“Honking Encouragement”

The Rev. Dr. Peter James
Hebrews 10:19-25
March 2, 2014
The phrase I hear more than any other these days is some variation on the theme, “I’m not religious but I’m very spiritual.” I heard musician Paul McCartney reference it recently. There was a time when religious and spiritual meant pretty much the same thing. Spiritual has become a positive word, referring to a wide range of beliefs and practices people hold privately. Religion has become a big, bad word. It has to do with undesirable things religious people do, like becoming judgmental and dogmatic. This phrase has become something of a code word for expressing belief in God while at the same time differentiating oneself from organized religion.

Actress Susan Sarandon announced recently that she has given up on organized religion. Why on earth we give so much attention to what entertainers say about such things is beyond me.

I’ll be the first to admit as a proponent of so-called organized religion, there is plenty of ineptitude and inefficiency in churches. Churches are notoriously slow and ponderous when it comes to making changes.

With this admission on the table, I agree with one author who said, “Being against organized religion is like being against organized hospitals.” Hospitals, like churches, demonstrate ineptitude and inefficiency at times. Hospitals can be slow to change. Yet, where would we be without hospitals? I mean, if books are enough, why have universities? If laws are sufficient, why bother with police?

When people pronounce that they don’t believe in organized religion, I’m tempted to ask whether they believe in disorganized religion. Isn’t there something to be said for religion that wants to be organized? Sure, organized religion has its flaws, but surely disorganized religion is worse!

I need other people to challenge and hold me accountable. I need people who tell me the truth. Lillian Daniel writes, “Being privately spiritual but not religious doesn’t interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition you did not invent all for yourself.”
We’re focusing this year on our mission, “Becoming like Christ Together for the World.” January’s theme dealt with becoming like Christ. This past month, we concentrated on the “together” portion of our mission. We’ve looked at spiritual friends, marriage, family and now community. We’re going to turn all this outward beginning next Sunday to explore what it means to become like Christ together for the world.

Living in community is admittedly messy. It would be so much easier if we didn’t have to navigate complicated interpersonal relationships and controversial social issues. Take the red hot issue of same sex marriage. There are few places left in society where we can talk through such issues with common courtesy and respect. Everybody is so shrill in registering their treasured opinions. I long to be in community with people who explore how God’s Word addresses the great issues of our day and do so with genuine civility.

The Hebrews passage speaks to this matter of community. In the opening ten chapters, the author of Hebrews provides us with an overview of Jesus’ ministry as our great high priest. Then, beginning in Hebrews 10:19 and continuing through the rest of the letter, the author shifts to matters of more immediate concern. Each of the five practical considerations in this section is marked off with a “let us” phrase, which is called in English a hortatory subjunctive. It functions as an imperative in the sense that it directs us to do something, but since the writer is engaged in the same act, “let us” serves to qualify the imperative.

Glenda directed us earlier to pray with the words, “Let us pray.” Wonder if she would come forward and simply said, “Pray!” We would have found her to be rude and brash. Since she is praying along with us, she announced, “Let us pray.”

Let’s explore these five subjunctives. The first subjunctive is, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22). Earlier in the sentence, the author makes reference to Jesus as our great high priest. In the Old Testament, the high priest entered the inner sanctum of the temple on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) to offer sacrifice for people’s sins. He would repeat this practice every year, again and again. But when Jesus, our high priest, offers his life for our sins he does so
“once for all” (7:28; 9:12; 9:26; 10:11). The sheer repetitive force of the phrase “once for all” puts the exclamation point on Christ’s sacrifice. The reason for his single offering is obvious. He can only sacrifice his life once for all.

Christ sits down at God’s right hand because his salvation for us has been accomplished (10:13). There’s nothing left for him to do to atone for our sins. That’s why we can draw near to God. Christ has given us entrée to God. Look, folks, we don’t have to grovel. Christ has given us full and complete access to God.

The second subjunctive is, “Let us hold fast to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (10:23). The letter to the Hebrews is written to people who are struggling to remain faithful to God in a hostile environment.

Everything in this second subjunctive hinges on the latter half of the verse, “He who promised is faithful.” You may be embroiled right now in a conflict with someone or experiencing a season of spiritual dryness. You may be wondering, “Is God really faithful to me?” It surely doesn’t feel this way. Yet, things aren’t always what they seem. Sometimes I can see God’s faithfulness only in retrospect.

The third subjunctive is, “Let us consider how to stir one another to love and good deeds” (10:24). People in churches don’t always stir up love and good deeds. They seem to enjoy stirring up controversy. Paul writes in his letter to Timothy that some Christians stir up controversy rather than God’s work (1 Timothy 1:4). Love and good deeds appear together because love issues forth in good deeds. We make it our aim to sow love and good deeds rather than dissension.

The fourth and fifth subjunctives go well together: “Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing but let us encourage one another” (10:25). Some people in this first century community had forsaken meeting collectively. We’re not told why they have given up meeting this way.
Perhaps it’s the result of persecution or just plain indifference. The writer urges them to meet together for the purpose of encouraging each other. Scripture places a high value on the importance of mutual encouragement. It’s one primary reason why we worship together. I’m motivated to give my best to preaching because you show up. Just as you encourage me with your presence, so my role is to encourage you in things of faith. There are plenty of places out there eager to recruit you to join the dark side. The church is the one place where you and I are encouraged to live the Christian life.

Scripture places a high value on the importance of mutual encouragement. It’s one primary reason why we worship together. I’m motivated to give my best to preaching because you show up. Just as you encourage me with your presence, so my role is to encourage you in things of faith. There are plenty of places out there eager to recruit you to join the dark side. The church is the one place where you and I are encouraged to live the Christian life.

Okay, now for the sermon title. There are those sermons which I preach that are all but forgotten by this time tomorrow morning. There are those few sermons which seem to take on a life of their own. Years ago, I was preaching a sermon on some aspect of community life in which I likened our church to lessons learned from Canada geese. One woman went so far is to needlepoint me a shirt with a Canada goose and the words “Honk, honk.” Now, this illustration won’t go anywhere if you insist on being annoyed with Canada geese because they deposit bird droppings on athletic fields and golf courses. These migratory birds travel thousands of miles each year in search of wetlands and suitable climate. I observed three things in that sermon about Canada Geese that bear repeating as we consider our life together in community.

First, they fly together. I marvel at their ability to fly long distances together in a “V” formation. Geese flying in formation have a 70 percent greater flying range than birds that fly alone. They know instinctively that flying together increases lift and reduces drag. We can be far better Christians flying together than flying solo.

Second, they rotate leadership. The lead goose has the hardest job. Wind resistance and turbulence is hardest for the lead goose. So, periodically, the lead goose will peel off and another will rotate to its place.

We would do well to model ourselves after these ingenious birds. Let’s say goodbye to the 20/80 rule in organizational life where 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. How can we do a better job to encourage everyone in doing God’s work?
Third, they honk encouragement. I don’t need to tell you that geese honk. The sound of their honk is distinctly different when they are in danger as opposed to when they are flying in formation. As they travel long distances, honking functions as their chief means of communication. The geese which do most of the honking are in the rear of the formation. Honking is their way of encouraging the lead geese to keep up their speed.

Need I say more? We would do well to honk encouragement. You can do it. You can follow Christ. No matter how many times you fail, you can do it. Don’t give up. Honk, honk!