

Provoking One Another

Preached FCCW November 18, 2018

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

When you open up the Bible, what do you expect to find?

Stories that teach us about what God is like?

Moral lessons to guide us?

Personal comfort for difficult times?

Inspiration?

All of that is there in the Bible.

But, when you open your Bible to the passage we just read from the Epistle to the Hebrews, what you read *there* is something you might not expect to find.

Which would be these words: “Let us consider how to provoke one another.”

Look up the word provoke in the dictionary and the primary definition you will be given is: to anger, enrage, exasperate, or vex.

When you stop to consider that definition, and that this invitation to provoking one another was addressed to church members, it certainly does not sound like constructive advice.

Now, admittedly, it is not unheard of for there to sometimes be anger – even rage – among church members.

Occasionally, church can be exasperating and quite vexing.

What you don’t expect to find is the Bible encouraging those behaviors in the life of the church.

Then you read the secondary definitions of provoke and you get why provoking one another is an *essential ingredient* for healthy churches.

Because, provoke can also mean other things; such as to stir up, arouse, or call forth feelings, desires, or activity. Or it can mean, to incite or stimulate someone to action. Cast in the light of those meanings, provoking one another makes for a perfectly good bit of advice for churches to follow.

The complete sentence from Hebrews where provoke appears reads like this: “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*.”

Like just about every other book of the New Testament, Hebrews was written to address particular challenges that were facing the Church. Two church-crippling challenges can be identified in this verse.

One is a decline in the church's energy for faithful action and witness. The other is a dwindling appreciation for the importance of worshipping and serving together as a faith community.

If this has a ring of familiarity to it, that's because they are two of the biggest problems faced by churches today. The details vary from age to age, but the song remains the same.

And, thankfully, so does the solution.

Which makes Hebrews no less important of a guide to churches today, as it was when it was first written.

To appreciate the wisdom found in the Book of Hebrews, it helps to begin with an awareness that the book was, as the name suggests, written to Jewish Christians. That is to say, its message was intended for Jews who had accepted that Jesus was their Messiah.

That's why there is so much written in Hebrews about the ancient Jewish religious practices where priests would offer a yearly animal sacrifice to take away the people's sins. Those familiar religious practices were helpful for explaining to Christians from a Jewish background how Jesus' sacrifice of himself brought forgiveness of sin once and for all.

But, like many Christians at that time, these Jewish Christians suffered persecution under the Roman Empire. You couldn't blame many of them for wanting to stop meeting together for worship or doing works of charity in public if those things attracted the hostile attention of their Roman neighbors. Why not just go back to worshipping God the way they, and their Jewish ancestors, had done in the past and avoid all the problems that came with being out of synch with those around them.

The Book of Hebrews repeatedly reminds readers of that for which we have most to be thankful; which is the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made for us, so that we could be assured of God's forgiveness and love. And encourages us to provoke and encourage one another when our commitment to God and each other wavers. This is what Jesus, in our Gospel reading, referred to as "striving first for God's Kingdom and God's righteousness," even when to do so can be anxiety producing. Yet, continuing to strive, through trust in God who demonstrates in so many ways, his care for us.

Hebrews was written to hold churches of that time together that were being eroded by threats presented to them by the culture around them. It still speaks to Christians today, who - though not facing physical persecution - are pulled in different directions and who are confronted by difficult choices about their level of commitment to the Church.

The pressure to conform to the norms of the times can make it hard to give fully of ourselves to the ministry of the church. As it did then, Hebrews still provokes us to find the center of gravity that holds us together in our thanksgiving for the life Jesus gave for us and the life he calls us to share.

Hebrews inspires us to be a Church that finds its strength and cohesiveness and effectiveness in provoking one another - by arousing a desire to express the love of God to others; by inciting one another to deeds of mercy and justice; and by encouraging one another when our resolve wavers and our energy is depleted.

I believe that this church *has been* that kind of church. That this church *is* that kind of church. And that we can *continue to be* that kind of church.

Ultimately, the message of Hebrews is that the challenges which might *weaken* the Church, can actually serve to provoke the Church to *greater* solidarity, a *more potent* witness, and *more dedicated* service.

Our meeting after worship this morning will be a time to gain some clarity about challenges we face as Christ's Church, here and now. As we prayerfully process and respond to this information, let us remember this message from Hebrews.

In all things, may our response be to encourage one another and provoke one another to heights of love and good deeds that not only rise to the level of the challenges that lay before us, but ultimately, exceeds them.

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