

Provoked to Love

Psalm 16 & Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost/ 14th November 2021

“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...” (Heb. 10:23-24). There’s much that jumps out at us in this verse, particularly these words: “...not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some...” They take on a different cadence in light of the past nineteen months. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to *not* “meet together” for worship, for meetings, for the work of the church. We have redefined what it means to “meet together.” The author of Hebrews could never have imagined a world where it’s possible to connect, talk, plan, share, worship, pray, cry, laugh together through a screen without physically being together in the same shared physical space.

Indeed, the pandemic has raised many questions for the church. There are questions regarding the nature of worship—just consider how we had to think through theologically the question of online Communion. Is that even possible? We talked about virtual worship and virtual Communion. But it wasn’t virtual; it was real. There are questions regarding our relationship to the sanctuary and the building. We became and, in many respects, still are a church without walls. And there are questions regarding the nature of community itself. The church is a community of *gathered* people, so what are we when the community cannot gather or meet together in one place? How do we minister to a congregation that we cannot see, when we’re not sure who is out there watching Sunday worship online? You can be anywhere, watching from the comfort of your home or on a cruise ship in the Caribbean. Or you can watch a recording of Sunday worship at some other time during the week. Last Christmas, someone said to me they binge-watched our Advent services all in one evening. I’m grateful for the technology that allows this to happen, for all that we have done as a church to make this possible—it’s truly remarkable. But it also feels odd and a little unsettling, which is not a bad thing. It’s just different.

The pandemic has ushered the church and its ministry into a whole new world, and, in many respects, there’s no going back. The culture has changed. Habits have changed. The church has changed. You can understand why many pastors are exhausted or have left parish ministry during this time or have taken early retirement because they don’t want to contend with figuring out how to “do” church, how to “be” the church post-pandemic. It was relatively “easy” to shut down and move things online. We used an iPhone on a tripod for the first couple of weeks to record worship, and we thought it was only going to be for a couple of weeks. It’s infinitely more complicated to open back up the building, return to the sanctuary, meet together in small groups. And some don’t feel comfortable coming back, for excellent reasons. Until children are vaccinated, parents are reluctant to bring their children on a Sunday—if they can convince their children to come to church on a Sunday, whether for church school or worship, after more than nineteen months away. Some folks have drifted away. For some, the pandemic has raised all kinds of existential and theological questions that have moved them away from the church. Others have been drawn to the church during the pandemic, drawn to a deeper exploration of their faith. It will be interesting to see who we are as a church, who is here, who shows up,

whether in person or online when things open up even more. I want to say when we “return to normal,” but the truth is there’s no going back. We have arrived and entered into a new normal or, better, something entirely *new*. Whether or not we like it, God is calling us to be faithful in *this* time, calling us to be and do church in a new way.

Some like all these changes. But we know there’s a cost. Isolation is not good, whatever one’s age. Individuals, families are worshipping alone. Can this be sustained for long? Someone shared with me this week, someone who lives alone, that “virtual” Communion, celebrating alone at home, heightened the feelings of isolation.

James K. A. Smith is a professor of philosophy at Calvin University. He was asked about the pandemic’s effect on meeting together for worship. He tells students, adults of all ages to make worshipping together with other Christians a priority. After all, he says, “Worship is a chance to love the people we don’t like.”¹ That’s a profound insight into a culture divided by deep differences over theology, politics, and even efforts on how to mitigate this pandemic. Social commentators have shown how little many North Americans interact with those with whom they disagree. Christians find it increasingly difficult to like the people with whom we disagree.

It’s striking that this reference to “meeting together” in our text is connected to the previous verse that reads, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and do good deeds.” Love not in thought or aspiration but *action*. Not love in general but love in *particular*—the love of another human being, another person created in the image of God, your sibling in Christ, your neighbor beside and before you. The text implies community, having someone to love, someone to be good toward.

The text implores us to “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” Some context is helpful here. The author of Hebrews, often known as the Preacher, is not simply extolling a pious platitude in us. This command to the church is directly related to what comes earlier in the chapter. The Preacher understood the life and witness of Jesus Christ as that of a priest. Unlike the priests in the Temple who stood and offered the same sacrifices again and again for the forgiveness of sins, Christ as priest offered a single sacrifice to God for sin, the sacrifice of his body and blood. And then, when the work of our “great priest” was finished, “he sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:22). That single offering perfected for all time those who are sanctified. “Where there is forgiveness of [sins], there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb. 10:18). The work is completed. There’s no need for more sacrifices and offerings. This was how the Preacher and his community understood the work of Christ on our behalf; it’s how he theologically imagined the work of Christ. This single sacrifice provided a way for us to enter the sanctuary, the inner sanctum, to draw near to the presence of God without shame or guilt. Christ, “the new and living way” (Heb. 10:20), opened a way for us to enter a place we previously were not permitted to go. Something new, now, has been granted to us through Christ’s single sacrifice. The word *sacrifice* means “to make holy.” Because of his sacrifice on our behalf, Christ gives us access to something we could never have achieved on our own. And something has been released within us, something holy.

