebrews 13:1-3,

¹ Let love of the brethren continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.

This morning, let's learn what God wants us to learn from this passage...

I. ...and let's start with the opening line: **LET LOVE OF THE BRETHERN CONTINUE.**

And I hope we notice that the love he commands here at the beginning starts with one another. Obviously, it's important to love everybody, even strangers, but it has to start with us, with the love that we have as brothers and sisters. And this love, he says, is to ***"continue."*** In other words, this isn't new, this isn't some shocking new thing he's proposing here, but he's saying that the love we show towards one another must ***"continue."*** Earlier in this book, by the way, he already praised them for loving each other. Back in Hebrews 6:10 he said that, ***"...God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints."*** That's love! They were serving each other. But this love, he now says, must ***"continue."*** Keep it up! And we have to be told, because brotherly love is hard sometimes. Some of us are not always easy to love! So, it's difficult, which means that we have to think about it, we have to challenge ourselves. As he's already said (in Hebrews 10:24), we must ***"...consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds."*** In other words, we have to think about it. And we do think about it, because of Jesus. Jesus is what all of us have in common. Those of us in this room may not have the same education, we may not be in the same financial situation, we may not speak the same languages, but if we have obeyed the gospel, then we are brothers and sisters. And if that's all some of us have in common, we may need to really work on loving each other! What I'm saying is: This love we share isn't necessarily natural.

And this leads to another challenge here, and that is: It's easy to love each other "in theory" without actually loving each other "in practice." And what I mean by that is: We can read a passage like this, and we can agree with it, we can say, "Yes, it's important to love each other," and we can even say "Amen" to a passage like this, but it's so easy to then walk away from this passage without actually doing something. And so, as with so much of what we learn from scripture, what we really, truly believe is revealed by what we actually do. As John tells us in 1 John 4:20-21, if we say, ***"I love God,"*** but don't actually show it, we are lying. This is a real danger. We think we love each other, but do we? What have we personally done to show that we love our brothers and sisters this week? Have we thought about it in that way? What have we done over the past seven days to demonstrate our love for our Christian family? Since love doesn't necessarily come naturally, we may need to think about it. We may need to be intentional. We may need to brainstorm a bit. Love is not automatic, so we may need to make an effort. We may need to plan something. Consider the Golden Rule, where Jesus said (in Matthew 7:12), ***"In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets."*** What would make me feel loved this week? I know what made

me feel loved a few weeks ago. It happened on the afternoon of October 29, a Sunday afternoon, I remember it well. It was the day I had guessed for seeing the first snowflake. I was up on the roof clearing the gutters, and I started to see the first snowflakes of the year. Within minutes, I started getting calls and texts from all of you, making sure I saw the snow. So, here I am on my roof, taking calls and texts from my Christian family, and I felt loved and remembered. Well, whatever it is for you, we may need to go out and do that for somebody else. And this leads us to the second big idea this morning...

II. ...as we learn that we must **NOT NEGLECT TO SHOW HOSPITALITY TO STRANGERS.**

And I don't know how many of us realize this, but in a sense, we fought a revolutionary war over this. As a nation, we have some pretty strong views on this subject, even to the point where we have an amendment to our constitution on this issue. It's in the Bill of Rights. Are you all familiar with the Third Amendment? The issue of "involuntary hospitality" is given in the Declaration of Independence as one of the reasons for separating from Great Britain: King George had quartered armed troops in private homes among the colonies, and as you can imagine that was intolerable, and so, when our forefathers wrote the US Constitution several years later, they included the guarantee, that "No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law." We went to war over this! And so today, we cannot be forced to open our homes to soldiers. Maybe I can pick on the Marines, since they just had a birthday a few days ago. If a truck full of Marines pulls up in my driveway demanding dinner and a place to stay, I have a constitutional right to tell them "no." I don't know whether that would be the best move for me to make, but I have a right to turn them away. That's the Third Amendment. Before I said anything this morning, could you have explained what was in the Third Amendment? Some of you are constitutional scholars, but most of us are not! But the point is: Just as the Third Amendment is often overlooked, so also this matter of hospitality is also overlooked.

