



How Do We Make a Difference?

Hebrews 13:1-16

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Over the past few weeks, I've been reflecting on conversations I had over the summer months with random golfers while traveling and recreating during my Renewal Leave.

First, I want to offer – if you're a golfer, or have ever wanted to be a golfer, I'd love to join you on the golf course or at a driving range. I welcome conversations about life, and church, and spirituality; only, I promise these conversations would be invited and welcome, and that they won't become sermon fodder for the future.

Second, I've asked some questions over the past few weeks that I hope have invited you to wonder and think. The questions have had me thinking for some time, and I pray you've received them in the invitation to ask more questions – to ask more hard questions – and to allow your cynical, curious, faithful, and unsure sides to be ok with the questions you may ask. I believe asking such questions is healthy and necessary.

Ultimately, if you can endure the uncertainty and skepticism of the Church, if you can show up even amidst the problems the Church has created, it indicates you're committed to something greater than a building, a denomination, or even an entity that has been corrupted by the brokenness of humanity. Truly, the work to which we are called is greater than the power of our collective faults. We are "the Church," called and empowered by God through the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ in the world.

So, moving past some of the critical questions of the Church, the final question for me is: how do we do this work – the work of the "Church" – in our joint witness as God's people? In a world where the Church has not always been at its best, and at times still seems far from being its best, how do we – at least here at Washington Street – offer a place that is more representative of God's love in the world? How can we, even if but one small blip in a global society, offer a correcting witness to what we believe is God's will for the world?

Instead of staying in a place that simply critiques the Church, how do we move to a place of constructive witness?

Our text in Hebrews today gives us some good guidance for this, with a couple key focus points.

Chapter 13 of Hebrews offers the concluding thoughts in this letter to the early church. It's like the benediction at the end of the service, only, instead of being a nice short benediction that simply says, "go in peace," it's clear the preacher has a few more thoughts to add to the sermon. (We all know there are times when the benediction becomes a second sermon!)

However, true to form for a benediction, the apostle isn't offering more theological depth in these concluding thoughts; instead, he's offering the concluding "now what" which flows out of the theological thoughts that have been offered previously.

In other words, chapter 13 might best be read with this introit, "Given all that I've said to you in the previous 12 chapters, here is what it means for you." ... These are concrete thoughts on how the witness of the Church might best represent the gospel message that was laid out in Hebrews 1 through 12.

Verse 1 offers this succinct summary, "Let mutual love continue."

The following verses expand upon this idea, but right here at the start of the benediction, the apostle lays out the bottom line. The witness of the Church always comes back to *mutual love*. Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson reminds us that this kind of love is not about some emotional sentiment, it "involves a complex set of dispositions and practices."ⁱ This is not some ethereal and intangible love that hovers above us as if an unattainable and eschatological – that is, future – reality. This is community-based love;ⁱⁱ actionable love; unifying love; love that shares power.ⁱⁱⁱ

As the apostle continues to write, he goes on to name concrete witnesses of what this mutual love looks like in practice.

Verse 2 offers, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." I like how the Rev. Dr. Thomas Long addresses this verse, as he writes, "The book in the New Testament with arguably the most elaborate Christological doctrine brings it immediately home to the dinner table."^{iv} For all the ways we might think of Christ as the incarnate God, for all the ways we might posture theology and religion, the first specific practice the apostle names as a witness to mutual love is setting an extra seat at the dining table for random passersby.

Such a practice seems so easy, and yet it is found to be one of the hardest and most rejected practices in social life today. The most basic of practices to witness to God's love in Christ is to accept one another, regardless of how different we might be. *Let mutual love continue.*

Verse 3 invites us to "remember those who are in prison, as if we are in prison with them." In this vision of mutual love, we must acknowledge that the apostle is not asking for "thoughts and prayers." This is not a sympathetic love; it is empathy the apostle deems necessary. To really share in this mutual love with one another, we must feel each other's pain. Again, Scholar Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "Mutual love means sharing in the unfortunate circumstances experienced by the brethren, rather than removing oneself in disdain or fear."^v

I have all kinds of thoughts around the application of this invitation toward empathetic love. How does such an invitation offer review of social phenomena such as white flight, gated communities, private schools, regentrification, and redlining – all practices led by and heavily influenced by the Church.

These become really pressing questions when we look closer at the original Greek text. The invitation of the apostle here in verse 3 to be tortured or to suffer with those being tortured comes from the Greek word *kakoucheo* (ka-kou-chay-o), which “echoes the story of Moses, who chose to suffer hardship with the people of God rather than enjoy the temporary advantage given by ... associating with the privileges of the oppressors.”^{vi} *Let mutual love continue.*

Verses 4 through 6 seem a bit misplaced when read out of context. The invitation here is to maintain fidelity in marriage, and to reject a love of money. One may try to strip them from this text as if they are a critique of adultery and wealth in and of themselves. Yet, as the Rev. Dr. Christopher Holmes states, “in Hebrew, mutual love is a shorthand for practices and dispositions that preserve and strengthen the community.”^{vii} The emphasis then, in a text focused on mutual love, is to see how these practices, such a adultery and the love of money, are antithetical to the health of the community.

