

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

September 2, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

1Keep on loving each other as brothers. 2Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. 3Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

4Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. 5Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said,

"Never will I leave you;

never will I forsake you."6So we say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can man do to me?"

7Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

9Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. 10We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

11The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. 12And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. 13Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. 14For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

15Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

“Now, don’t forget to say “please and thank you.” Please listen to the adults. Don’t yell in the house. Don’t run in the house either. Be sure to chew with your mouth shut. Share with the other kids. Be polite. Pick up your toys. Remember that Jesus loves you and so do I and I’ll be back in a few hours.” It doesn’t matter where I’m leaving him or with whom I am leaving him, this is the mantra I go through every time I drop Nathan off at daycare, someone’s house, or I leave him in the church nursery. I’m sure that to him I sound like the teacher on Charlie Brown—wah, wah, wa, wah, wah, wa. And yet, I can’t help myself. I just feel like I have to communicate our family’s values, traditions, and customs to him every time I leave him. I just want to make sure the bases are covered.

And I imagine that the Apostle Paul was feeling the same way as he wrapped up his letter to the Hebrews. “Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers . . . remember those who are in prison . . . honor marriage . . . don’t love money and be content with what you have, remember that God said “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you . . . Say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? . . . remember your leaders . . . Don’t be carried away by strange teachings . . .” and on and on it goes. It’s sort of a check list for the early Christian Church. And though it may seem that Paul is being redundant or overdoing it like an over-protective parent, his repeated reminders are really quite necessary.

The early Christian Church wasn’t like our church or really any other church with which we may be familiar. The early church was in a constant, day to day struggle for survival. And if the Christian movement was to survive, early believers had to have a strong sense of identity with their faith community—they needed a strong connection with their brothers and sisters in Christ. They didn’t have the luxury of an established church that would be there for them week in and week out regardless of what they did during the week. Far from it. In fact, Paul’s reference about visiting folks in prison is not

a reference to criminals but rather a reference to other Believers who had been imprisoned for their beliefs. That's how fragile the movement was in that environment—one could be imprisoned and even killed just for professing belief in Christ. It's a reality that is hard for us to comprehend because the church as we know it in the United States has evolved so much from the church's early days in the Middle East. Richard Halverson, former chaplain of the US Senate, offers a helpful summary of this evolution. "In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome where it became an institution. Next, it moved to Europe, where it became a culture. And, finally, it moved to America where it became an enterprise."

Now I don't know exactly what he means by enterprise here. If he means enterprise as "an organization created for business ventures"¹, well then, in many ways he's correct. Just turn on the TV on a Sunday morning and you'll discover many opportunities to buy an angel knick knack worth 2 bucks selling for 25 bucks with the profits going to a very enterprising televangelist. But lest I sound hypocritical, we need to acknowledge that we aren't as different from them as we might like to think we are with our stewardship drive and fundraisers. After all, there are certain expenses that this church needs to take care of and in order to do that, we need to be enterprising and I don't think that's a bad thing. However, if that's the reason we're here—to be enterprising and raise a bunch of money—well, then, we're missing the point. The money we raise is our tool for ministry, not our ministry itself. Money is not the reason we're here.

And if he means enterprise as an activity in which people engage, well then, again, in many ways he's correct. There are a myriad of activities in which we engage as a church—mission, fellowship, committees, music—there are lots of activities going on here. And yet, if all we're looking for is something to do, seems there are a lot more fun and interesting activities out there than what our church has to offer.

So why are we here? Why do we gather to listen to words from dead guys who lived 2000 years ago in places many of us probably couldn't even find on a map? According to one of the best preachers I've ever heard in my life, William Willimon chaplain of Duke Divinity School "The baptized gather here on Sunday because they have been called, summoned. They are not here because of a vague curiosity about the 'human condition.' Other entities presume to address that state—in a way, I might add, much less threatening than the approach represented by the church. They are not here to be titillated, entertained, or even reassured. If all they want is entertainment, let them fly to Vegas. If mere reassurance can soothe their pain, a score of chemicals and self-help books are cheaper than church. No. The baptized congregate because they have been called."²

Now this, my friends, is a little strange. We congregate because we've been called—called by a God we've never seen and whose voice we might imagine we've heard but we're not really sure. This being called business makes us strange folk. Shoot, just being here this morning makes us all a little strange. After all, according to the standards of the society in which we live—an every man for himself, get as much as you can as quick as you can, you earned it so you should enjoy it, and of course that phrase that we all know by now is NOT in the Bible—God helps those who help themselves—society, in a society

¹ www.wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn

² Willimon, William H. *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, MI, 1992 pg. ix, x.

such as ours, to be people of faith, in particular the Christian faith, is a very strange thing indeed and it is strange folk who participate in our love your neighbor as yourself, forgive seven times seventy times, the first shall be last and the last shall be first religion. This is a strange enterprise in which we are involved and by virtue of being adherents to it, we have become a little strange ourselves.

Now lest you doubt me, I have proof. Just this last week, here are a few of the strange things that strange folks have done around this place. On Tuesday, Jane Nichols came down to the church first thing in the morning to help us shoo a bat out of the Narthex. Now most people, when asked to leave their home on a Tuesday morning to come across town to shoo away varmin that may very well being carrying the rabies virus—well now a normal person would say, “Call an exterminator.” But not Jane Nichols—oh no. She was down here with a net chasing that thing all around with her trusty sidekick, Robin, foiling her efforts at every turn with my bat chasing inexperience and general uneasiness with mammals that fly. Now that is one strange folk. And then there were a couple of other strange folk here on Thursday. Stu Laing and Howard Eisenhart came to help their pastor in distress as she yearned to create more space at the front of the sanctuary and yet lacked the brute strength necessary to rearrange these platforms. And so these two strange guys gave up an hour of their time and let me order them around until things were to my satisfaction. And then, Stu, a very strange folk indeed, stuck around to climb a ladder that took him to the ceiling of this sanctuary to adjust the lights so that they’d shine on my sermon manuscript as I read and then he followed this up by mowing the lawn, a volunteer job that many of you strange folk have done before. And as strange as these do-gooding folks may seem, I must say that the strangest folk I’ve seen around here lately is Joan Bell. A few months ago I met with Joan to discuss the possibility of hosting a quilt show here at the church. When I returned from Chicago three weeks after our conversation, Joan had a committee of 13 and along with Bonnie Modroo she had cut out the pieces of the quilt that is being made to be raffled at the quilt show and then when I volunteered to machine quilt said quilt, she politely declined my offer and instead she and Bonnie and Lois Streitlein have spent countless hours hand quilting that quilt. Strange folk indeed.

Now most all of you here this morning would, at some point in the year, show up as a strange folk in a sermon such as this one. For it is strange folk—called folk—God’s folk who give tirelessly of their time, talents and treasures to insure—not that this business enterprise keeps going, but rather that we continue to “live and grow as a fellowship of men and women centering on the Living Christ.” Modern believers aren’t all that different from the ancient Hebrews to whom Paul wrote. And we need his words just as they did, words that affirm the strangeness, the counter-culturalness, the different-ness of who we are as brothers and sisters in Christ. And indeed, that is what we do when we every Sunday morning when we gather to sing, pray, listen, speak, hug, shake hands, work, and today eat together as a family of faith. We affirm, we celebrate, and remind ourselves that we are strange folk. We need to be reminded of our family’s values, traditions, and customs. Indeed, we are called to be here and we need to be here because we need to know that it’s okay, indeed it is a good thing, to be strange folk. Thanks be to God that we are strange folk. Thanks be to God that we are called folk. Thanks be to God.