

25th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Hebrews 10:11-25

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God', and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds,'

he also adds,

'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'

Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

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.

You likely entered this building from one of two entrances (unless you're the choir who has their own super special secret entrance). You likely either entered from one of these two doors next to the sanctuary, or you entered from the main rear entrance by the offices. If the latter was your preferred method of entrance, then you might notice that there is quite some mess outside. You probably noticed a massive amount of wooden planks, some roofing materials covered in a large tarp to protect it from the wet weather we've been having, and a ladder. If you are unawares, we are working on repairing our roof above our kitchen and bathrooms. You see, that's a flat roof and down south we typically don't think twice about having a flat roof; it's no big deal when you only get maybe an inch or two of snow a year. However, up here in the wild and barren northern tundra, a flat roof is a bad idea because the ice and snow build up and cause nasty leaks. Therefore, we're working on repairing that roof so that it has a slight incline to it to help the snow and ice not build up on it.

Now, we had hoped this work would have been done this past week but mother nature had other plans. Because of the rain we had, the work has been postponed to begin tomorrow when, hopefully, the weather will be more cooperative. Until then, we will have quite a mess lying outside our main entrance.

Many of you likely got an email a few days ago with the subject saying "Pardon Our Mess." In this email, we apologize for the mess and let you all know that the work will hopefully get done this week. The subtitle to this email went something like this: "We are all works in progress!"

We *are* all works in progress, aren't we? Sometimes we like to think that the work has come and gone, that the repairs have been done and the job completed but the truth is that the work is never really done; we are all works in progress!

One did not need to look far in the week's news to be reminded of this fact. The terrorist attacks on Friday in Paris were all too familiar for those of us living in the United States of America and in *many* other places in the world. In fact, although the attacks in Paris were horrible and should certainly be grieved, we must be careful not to do so to the extent that we forget that atrocities of this nature do happen and are happening in many other parts of the world including, but certainly not limited to, Lebanon, Kenya, Syria, Iraq, and many others.

What happened in Paris speaks to the fact that we have much work to do in this world. Anyone who questions the relevancy of the Church needs only glance at our scriptures to notice that we worship a savior who preached peace in the face of political and social violence. The Church definitely has a place in this conversation. The question is, are we speaking up? We are all works in progress, aren't we?

Another reason that I bring up this reality of our mess while renovating is that it is Celebration Sunday, when we celebrate the fruition of God's blessings in our lives with the conclusion of our Stewardship "season." Now, I bring up this motif of our lives being works in progress because we should all be careful not to celebrate this Sunday as the ending of something but, rather, the beginning of something else.

Since I know that Stewardship season is our favorite time of year, I know people will agree with me when I say that absolutely no one present feels relieved that stewardship season is over! All joking aside, I, myself, and more than a little guilty of treating this Sunday with a bit of relief. After all, much hard work goes into each stewardship season. In fact, I would like to take a moment to publicly thank the hard workers of the stewardship committee who have worked tirelessly the past few months to lead us all into a more generous culture of stewardship. I would also like to mention that 4 of the 5 members of the Stewardship Committee also serve as the Budget & Finance Committee! So when you see Clarissa Tybaert, Laura Nelsen, Heather Reylek, Chris Lewis, and Karen Tudor, give them a big thank you for the work they've done and the work they're calling us to do by the discernment of the Holy Spirit!

But the work they have done in no way signifies that the work is "done." If anything, this Sunday calls us to remember that the work is *not* finished; in fact, the work has just begun! The gifts that we celebrate this day, the gifts that come only from God's steadfast blessings in our lives, are given to equip us to do the ministry that God calls us to do.

Today's passage in the book of Hebrews tells us just that. Today's epistle lectionary passage essentially tells us two things: who it is that we serve and how it is that we serve.

To answer the first question (of *who* it is we serve), Hebrews uses the analogy of Christ as the great High Priest who supersedes all other regular priests. You see, back then, a priest served as an intermediary between God and the people, kind of like how Moses traveled up and down the mountain between the Israelites and God. The Temple was divided into two main areas, the larger area where the common people sat and then what was called the "Holy of Holies," which is where the ark of the covenant was kept and sacrifices were made. A curtain separated the people from the Holy of Holies and only the

priest could enter this special section in order to make daily sacrifices on behalf of the people to appease God.

However, in the book of Hebrews, the author establishes Christ as the true and great High Priest who now serves as the intermediary between God and God's people. Hebrews establishes some very important differences between Jesus as the Great High Priest and other human priests:

- First of all, unlike human priests, Jesus Christ is both fully human *and* fully God.
- Secondly, the sacrifice that Jesus makes is done once and for all. Unlike the normal priests, who have to make sacrifices day after day after day for the people, the sacrifice that Jesus makes is done once and it is good enough for everyone in all times past, present, and future.
- Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the sacrifice that Jesus made is not some animal but rather *himself*.

Today's passage from Hebrews reminds us that these gifts we dedicate today are not given to serve us, or to serve Shelter Island Presbyterian Church, or to serve simply to satisfy "the bottom line," but that these gifts are given to serve Jesus Christ because Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate priest for us.

- We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, who invites people to this table.
- We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, in whose name we are baptized.
- We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, in whose name we pray.
- We serve Jesus Christ because it is him, not us, that offered a single sacrifice for all sins.

Because Jesus Christ serves as our High Priest, because he made a single sacrifice for all sins, we have confidence to approach God not as pitiful creatures but as empowered disciples seeking to be commissioned to serve God's purpose in the world. To use the words of today's passage, "*let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.*"

The second part of the question (that is, *how* it is that we serve) is this: we are called to serve by provoking one another to acts of love. In Engaging the Text last week, we spoke about how this verbiage can seem rather weird. The verb "provoking" can have some negative connotations. If I "provoke" someone, it typically would be understood that I am doing so out of spite or maliciousness. However, in the context of today's passage, when we *provoke* one another in acts of love and good deeds, it is kind of like we are poking one another, challenging one another to hold ourselves accountable to go above and beyond to do these acts of love and good deeds and not just talk about them.

Here's a rhetorical question for us to ponder: what if, prior to every decision we make as the people who are Shelter Island Presbyterian Church, we paused to ask ourselves how this decision is or is not provoking acts of love and good deeds? Would that change any of our actions? Food for thought as we go about our week.

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, we are all works in progress. I hereby would like to withdraw an apology that was made on this church's behalf: we do *not* apologize for our mess! We will *not* apologize for being a work in progress. Rather, we embrace it and are thankful for it. We are thankful that we are always reformed and being reformed. We are thankful for the gifts dedicated today that allow us to be a

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work in progress and *to make progress* in growing together as disciples of the Risen Christ. I am thankful and I hope you are as well! Let us respond with thanksgiving and get to work provoking one another to do good deeds and acts of love. So be it!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!