Adultery neglects social trust and in many cases, personal commitments. Greed leads to corrupt business practices that benefit the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Both abuses place one’s personal satisfaction and power over the greater needs and health of the community. But mutual love is never about any one’s personal gain – it’s always about communal health and a shared commitment to the *corporate* well-being.

The responsive invitation, the alternative to greed and adultery, which is offered by the apostle, is contentment. “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for I will never leave you or forsake you.” The idea of contentment stems from the apostle’s theological framing of Christ in earlier chapters, defining that, we have all we need in the presence of God’s love.

When thinking of contentment, I’m always struck by the question, *how much do we need to be content?* Have you thought about this question? Has your financial planner ever given you a target number to aim for? ... It seems like some are convinced that a guaranteed pay check is more than enough to be content; others that a six-figure salary will meet the mark; still others that a cool million in the bank will make it all *ok*; and others that a few million will suffice; and yet, there are still others seeking to add 0 upon 0 upon 0 to their *Forbes*-top 50 bottom line.

It seems the apostle, in the framework of mutual love, is more interested in how we **view** what we have rather than looking at **how much** we have. Are we utilizing what we have to aid in the health of the community, or to set ourselves apart from the community? Are we seeking to benefit ourselves as individuals within the whole, or are we looking to support the whole? *Let mutual love continue.*

Verses 7-14 are often overlooked in this text. In fact, in the Revised Common Lectionary, it skips verses 9-14 altogether. But these verses are important for setting up the final exhortation offered by the apostle in verses 15-16.

The instruction in these intermediary verses offer a very real concern that there might be other teachings that influence our way of living as the Church ... and that we should give them **no** credence.

Verse 9 offers, “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food.” In other words, there are ancient rules that God’s people have followed that are not doing the church any good today – focus on God’s love in Christ, which is *grace*.

Verse 12 then offers, “Jesus suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us go to him there ... for we have no lasting city, but are looking for the city that is to come.” The apostle is reiterating Jesus’ own teaching in John 4 about how true worship will not be focused in Jerusalem or in any other singular place, but instead, that our work as the Church will be focused on the underlying characteristics of our worship – what Jesus called “truth and spirit.”

Which leads us into the concluding two verses, 15 and 16. You’ll notice at the start of verse 15, we find the word *then*. This word indicates that what is to come is built upon what was just stated. We read: “Through [Christ], then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess [God’s] name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Still in the framework of offering mutual love, the apostle gives these final exhortations: share in constant praise of God, do good, and share your possessions. It’s almost as if these final three items summarize the call to mutual love, which the apostle has been laying out. Mutual love does not come out of thin air – it is a response to our acknowledgement and praise of God’s love as witnessed in Jesus Christ. If we are centered and focused on God’s witness in Christ, then our witness will be one of mutual love, for that is the witness of God in Christ.

To do good can take on many forms. It can be caring for those in prison and sharing hospitality with strangers, it can be respecting the personhood of others and upholding the well-being of the community, and it most certainly reflects a fellowship that offers grace to one another.

And then there is the sharing of possessions – a practical and humble acknowledgement of the unequal and biased socio-economic practices that prevent the financial well-being of many in the community. We, the Church, are not governed by the political and cultural practices that – at least in our nation – have been and are still utilized to regulate some as unwelcome, unwanted, and unworthy. Our call is to forgive debts, to encourage stability, to end hunger, and to ensure housing so that none are relegated as unwelcome, unwanted, and unworthy. *Let mutual love continue.*

The Rev. Dr. Christopher Holmes summarizes the apostle’s benediction, writing, “The exhortations suggest that a congregation’s vitality should not be measured in the plethora of its programming or the flashiness of its preacher or worship band. A congregation’s vitality depends on the demonstration of deep love, radical hospitality, solidarity with those on the margins of society, honoring (but not idolizing) marriage, sharing possessions, practicing contentment, and emulating the exemplary behavior of those who have gone before them.”^{viii}

A few weeks ago, I asked the question, *What really matters?* What’s most important in our witness as *The Church*? The apostle here reiterates what Isaiah had claimed nearly a millennia before – what

matters is whether we are aligning ourselves with the witness of God in the world. This is our call. This is to be our witness. This is how we make a difference. This is how we change the perspective that many hold regarding the Church. This is how exemplify God's will, made known through Jesus Christ. *We let mutual love continue.* So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ Luke Timothy Johnson. *Hebrews, A Commentary (New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ David R. Adams. *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Timothy L. Adkins-Jones. "Commentary on Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16." *Workingpreacher.org*. Retrieved August 24, 2022.

^{iv} Thomas G. Long. *Hebrews: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

^v Johnson.

^{vi} Johnson.

^{vii} Christopher T. Holmes. "Commentary on Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16." *Workingpreacher.org*. Retrieved August 24, 2022.

^{viii} Holmes.