**Homily for November 17 2024 Hebrews 10:11-25 “Provoked to Piety!”**

*Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,**“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:**I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,”**he also adds,**“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”**Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.**Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 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, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

At Annual Conference very year, legislation is presented in the format known as a *resolution*. The argument for doing this or that is laid out first, in a series of statements, each of which is preceded by the word *‘whereas’*… When all the argument has been put forth, on paper, anyway, the conclusion is laid out, and *it* begins with the phrase, *“Therefore, be it resolved that…”,* and if there is a really meaty decision on the table, there can even be additional clauses, be it further resolved, dot, dot, dot, and so forth.

I tell you this because today’s scripture carries this same imprint very strongly. Arguments – and these from the letter to the Hebrews sure have caused a lot of arguing over the years – are presented, and then the conclusion the author wants us to embrace is presented as well. The voting, in these kind of biblical resolutions, is not done by show of hands or ballot, but by acceptance of the conclusion at a level that it becomes a vibrant part of our lives.

So I’m going to present the scripture one more time, but *this time* as if it had been written as a resolution to Annual Conference. Here’s what it would sound like from the conference floor, as read aloud by the conference secretary:

WHEREAS, Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins, and

WHEREAS Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, and

WHEREAS by this single offering he has perfected for all time those who are

sanctified, and

WHEREAS the Holy Spirit also testifies to us. After saying, "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more, and

WHEREAS if there is forgiveness of *these*, there is no longer any *need* for a sin offering:

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and

**THEREFORE BE IF FURTHER RESOLVED** that since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith;

**THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that we should hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God is forever faithful. And,

**LET IT BE FINALLY RESOLVED** that we consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as we see the Day approaching.

I hope that was clearer than the first time we heard it; because each of these points, both of argument and of conclusion, have historically been the source of much debate and commentary. And I am thrilled to skip the debating, and provide you with some commentary that will enrich our lives.

The opening argument is about the ineffectiveness of Hebrew priests. We need to know, as the Jewish/ Christian converts in Rome surely did, that this writing was not intended for any actual Jewish folks at all, but was written to encourage the persecuted followers of Jesus who would one day be called Christians. It opens with a lambaste, a broad swipe at those worthless, repetitive sin offerings…that was the way, y’know, there was no remission of sin without the shedding of blood, that was the belief that went *way* back. So, if you had sinned, you brought or purchased an animal whose value or size would adequately “pay for” the sin, and as the priest slit this poor creature’s throat, and the blood ran down the altar, your sin died with the sacrifice. There were a bunch of different sorts of sacrificial offerings, but here the writer is focused on the sin offering, the thing that brings atonement into the realm of possibility.

The second whereas really starts the pitch, for by contrast to those senseless and worthless sacrifices of the priests, we are told that Jesus made, by his death, a one-time, universal sin offering for every human being ever. That is a lot to believe in those few little words, but they are buttressed with oodles of scripture quotes, so it must be true, right? And here, right here, is chiseled in granite this ancient doctrine of *substitutionary atonement;* what used to be done ineffectively, over and over, with animal after animal, has now been completed, once, for all, by the substitution of a perfect, sinless lamb without spot or blemish, Jesus. And then, all of the whereas’s effectively conclude rather breezily by proving, from various scattered scriptural texts, that if forgiveness has been offered, once for all, then this old habit of sin sacrifice is no longer needful as part of the religious life.

Which brings us to the therefore let it be resolved parts, the parts where we are called to confidence and assurance and encouragement. Those qualities were much needed in the persecuting times of Caligula and Nero, and are much needed in our world right now! But before we continue, I need to say a few words to more modern listeners, many of whom are not now and never have been that wild about the blood of Jesus and its many dramatic uses. I need to reassure you that the forgiveness of God is unquestionably real, no matter how we describe it. These days, many of us no longer hold dear to the older image of God as a bloodthirsty desert chieftain who cannot let go a grudge unless someone or something pays the ultimate price. This notion that God is somehow gleefully satisfied by his son’s brutal murder has always been suspect, if not abhorrent to many modern folk. And so I want to reassure, that one can live the teaching and love the Lord without being required to believe that blood sacrifice paved the way for each of us. The sacrifice did not end in ultimate death, did it? And the new life, the resurrected life, *that* is what calls to those of us on the less bloody side of the aisle. It is another way of relating to Jesus than the one suggested by today’s writer, because however bold and exclamatory his rhetoric, his arguments are not for everyone. His way of understanding forgiveness is, in fact, not the only way.

