The Third “Great End” of the Church: Worship
By Rev. Neal Neuenschwander
Hebrews 10:19-25
September 9, 2018

I. Introduction to the Scripture:
This morning’s Bible text was written to address a problem that was not unique to the first century: disenchanted. After their initial enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ, some 1st century believers had begun to fall away.

- Some of them may have missed all the elaborate rituals of other, more established faith traditions.
- Some may have been discouraged that Christ had NOT yet come again. They so wanted that to occur.
- Some may have simply returned to old habits, old practices, old ways of seeing the world.

In response to that problem, the writer of this book encouraged them to look more deeply into the life and work of Christ, from whom our faith sprang. He wanted them to see both the similarities and the differences between Christianity and ancient Judaism.

He also wanted them to see that no one else—in heaven or on earth—can compare to Jesus Christ. Christ did for us what no one else can do. That is why we worship. That is why we pray. That is why we gather once again.

In order to be effective, we must consider the work of Jesus—including the present work of Jesus—over and over again. Jesus became our high priest. Not only that, he also became our sacrifice for sin. Because of Jesus—and only because of him—we can approach God with confidence. Because of Jesus—and only because of him—we can be blessed in many and varied ways as we worship him.

That’s why this morning’s text is all about.

II. Scripture Reading & Commentary (Pastor’s Translation)

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,

- This is clearly a reference to Jesus’s death. It’s also, quite possibly, a reference to communion—the sacrament in which we re-enact that death—and the life it brings to us. Communion is one of the ways we are reminded of Christ’s work in the world. But the most important part of that sacrament is the “opening” --the access it provides to God himself through the body and blood of Jesus Christ, who became our sacrifice for sin.
and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a truthful heart in full assurance of faith,

- The important part of this verse is that Christ’s work is not finished. He’s still at it. On Calvary, he became the sacrifice for our sins. He died just once for all. But now he becomes our priest. He’s still serving. He’s still praying. He’s still working to draw us unto God.

with our hearts sprinkled clean from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

- This verse is probably a reference to baptism—both forms of baptism—one by sprinkling, the other by immersion—you can almost take your pick. Whatever form you pick, the purpose is the same: to cleanse the heart from a guilty conscience just as we cleanse our bodies from dirt.

Let us hold fast the consensus of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

- The key word here is hope: hold fast to the consensus of our hope.
- “Consensus’ (homologia in Greek) is more commonly translated “confession.” But it literally means “same word”—thus “agreement, consensus, covenant.” Christians differ in many ways. We always have. We always will. But we agree on 1 thing: Jesus is our hope. What he said, what he did, what he means for you and me—that is our central source of hope
- Another key word in this text is “hold fast” (katechomen in Greek). That is not easy. Sometimes, we tend to waver. Sometimes, we do grow week. But it is possible. Because of Jesus, it’s still possible. He’s still working. He’s still serving. He is still delivering the goods you really need. Because of him, we can hold fast to our (common) hope.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good works,

- That word “Provoke” (paroxusmos in Greek) is really interesting. This is the only positive usage of that word in the New Testament.
- In Acts 17:5 Paul’s spirit was provoked by the idols in Athens.
- In Acts 15:39, Paul and Barnabas split b/c Paul is provoked by the behavior of John Mark (Barny’s cousin)
- Here it’s positive. Because of the result. . .good works
- President Trump—for good or ill—is a master of provocation. He stirs folks up. He stirs up his base to think one way; his opponents to think another. He stirs up our allies to get defensive, he stirs up our enemies to scratch their heads. It’s too early to know how all
this will turn out. If Kim Jung Il does denuclearize, I’ll be the first to applaud.

- In the meantime, you and I need to make sure that we get provoked not to arguments but to action: to “love and good works” That’s why we’re here. That’s what it’s all about. I’ll say more about that one later.

not forsaking our common gatherings, as is the habit of some,
but encouraging one another--all the more as you see the day drawing near.

- This verse is based upon a clear contrast between those who forsake the fellowship and those who use it to encourage one another. I’ll say more about that one, too.

In the meantime, what do we do this passage?

III. Application:

How do we apply this in our world today? I think we focus on the verbs: 4 specific tasks that can make our (public) worship really vital in the world today.