The Greek word translated here as "*hospitality*" is a word that refers to having a "love of strangers." And in English, we have the word "hospital." Do we see how that fits? A hospital is a place where strangers can go and get cared for. If something's wrong, I can go to the hospital, even though I may not know anybody there, and they will take care of me. That's "*hospitality*." You know the word "xenophobia"? "Xenophobia" refers to having a "fear of strangers." Well, this word is "philoxenia," meaning a "love of strangers." This is pretty much the opposite of "xenophobia." As God's people, we are to have a "love of strangers." And really, this reflects who God is. God is love, and so this command to practice hospitality (to love strangers) is repeated over and over throughout the New Testament. In 1 Peter 4:9, for example, Peter tells us to, "***Be hospitable to one another without complaint.***" So, this is directed to fellow Christians, which is a bit strange, since the word refers to "loving strangers." As I see it, we are to treat each other as honored guests, we are to welcome each other into our homes. In Romans 12:13, Paul says that we must be "***...contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.***" God feels so strongly about this, in fact, that an overseer in the Lord's church "***must be...hospitable.***" (1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:8) And that reminds me, Peter was an elder, so in that passage we just read from 1 Peter 4:9, he tells us to "***be hospitable to one another without complaint.***" Peter and Mrs. Peter surely knew the temptation of complaining as we practice hospitality. It's hard sometimes, but hospitality doesn't need to be complicated. And really, it doesn't even require having someone into our home for a meal. We might think of the Good Samaritan who literally demonstrated his love for a stranger by taking care of him on the side of the road and by putting him up in an inn. That man was hospitable in the true sense of that word. In our culture, it's easy to confuse hospitality with entertaining. Entertaining means whipping out the fine china and the cloth napkins, but hospitality may involve paper plates and Solo cups. Hospitality is inviting others into our lives, just as we are, perhaps even kicking the dog toys behind the couch as we bring someone home with us after worship. Sometimes we see our homes as a place to escape from the world, but God sees our homes (the homes that he gave us) as places to show love for others.

But, as the author reminds us, we must not *“neglect”* showing hospitality to strangers. To *“neglect”* is to “forget,” to “escape notice.” In other words, he’s not warning against some terrible sin we might commit, he’s not warning us about “refusing” to practice hospitality, but this is something that’s so easy to overlook. We live in a time when we can live right next door to somebody for several years and never meet each other. It’s not that we’re necessarily avoiding them, but we just don’t interact. It’s easy to get so wrapped up in our own lives that we forget to welcome in the strangers. So, we are to make a point of not “neglecting” this.

And as we go back to the text, let’s also note the little bonus here, *“for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.”* We might think of Sampson’s mom and dad in Judges 13, or Lot in Genesis 19, or the most famous example – Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. They didn’t know it at the time, but when those three *“men”* stopped by for a visit, and when Abraham and Sarah invited them in for a meal, they had no idea (until later) that one of those men was the Lord himself and the other two were angels. Now, he’s not saying, “Practice hospitality so you can hopefully meet an angel,” I don’t think that’s it at all, but I think he’s suggesting that we may not know how much good we’re doing by practicing hospitality until many years later. This is something we do over the long run. And, as Jesus explained in Matthew 25, when we serve those in need (when we provide food and clothing to those who need it), we are actually serving him.

So, let’s ask ourselves: When was the last time we demonstrated love toward a stranger? Now, I don’t think we have to open our doors to absolutely everybody and give everybody exactly what they’re asking for, but the danger here is that we never open up to anybody. We must not neglect showing hospitality to strangers.

III. As we come to the end of this passage, let’s close today by noticing that we are to REMEMBER THE PRISONERS.

“Remember the prisoners,” he says, *“as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.”* And I hope we understand that when he says to *“remember”* the prisoners, he’s not just talking about some kind of mental recollection, “Yep, there are people in prison right now.” But I hope we understand that to *“remember the prisoners”* means that we do, in fact, remember the prisoners, but that we also do something about it, that we act, that we are moved with compassion, and that we do something. We empathize, we try to imagine being in prison with them. I don’t know about all of you, but I know I’ve been in a number of county jails, and state prisons, and the maximum security section up at Mendota (our state mental health facility), and being in prison on a full-time basis is not something I would recommend. Based on the larger context of Hebrews, I’m assuming he’s talking about those who are in prison for their faith; this is a reference to those who are being persecuted. Back in Hebrews 10, he referred to the *“former days”* when they *“endured a great conflict of sufferings”* they were made to be a *“public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.”* They *“showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of [their] property.”* And this fits in with the larger context of scripture, where Jesus spoke (in Matthew 25) of those who came to him when he was in prison. So, I don’t think the author of Hebrews is talking about those who are in prison for drunk driving, but it seems to be some kind of persecution. But even regardless of the reason for being imprisoned, it seems that those of us on the outside have a role to play in showing concern for those who are on the inside. And this goes for those who are *“ill-treated”* as well. When people are suffering, we are called upon to *“remember.”* And the reason is, *“since you yourselves are also in the body.”* This might be a reference to being in the body of Christ, but I’m leaning toward the author basically saying, “You have a body just like they do, so you know what it feels like to be mistreated; therefore, do something about it!”

