

Persistent Love

You may recall that I announced an upcoming Advent series of sermons from Hebrews several weeks ago with a fair amount of excitement. After preaching the three-year lectionary cycle four times through here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, I was looking forward to a brand new set of Scriptures to wrestle with, grateful to Timothy Matthew Slemmons for proposing “Year D: A Quadrennial Supplement to the Revised Common Lectionary.” I sort of blithely assumed that, good liturgical as he must be, he would follow the traditional Advent themes in his selections, looking for four passages each week that connected consecutively with hope, peace, joy, and love. When each week in Advent became more difficult than the last in this regard, I went back and read more carefully his rationale for the selections in this season. Not a mention was there of the four Advent virtues. Nevertheless, I have persisted and I hope that you will see by the end of our time together this morning, as I did, that this rather unlikely passage really is about love, love that persists even more fervently than I have in my bullheadedness about squeezing these first 6 chapters of Hebrews into my preconceived mold.

You see, when I consider what I have learned about the Epistle to the Hebrews, to whom it was likely written and why and who may have been the writer, and when I add that to what I know from my own life about those who have shown me persistent love, especially the love of God for me and all of us revealed through Christ Jesus, then that sturdy Advent theme of love comes shining through the words of rebuke, warning, exhortation, and promise. If I can do my job well this morning in sharing with you the love I feel in this passage, it will give us a solid platform from which to proclaim our awe and gratitude this evening as we celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Let’s begin by recalling the likely audience for this letter. As I said at the beginning of our review of Hebrews, consensus among scholars is that Hebrews was written for a congregation of Jewish Christians in the mid-to-late-first century, probably in Rome. You may remember that many Jews were expelled from Rome under Claudius Caesar in A.D. 49 only to return after his edict was lifted. Upon their return, however, they found that in their absence the Jesus Movement which they had founded in that city had been transformed into a primarily Gentile group, as Paul seems to describe in his Epistle to the Romans. When the persecution of all Christians came under Nero in A.D. 64 – 68, these Jewish Christians were less confident in their place in the Church and in the world, more susceptible to despair, more likely to shrink from their relatively newfound convictions.

The late William Lane, who wrote the excellent two-volume commentary on Hebrews for the Word Biblical Commentary series, sees the evidence of the trouble in the community in the opening verses of our passage: “About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God.” Lane points out that the author of Hebrews clearly felt the need to shake up his or her audience because they had become “unreceptive” to the teachings of the Gospel, which they should have known well. As a result, he says, they have “withdrawn” – rather than being bold in proclaiming and teaching the Good News, they are doing their best to become inconspicuous in that time when to be “outed” as a Christian could mean death by a number of horrible ways. They had forgotten the teaching of Jesus which would have already been circulating in some form: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”

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From rebuking for their backsliding ways, the author, whom I still think to be Priscilla, turns to warning them about the dangers of backsliding. She paints a pretty gloomy picture in 6:4-8 of the potential danger to those who fall away from their loving response to God's love. But her tone changes in verse 9: "Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation." I believe, as does William Lane, that the key to understanding the first half of this passage lies in this pivot point. Lane writes of the rebuke and warning in the first half of the passage, "It is irony, calculated to shame them and to recall them to the stance of conviction and boldness consonant with their experience and hope... The immediate intention is to shame them into recognizing that they are mature and must assume the responsibilities that accrue to a spiritually mature group of Christians in a hostile society... What the writer actually believes (her) intended readers to be is expressed by the image of the adult, and this is confirmed by the solid food they have received, and continue to receive in the homily... The intention of the stern warning in 6:4-6, consequently, is positive. There the writer recalls for (her) audience what they possess and what they have experienced as the result of God's redemptive activity through Christ... They must not succumb to the temptation to become weary of being God's people in a world that rejects their witness and holds them in contempt."

Now, I understand this technique of gentle shaming and warning in order to recall someone to their potential down to the bottom of my feet. It's a technique that both of my parents and especially my mom used on me with great success. To this day, the memory of my mother saying, "Christopher, you know better..." has a remarkably salutary effect on me. Or, worse, "Christopher, I'm ashamed of you..." Or my dad saying, "Son, you better straighten up and fly right." If the author of Hebrews wasn't Priscilla, he or she was certainly a parent. Or maybe a grandparent. I rarely watch award shows any more but I still remember that great moment from the 2005 Oscars when Jamie Foxx won Best Actor for his portrayal of Ray Charles in the movie, "Ray." He thanked his grandmother for teaching him how to act: "She told me, "Stand up straight. Put your shoulders back. Act like you got some sense." We would go places and I would wild out, and she says, "Act like you've been somewhere."" I understand the loving desperation of a parent trying to reach a child whose behavior is leaving the tracks of acceptability.

So, if I hear the parental technique of correction in the first half of this passage, I also hear in its pivot point the unshakeable love which Priscilla bears for her spiritual children in Rome. "Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation." Although she was disappointed in them, she still had a word of Good News for them, a word of love. To take a phrase originally meant to be dismissive but which has become a proud rally cry, "nevertheless, she persisted."

Priscilla's love for her friends was persistent because it sprang from and was modeled on God's love for all of God's people. In your pew Bibles, the last section of chapter 6 is headed "The Certainty of God's Promise" and I think that is a fine reminder to us. The context is Genesis 22:1-18, the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. In the wake of this terrifying episode, God swears to Abraham the certainty of blessing in his future far beyond his lifetime. Priscilla's reminder to her contemporaries among the Children of Abraham is that God has continued to be faithful to that promise, not only in the salvation history of Israel but more particularly in the work of Jesus. Not only does the God of Abraham continue to bless the people of the covenant but now the blessing, like the work of Jesus in opening the Holy of Holies

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behind the torn curtain of the Temple, is extended to all of humanity. This is despite the many failings of the Israelites, the many failings of the other Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve. Humankind has taken the blessings of God's love since the dawn of time and brought forth thorns and thistles from the good earth. Nevertheless, God has persisted.

God has persisted in loving, says Priscilla to the Hebrews. Can you? Can you rise above your present danger and trouble and love God in return by loving your neighbor and showing him, showing her, the Good News of God's love revealed in the life and work of Jesus the Messiah? Clearly, she believes her beloved friends can do so – she is confident of them.

In like manner, my beloved friends, I am confident in your ability to rise above the present darkness of our times to continue to reach out to our communities with acts of love. I am confident that your voices will be heard above the stridency coming from the halls of power that say only the rich count for anything in this country and in this world. I am confident that you will continue to be voices of hope for those so badly in need of hope. I am confident that you will strive to be instruments of peace, sowing love where there is hatred, pardon where there is injury, faith where there is doubt, hope where there is despair, light where there is darkness, and joy where there is sadness. I am confident that, because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in your lives, you, too, can be persistent in love.

For the millennia of the persistence of God's love, for the coming again of our Lord, Christ Jesus, for the ongoing fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God!