

“Dwellings: Confidence” Hebrews 10.11-25

Two questions we are exploring this month in our sermon series are “Where does God dwell?” and “Where do *we* dwell?” Today’s focus is on “confidence,” and the scripture reference is Hebrews 10.19. The Common English Bible translates it this way: “Brothers and sisters, we have confidence that we can enter the holy of holies by means of Jesus’ blood.” Eugene Peterson paraphrases it like this: “So friends, we can now—without hesitation—walk right up to God, into ‘the Holy Place.’ Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God.”

The verses from this particular passage that always stand out for me, however, are verses 24 and 25: “And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.”

Now, you may be wondering how the theme of confidence and the verses about continuing to meet together, encouraging each other, and making our purpose one of “sparking love and good deeds” fit together. You should know by now that my brain doesn’t always work in the same way as most folks’, and I often see or interpret things in a way uniquely mine. And *I* see meeting together to encourage one another and confidence as two facets of Christian discipleship, which is what we are all about!

The confidence “thing” brings up a couple of points. First, of course, is the fact that we have confidence—we *do*—in what Christ has done. Because Jesus is our high priest, “by the one sacrifice of his perfect and holy life, [he] takes away the sins of the world.”¹

Another “confidence” or assurance that comes from our text today is that we can approach Jesus directly—even though we do ask others to pray for us and with us, it isn’t because we have to go through anyone else to talk to Jesus. We are free to do that on our own. Jesus promised to be with us always—another truth we can claim and cling to in confidence.

In my reading this week, my attention was drawn to an issue that made my heart hurt, and out of that sadness I felt compelled to pursue this concern in today’s message. Before I flesh it out, please hear me: this is no way meant to make anyone feel guilty or to point fingers at any person or any specific congregation. But I do think it is something we need to be aware of, reflect on, and devise some sort of action plan to address it.

About ten years ago, research by the Barna Institute revealed that 16-29 year old non-believers overwhelmingly perceived “that Christians are judgmental and hypocritical, not practicing the love and grace that Jesus modeled.”² We can hope that in the 10 years since that study came out, things have changed for the better, but I’m pretty sure we still have work to do.

¹ (Hoezee 2017)

² (Lear 2018)

Rev. Dr. Heather Heinzman Lear, writer of the sermon helps I'm using, recently did her own research into how well our churches are doing at fulfilling our stated mission of "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." She found "One major barrier in most of the congregations was the inability to freely share struggles and be vulnerable to share stories of brokenness. [She explains] Through private, online surveys, even those who had been quite active in church for years, revealed their hesitancy to share aspects of their past or current temptations. [Rev. Dr. Lear then asks] If shame and fear of judgment is real among leaders in our church, how can we expect those outside our congregations to be willing to bring all of themselves to our faith communities?"³

At first I was shocked by Lear's research findings, and couldn't believe church would be a place where anyone would not feel free to share life experiences. On second thought, though, I understood. As a private person with introvert tendencies, I sometimes do not say what is on my mind, for fear of looking foolish or needy. I remembered a conversation several years ago after a worship service at Annual Conference, when my best friend, Becky, remarked that it was such a joy to be able to show her emotions freely, without being afraid someone would think she was weird or a religious fanatic, or jump to the conclusion that she was going through some major life crisis. I agreed that Lakeside worship was a sacred, safe space.

Those memories forced me to think about our worship, our small groups, and our way of being with one another. Are *we* providing a sacred and safe space, whenever we gather? Again, this is not to make any of us feel guilty, but a reason to reflect on how we are doing at loving one another like Jesus loves us. The thing is that we don't want to shut anyone out, or to have anyone stay away because they think they might be judged or misunderstood.

Rev. Dr. Lear points out that "shame is an epidemic in our culture that corrodes that part of us that believes we can change. Shame undermines our intrinsic worth and value by telling us that those things we regret and eat us up define us. It wasn't the actions that were bad. We are bad. And so we do everything we can to hide who we think we are."⁴

Those are harsh and scary words, and they brought to my mind the times I've felt worthless, usually because of one small mistake or a sentence spoken in anger that I can't forgive myself for, or for something I didn't do, and now feel I should have. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who beats myself up for things that happened years ago, which have probably been long forgotten by anyone else involved. But it's human nature to cling to our feelings of shame and guilt, and to talk ourselves into believing that we are worthless and decide to play it safe and not reach out again. In addition, we often do not feel free to be honest with one another about these feelings of guilt and worthlessness.

Now—the thing to remember and remember and remember...our scripture for today! We have confidence because we know that Jesus came to free us from the burden of guilt and shame. We need to hold one another accountable, sure, but we do it with grace and love. "Regularly, we all still sin and fall short of who God desires us to be, but through vulnerability and

³ (Lear 2018)

⁴ (Lear 2018)

accountability, we can hold the things we've done up to who we want to be without letting those things define or paralyze us."⁵

We do know the end of this story, and it concludes in the kingdom of God. We can be confident that this story has a happy ending. But. The thing is, the story hasn't ended yet, and since we're all a part of the story, we, who are on this journey together, have work to do. Each of us has a purpose and a function in the body of Christ, for which each of us is uniquely qualified.

You might remember that last week's sermon title and theme was "Victory," and we sang "Victory in Jesus." This week we can say, with confidence, that victory is ours. As another pastor points out, the writer of Hebrews is clear: "Because of all that has already been accomplished by Christ, we are to have hope in various forms. A God-given hope that fills us with sustaining faith. A God-given hope that we needn't stand condemned any longer. A God-given hope that we might be useful to one another in the meantime. This is not a hope that wanes as the game moves on; rather this is hope that eagerly awaits Christ who has set the path for victory. We live in God-given hope until Christ comes again in victory, acknowledged by all as champion and king."⁶

Let us claim that victory in Jesus, and live joyfully, without shame or guilt or fear. And let us pray for the courage to lead others into this joyful, fear-less life in Christ. Amen.

Works Cited

Hoezee, Scott, ed. *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2018*. Nashville, TB: Abingdon Press, 2017.

Lear, Heather Heinzman. "Season after Pentecost 2018." *Discipleship Ministries*. 11 4, 2018. https://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worsip/Nove18_Dwellings-Worship-Series.pdf (accessed 10 15, 2018).

⁵ (Lear 2018)

⁶ (Hoezee 2017)