

'Forsake Not the Assembly'—Beyond the Scold

Sunday, November 14, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Hebrews 10:19-25

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.

Our epistle lesson tells us to cling tightly to what we believe as we are urged to *hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful*. It should also be added that the faith which we are to embrace is a rather audacious one! *My friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary—the very presence of the Almighty!—by the blood of Jesus.... let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith*. Wow! That's a lot of faith! And how are we doing at holding true to this bold belief? I will freely confess that my faith often becomes weak and begins to lack the boldness and assurance that we are called to have. How are we to keep faith strong? The answer is given just verses later in plain language and we dare not miss it. We are told: *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*.

We are urged to provoke and to encourage one another, and perhaps you noticed a familiar phrase in those verses: *not neglecting to meet together*. You may be more familiar with the King James translation's rendering, *forsake not the assembly*. These words became an often-used scold over the centuries, and while we should indeed *forsake not the assembly*, such a commonly used scold easily loses its power and begins to sound like so much nagging. It sounds like words used to induce guilt in those who don't make it to worship on Sunday morning. The guilt may be justified, but there is much more to this exhortation than trying to make people feel bad, and it

is crucial that we study it carefully. We need to be with the other believers on a regular basis so that we can keep our faith strong and accomplish the three listed tasks with which we are presented.

First, we are told to provoke love. *Let us consider how to provoke one another to love.* God wants us to stir up love and affection among the body of believers, and many are very good at this. I know Christians who seem to glow in the dark! Their very presence radiates a certain brightness and joy which is from God, and what a joy it is to be around these people! Most of us do not glow quite so brightly, but all can show kindness and caring in a way which lifts others. You may want to pause and consider those who have brightened your spirit already on this Lord's Day morning. I suppose that there are also those who provoke love in us by rubbing us the wrong way and causing us some irritation. Those challenges to our spirits can move us to strengthen our hearts by forcing us to do some difficult love. The difficult people in my life have been teaching me love for many years, and I suppose I should be at least a little grateful for their work. It is interesting how the Bible uses the word *provoke*, as the term has implications of being irritating and intrusive, but this is the way that this challenge to be loving is presented. Let us be up-close and personal in how we love one another.

We are also to be provoking each other to good deeds. Isn't it odd that we often apologize for asking for donations of money, time or leadership from the congregation? Yes, we should not repeat certain requests so often that they become so much irritating noise, but neither should we be shy about letting needs and possible paths of service be known. Part of our obedience to this exhortation would be to open our eyes to look around us and let our hearts be provoked by what we see. I see many impressive examples of Christian service among us and I need to be provoked by what I see! Were you provoked by Valarie Weaver's mission trip to Ghana last summer? I was. Such acts of faithful service should cause all to keep asking ourselves, "What should I be doing to make a difference for Christ?" Paul was not above stirring up some godly jealousy and competition between congregations as he collected the special offering for the poor in Jerusalem, and in his Corinthian letter we find him boasting of the poor Macedonians' generosity, in hopes to provoke the Corinthians to greater giving. (2 Corinthians 8:2) It is commonly remarked of the good things which we do at Church like prayer, Bible study, worship and generosity—"I can do that on my own without going to Church." While all these things can be done in the privacy of our own homes, the truth is that we *don't* do such things, at least with any regularity and enthusiasm, in our own homes. We need to gather and be provoked.

The third, and by no means least work that we should be accomplishing as we gather is the work of encouragement. This is such a crucial work, and we all know just how sweet it is to receive encouragement. This may sound like a light and unimportant part of the Christian's service, but encouragement is a crucial work. New Testament scholar William Barclay states it well with two examples. He writes: *One of the highest of human duties is that of encouragement. There is a regulation of the Royal Navy which says: "No officer shall speak discouragingly to another officer in the discharge of his duties."* He also points out a Bible verse which well describes the value and power of encouragement. In the Book of Job, one of Job's comforters spoke of this suffering saint's powerful blessings given: *Your words have kept men on their feet.* (Job 4:4, Moffatt Translation) Encouragement is often the difference between our standing or falling. Let us encourage one another. Our shut-ins always need and appreciate the encouragement of a call, card or visit. Perhaps the most important aspect of our ministry to our youth is in giving encouragement through that trying time of life. And let us be sure to go beyond the people that we know and like when we give encouragement. Remember that the stranger and loner are the ones without many friends and have an extra need to be blessed.

One can hardly say enough for encouragement, and I believe that a bold yet sadly overlooked illustration of this is found in our Lord's passion. Remember Gethsemane, the garden where Jesus went to pray just before his arrest? In his agony he asked the disciples to stay alert and pray with him. Instead, the disciples slept. Did it ever occur to us that Jesus genuinely longed for the encouragement and support of the twelve? We look at this event as merely an example of our Lord's unwavering faith and of the foolishness and weakness of the disciples, but this heartbreaking moment reminds us that all long for and need encouragement—even our Lord. One cannot say enough of the importance of the ministry of encouragement. Meeting together is crucially important as stirring each other to love and acts of kindness, and the ministry of encouragement requires that we be in each other's presence.

Actual physical gathering is important for the Church to really be the Church, yet nationally attendance continues to slip. The early Church and the Hebrew congregations being addressed in the Letter faced attendance challenges due to persecution. This is not an issue in our modern western world and while our challenges to Church attendance are very different, they are equally dangerous. Perhaps the greatest danger to the modern western Church is our comfort and affluence. We may be quick to label someone's non-attendance as laziness, but there is more to the problem than that. Unlike the first century, we now have well-furnished and heated homes in which we can so comfortably relax. There are so many amusements and pleasures which compete for our time and attention. We can spend all Sunday morning napping,

reading the newspaper and enjoying breakfast. Our wealth and technology have presented us with a world where we no longer feel the need for others as we once did. In a poor community of farmers people constantly relied upon each other for help in their work and daily living. Now we can more easily isolate from our neighbors.