There are four distinct conclusions, and the first two are more of the blood-drenched imagery and seem pretty self-explanatory. We are encouraged to *confidence*, because Jesus has found a way for us to be together eternally. The second resolution instructs us to approach with *assurance*, not cowardice. For those of us on the ‘less blood, please’ side of things, though, the value of this text is rooted in the final two THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED bits. The first of these, the ‘penultimate resolution’, is THEREFORE, BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that we should hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. This is a wonderful direction to take if you want to step around the blood and just focus on God – we can rely, not on the sacrifice of Jesus, but on God’s utter faithfulness. And we need not waver in our hope, or in the confessing of it, for *God is faithful*, and there is no truth more overtly observed in the natural world than the faithfulness of God. Whether it is saplings sprouting out of stumps, or spawns of fish and birds that number in the millions, or the promised rains, or even Jurassic Park opining that Life always finds a way, it sure does seem self-evident that God is not a quitter! The Camp Fire zone looks less horrible with each passing season, and wait till spring, and next spring…God is not a quitter, God is faithful. God keeps faith with creation, no matter how gunky and smoky and smarmy we make it; pureness and freshness and renewal are the signature of God upon the land and upon our internal real estate as well. If we want something to cling to that is less disgusting than the broken, bruised body of our Lord, clinging to God’s faithfulness is a fine option.

We are in the home stretch now, friends, the final LET IT BE FINALLY RESOLVED, and it says this: that we consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as we see the Day approaching. Acres of vellum and gallons of ink, all to conclude that the point of all of this is that we learn to provoke one another to goodness, and that the core of our religious life together is encouraging one another. There are two words used here that can change your perspective on life and love and all things if you let them. The first is provoke…we are commanded to be provocative Christians, believers who provoke others to goodness. And the Latin here could not be more clear – *pro* refers to being in favor of a thing, and *voke i*s from the great verb *vocare*, to call. The same root gives us vocation, one’s calling, one’s divine destiny. So if we are pro-vocative, we are in favor of folks finding and living their divine destiny. And we goad and tease and challenge and spur each other on to accept no substitute, but to become what God has richly designed each of us to become. The goal of the faith – could this really be it? - is to provoke one another, in the good way, the inspiring, uplifting, gentle kick-in-the-pants way. We live into our fullest goodness when others call it forth from us, when others demand it of us, when those we love have grown accustomed to our goodness. Provoke is a good word!

The other grand word here is *encourage*; literally, to give heart to. *Encoraggio,* in Italiano. When we encourage each other, we give life, pumping, living, flowing life, we give heart, we add our heart to the often-downtrodden hearts of others. To have a heart, to be a heart for those who feel weak and overwhelmed, that is the universal *vocare* of the Christian. And we can do this, according to today’s teacher and the teaching of the church throughout all time, because we have one who did it for us, who showed us how it works, who lives and moves and sustains and guides. And it matters not at all, I think, whether you waded through the blood or came in on the sunbeam of hope, Jesus’ love is nevertheless yours for the claiming. I close then, amidst all of this radiant verbiage, with a few lines from a great, great poem by James Russell Lowell:

*Earth gets its price for what Earth gives us; the beggar is taxed for a corner to die in, the priest hath his fee, who comes and shrives us, we bargain for the graves we lie in. At the Devil’s booth are all things sold; each ounce of dross costs its ounce of gold; for a cap and bells our lives we pay, and bubbles we buy with a whole soul's tasking: yet 'Tis heaven alone that is given away: 'Tis only God may be had for the asking.*

**THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED** that we continue to be, or seek to become, provocative, confident, assured, encouraging Christians. Amen!