What does this look like? Well, when Paul was under house arrest at the end of the book of Acts, at some point during that two-year period, the church in Philippi sent a messenger, and they sent this messenger with a gift. And the book of Philippians is basically Paul's thank-you note back to the church in Philippi, because in Philippians 4:17 he says, ***"But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God."*** This church Paul had just helped establish sent him a person and a gift. I plugged that trip into Google Maps yesterday, and they suggested it would be a journey of around 1200 miles and would take at least 18 days on foot, and I think that might have been walking 24 hours a day. But when the church in Philippi learned that Paul was imprisoned in Rome, they sent this man to Rome with a pile of cash. And then, later in Paul's life, when he was actually in prison-prison (not just under house arrest), shortly before his execution, in the last letter he wrote to Timothy, Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:16-18, ***"The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me — the Lord grant to him to find mercy from the Lord on that day — and you know very well what services he rendered at Ephesus."*** Here is a guy who knew what Paul was going through, and he tracked him down, stalking him all the way from Ephesus to Rome and did something to refresh Paul often and was not ashamed of his chains. It can be embarrassing to visit somebody in prison, especially a loved one. Onesiphorus had no such shame.

And this may go for those in other difficult situations. Those who knew him were sad to learn that Rob Porter's dad passed away this week. He and his wife visited here several times through the years (when they were up here visiting Rob and Brandy and the kids), and what I remember about Rob's dad is "Coffee for Troops." Do some of you remember that? I don't know the whole story, but as I remember it, Rob's dad probably had his share of bad coffee when he was in the military himself, and so, as troops were being deployed the middle east a few years back, somehow Mr. Porter saw that as a way he could help, as a way he could actually do something. So, he worked with his church out in Maine, and he found a sponsor in a local coffee company, and he started coordinating mailing coffee to the troops, and that program grew, and grew, and grew. A lot of good was done, and continues to be done. Some of us here at Four Lakes helped out as we could. But there's a practical, real-life example of somebody who put himself in the shoes of others and actually did something.

And that's the message here: Remember what others are going through, and then do something! Earlier this morning, I was reading some news and ran across a story about four cowboys (three from Montana and one from Arkansas – I didn't even know Arkansas had cowboys), but these four men flew to Israel last week to help with the harvest. With the conflict over there, most of the men in Israel have been called up to active military duty, many of them are farmers, but this is not a good time of year to be taken away from the farm; so, these men from Montana and Arkansas flew to Israel to fill in and bring in the harvest for these people they've never met. That's helping somebody in a difficult situation.

You might be thinking: But I don't know anybody in prison. I do. Last week, we read close to a dozen notes, most of them from inmates who are enrolled in our Bible correspondence course. Some of those men and women were looking for pen pals. Some of you are currently corresponding with men and women in prison. Earlier this morning, sister Karen showed me a picture of herself with Luis Trajillo, a man in prison who was baptized several years ago as a result of our Bible correspondence course program. Karen and her husband visited Luis through the years, and he came to understand the gospel and was baptized for the forgiveness of his sins. Karen just went to see Luis a few days ago. If you'd like to help with that program, either let me know or talk to Patsy.

Conclusion:

So, this morning we've started looking at these last-minute closing applications in the book of Hebrews, and we've been reminded to love each other, to show hospitality to strangers, and to remember those in prison as well as those who are being mistreated in this world. And in each case, we've been reminded to actually do something.

Let's go to God in prayer and then Caleb will lead us in a song as we think about what we've learned this morning:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are a God who has always taken the first step to reach out to strangers, and you have demonstrated this most amazingly through the cross, by sending your only Son to save us. This morning, we ask for your help as we look for ways to open our homes and our lives to the world around us. We pray for the children at Shults-Lewis, we pray for the children at Kennedy, and we pray for those in prison. Bless us, Father, as we become more and more like your Son.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus, our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com