The first verb phrase is “draw near.”

“Let us draw near with a truthful heart in full assurance of our faith” (v. 22)

While reading this text, that word “truthful” really spoke to me, because God is the only person with whom you can ultimately be completely candid, open, real. Anything else is foolish

Sometimes, people who see me only in church say “Neal, you’re always happy. . . “ If they only knew. Some of my prayer journals read like the book of psalms! (“woe is me”) I don’t dump all that on you. That would not be right. Instead. . I take all that to Jesus. Then, more often than not, I leave it there. That’s why worship is so helpful for me.

You can do that, too. Jesus is the one person you can tell everything in your heart without offending someone else. Nothing you say will be a shock to him.

The second verb phrase is “hold fast”

“Let us hold fast to the consensus of our hope” (v. 23)

Particularly in these days, it’s so important to remember what unites us as Americans, as Christians, as Americans, as people of good will.

When push comes to shove, our hope is God: “in God we trust.” It’s not our brilliance, not our choices, not our policies, but our God.

For Christians, the embodiment of that hope is Jesus

Yesterday, I naively agreed to make a 6 hour car trip in order to attend a denominational meeting in the Mojave Desert. Doesn’t that sound like fun?

Starting our late, I drove alone, and I was not in a very good mood. But, much to my
surprise, the journey turned out quite well over all. That’s because of my car radio, which could only get 2 or 3 stations. It kept fading out between one of two Christian networks: air1 and SOS. The music was a bit repetitive, I suppose, but the message was so powerful: “Hold on.” Hold fast to the consensus that we believe. Because of that message, I got to my meeting and back feeling strong.

The third verb is “Provoke:”

“Consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds” (v. 24)

This is not easy for me. By nature, I am a peacemaker. I want to settle disagreements, not create them.

But I learned in “love and logic” that there is a useful place for provocation—particularly in parenting. When some other person is not keeping up their end of a bargain—not acting right—a certain type of provocation is really helpful.

In the old days, when Andrew forgot to take out the trash before he went to bed, I’d take it out myself early the next morning. Then, I’d resent that little chore all day, creating a mini-sermon that he did not want to hear. After “love and logic,” I decided to wake Andrew up very early in the morning so he could take out the trash instead of me. Much to my surprise, he preferred that. Even after working the night shift at a local store, he preferred to be woken up than lectured later in the day.

I also learned to “provoke” him when he failed to make his bed. Again, in the old days, I’d make it if he were gone. Then I’d fume for hours about his irresponsibility. After taking “love and logic,” a chose a different course. Now, when his bed begins to bother me, the sheets just disappear! It’s kind of like magic. When Andrew asks me about it, I tell him that they can usually be found collecting dirt in some corner of our garage. When he hears that, his memory improves! So, he collects those sheets and makes his bed with a “daddy lecture” for several days in a row.

There’s a place for well-planned provocation in this world.

The fourth verb is “encourage.”

“not forsaking our common gatherings. But encouraging on another” (v. 25)

This takes a bit of thought, sometimes. How do you really do that when someone else is suffering. . . sick. . . etc. We tend to toss out clichés, like “everything happens for a reason,” becoming sort of like Job’s comforters in their time of pain.

Short of that, we tend to lie: “I’ll pray for you.” We say. Then, we often forget. Few of us are as callous as the visitor who said, “My uncle had that problem. He died”

But several of us lack the words we need to be a true encouragement.
The challenge is to get yourself inside another person’s head. What is he thinking? What is she feeling? If you’ve suffered a similar problem, you’ve got a leg up. Even then, it isn’t perfect.

The only way I can do it is to pray. “God, what would you have me say? What does that person need to heal?” More often than not, when I do that, God answers. When I stop to really listen for his voice, he helps me find the words I need.

With that, let us pray.

Gracious God, thank you for the promise that we can draw near to you with everything inside us—the good, bad, and the ugly. Thank you for this reminder to “hold fast” to the consensus of our faith. Show us how to encourage those who are discouraged, and show us how provoke those who less than diligent into love and good works, so that your love and grace might be revealed in us through Jesus Christ, our lord. Amen.