I occasionally hear from people who either claim no faith, or may see themselves as believers but feel no need to be with God's people, speaking of "doing their Sunday thing." These folks make a deliberate effort to give some hours of their Sundays to pursue some meditative or quiet activity. This may be a bicycle ride or hike, or time in an inspirational book. These all sound like great and refreshing activities, but let us beware of claiming these as a replacement for the assembling of the saints.

There are many worldly pressures which keep us from the Lord's House, with the most commonly stated one being that we are simply "too busy." The "Rat Race" has its hold on us as we feel so compelled to keep up with the world's expectations. We even feel this pressure with our children as the draw to keep them appropriately involved is strong, even when they are very young. Consider something as innocent as youth soccer, which more and more takes place on Sunday mornings! We want to keep up appearances and the grooming of our houses and lawns competes with worship time. Sunday has also become a prime shopping day. The world is competing for our time and seems to be winning. I often wonder what a visitor from the past might think of our claim to be so busy. They too felt time pressures, but those pressures had to do with finding the time to keep up on the cultivation of sufficient food for survival! What might they think of us today?

One part of the Hebrews appeal which I must not fail to mention is the matter of *one another*, and we need to hear this appeal now more than ever. Do we really care about one another? That may sound like a harsh accusation, but consider our way of thinking about Church. When quizzed about our Church involvements, whether our responses be positive or negative, we speak exclusively in terms of personal experiences and desires. We may say, "I like/don't like the Church because of these things which do or don't inspire and bless me." But what about others? What of our brothers and sisters in faith? We must think more in terms of "the team needs me," for the team does need us.

Let us *forsake not the assembly*, for we must never underestimate the power of fellowship. The word fellowship sounds like such a light and insignificant thing, for how important or life changing can the mere act of associating with others be? But such thinking is misguided, for fellowship is powerful and important. I am repeatedly drawn to the witness of the 12-Step Movement in our day and groups like Alcoholic Anonymous, for these people have discovered the central importance of the

fellowship while we have let this truth fade from our attention. How are we to rescue addicts from the death spiral that is addiction? To this day the most effective and widely known treatment for this lethal disease is a spiritual fellowship! Gathering is important. People who are just beginning their walk of sobriety will commonly be in the habit of attending meetings seven times a week, or even more! Many who have been sober for years and seem secure in their recovery will still attend numerous meetings per week as they sense the need to keep their spirits strong. When they need power for living, they seek the assembly. We affluent Americans are taken aback by the duration of worship services in other cultures. A person once asked an African-American pastor from a rough neighborhood why their weekly worship ran on for several hours. The answer they were given was that the world in which so many of the worshippers lived was so difficult that they needed hours of worship and fellowship to counter those bad influences and to stay strong. Our thoughts center on keeping Church activities to their minimal required time limits, for we believe in efficiency. Perhaps we need to think again on this matter.

I would be remiss to not mention another reason that many in recovery attend several meetings in one week. Once a person is becoming more secure in their walk of recovery, they are often asked to sponsor a newcomer to the world of sobriety. This is the *one another* of fellowship which we so easily forget. It is great when we can come to the Lord's House and feel safe and secure in our walk with God and even receive a word of encouragement, but that must not be the end of our story. It is at times such as those that we need to look around to find those who may need a boost and blessing in their walk.

We need to discover the fellowship which is the Church, and with some embarrassment I must confess that I have been slow in this matter. As a young person my thoughts dwelt much on faith as an individual matter, and the need for each person to make sure their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is all well and good, but this is not the whole story of our faith. Jesus founded a Church and faith is to be lived out together. At first glance the Church may appear to be just a bunch of ordinary folks, and in a way, we are just that. In fact, we are so ordinary that we have all kinds of bad habits and irritating traits which we seem unable to overcome. But look again! As we gather in faith and seek the Lord, God's Spirit comes and moves in and among us, and begins to do marvelous works of life in ordinary people like you and me. It is no accident that the New Testament epistles present us with some very wonderful yet very troubled congregations. A reader of the Corinthians or Galatian Letters might wonder if God's plan of the Church failed, as there were plenty of reasons to consider this possibility, but the deeper truth is that God was and is doing mighty works among the frailest of people who gather in Christ's name.

And finally, a word about the digital. In our day of internet, e-mail and countless new means of communication we have found numerous ways of connecting with one another, so is physically gathering really necessary? Through the separation which COVID has caused we have leaned heavily for a time upon internet connections and mailings. These have been lifesavers for us, and it has been a thrill to occasionally receive a response from someone who noticed our internet postings and message from across the country. Internet can be an important emergency measure for the shut-in and a boost to our faith, but it is not a substitute for gathering. It is wonderful to stay abreast of prayer needs by our prayer chain, but there is even greater power when we gather and pray. I cannot explain it, but this is God's command and I have seen the power of fellowship.

I leave you with a word about the *assembly*. The word may seem a bit outdated as newer translations refer instead to *gathering*, but let us consider what it means to be assembled, and to be unassembled. There are many items in my life and household which have come to me unassembled: my gas grill, bicycles, furniture, and the list goes on. Unassembled these items are worthless, and one would never dream of paying good money for an item and never bothering to assemble it. Things simply must be assembled if they are to be of any real value and effectiveness, and the Church is no exception! *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. Let us forsake not the assembly!*