We are now free to approach God with “a true heart” (Heb 10:23), a full heart, an undivided heart, a heart confident in the knowledge that it’s forgiven, knowing that everything that previously separated us from God—and anything that might separate us in the future—has been and already been dealt with by our great priest. A priest is a mediator, the go-between, who moves between two worlds, who conveys a word on behalf of one to the other, humanity toward God, God toward humanity. That word is: we are forgiven. You are forgiven. You might not think so, but that doesn’t change the fact that you are, that we are. And when we realize this, claim this, come by faith to see what has already been done and is being done on our behalf, when we take this in, let it sink into the core of our being, into our bodies, everything changes—our relationship with God, with our neighbor, and with ourselves, that is, our inner heart, this changes too. And what comes in its wake is confidence, assurance, joy, love, gratitude, hope, courage to live, to live boldly, without fear. Something is activated within us.

Soon we are provoking one another to love and good deeds because something of God’s love and goodness has been and is being released in us. This is an odd turn of phrase, isn’t it? “Provoke one another to love.” What does it mean to provoke another to love? What does this look like in the life of the church? The Greek here suggests poking, prodding someone to do something. Can love be provoked in us? Can we provoke another to love and good deeds—without being irritated or irritating? How does this happen? How do we do this?

Maybe all we must do is simply *show up*. “...not neglecting to meet together.” Just being in the presence of another in community, whether in person or online, is enough to remind us that we are called to love the other. And as we know, this is not always easy. “Worship is a chance to love the people we don’t like.” Being together, meeting, or worshipping together, brings with it all kinds of challenges. You can understand why people stay away from the church and avoid worship altogether. There are days when I don’t blame them. But to avoid being in community, “meeting together,” means we are missing out on something very special and holy.

It’s impossible to be a follower of Christ by yourself, apart from a community, without another to love and be good toward, without allowing yourself to be the object of another’s love and goodness. But when God’s people come together, when they together are drawn into the presence of God in worship, work, and witness, remarkable things happen in them, in that church, in that *ekklesia*. In the *ekklesia*, we discover what the New Testament describes as *koinonia*, a connection, a fellowship, a relationship with people rooted and ground in love, where love is invoked and provoked, where the limits of our capacity to love and be loved are tested and challenged again and again—as it should be because this is the way we grow deeper in faith and commitment. Here we are provoked by the Holy Spirit to love neighbor, love God, and love oneself.

As we emerge from the pandemic and reconnect as a church, I believe, we will come to see in a new way that God calls us into community, the Spirit draws us into community, and a healthy community requires grace and patience, hard work, and love.

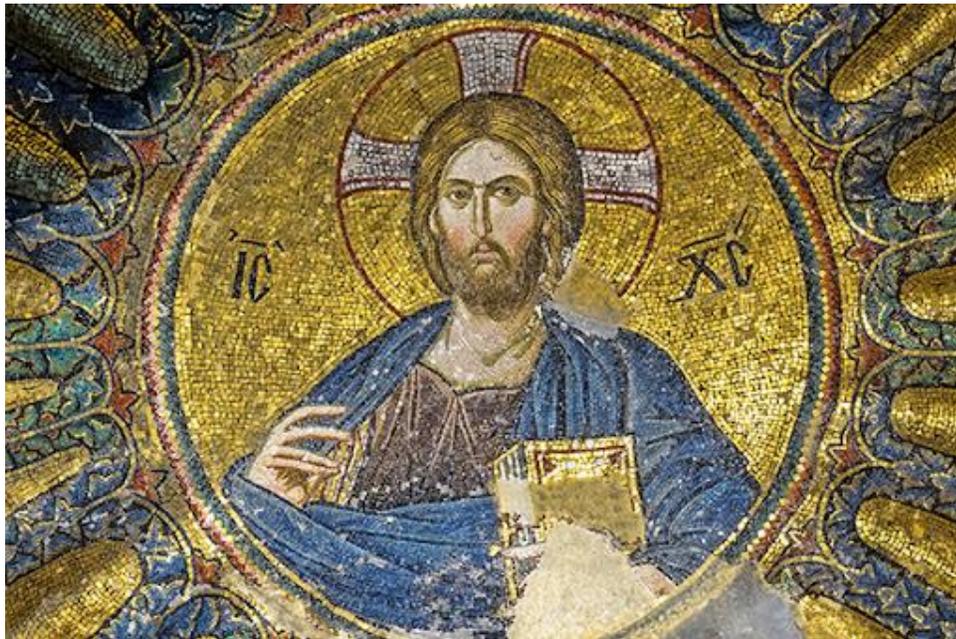
This past week was Dorothy Day’s (1897-1980) birthday, the Roman Catholic writer, activist who valued community. Day wrote from the heart about the power of love; radical, fierce love can change us and change the world. “We cannot love God,” she said, “unless we love each

other, and to love, we must know each other. We know [God] in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”²

“Love,” she says, “and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other’s faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light a fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.”³

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What a beautiful vision for the church we are becoming.



Christ Pantocrator (Almighty) Mosaic, 11th century, Chora Church, Istanbul, Turkey.

¹ Cited in Doug Bratt’s reflection on Hebrews 10. Center for Excellence in Preaching: <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2021-11-08/hebrews-1011-14-15-18-19-25-3/>.

² Dorothy Day, “The Long Loneliness,” *The Catholic Worker*, May 1980, p. 4. <https://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/articles/867.html>.

³ From Day’s “House of Hospitality” cited in Robert Ellsberg, *Dorothy Day: Selected Writings* (Orbis Books, 2005), 87-88.