

**“Holding Fast to Our Confession”**  
**Hebrews 10:11-25**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**November 15, 2015**

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.” The word can also be translated “pester.” Just what you wanted to hear on a Sunday morning! Church, not as the place of quiet comfort and sanctuary; church, not as the family of God that gets along; church not as the place where we find gentle community: church as the place where you get pestered to love and good deeds.

At the Bible study on Wednesday someone blurted out, “Andrew’s sermons provoke me all the time,” which brought me a fleeting moment of pleasure just before I had to confess that nine times out of ten, it’s not really me doing the provoking, it’s the text.

I’m provoked this morning. How else could you describe getting a text that proclaims that God has overcome the sin of the world only a couple of days after one of the worst terrorist attacks in French history? A day after Baltimore reaches that 300 murder mark that we all knew was coming, we get a text that encourages us to hold fast to the confession of our hope that the old ways of sin are falling away. The same week that a father of 3 is gunned down trying to protect his children from the drug dealers we get a text proclaiming that the old ways that separate us and our world from God have been repaired. A week after black students in Mizzou endure racist threats to their lives, we get a text that encourages us not to despair at the world around us but to trust that a new world order has already been ushered in. It’s the text that’s doing the provoking.

Most of the time people dealing with this Hebrews text spend a lot of time in thick theological debates about atonement theory and supersessionism which is the way my sermon started until I deleted it last night. I had a page on how to understand the new covenant without completely dismissing Jewish practices in triumphal favor of Christian ones. I had an erudite paragraph on how after the destruction of the temple in the year 70 AD, Jews themselves had learned how to live without the temple sacrifices thereby rendering the temple cult less important going forward for both Jews and Christians alike.

But in the wake of so much violence around us, those carefully crafted answers weren’t addressing questions that I think many of us are asking. Questions like how do we live with hope when our city and our world seem to be coming apart at the seams at the same time? How are we supposed to maintain our confession of hope in this kind of violent world? And how is provoking one another to love and good deeds relevant to the violent places that we find ourselves?

Is that last question that seems to keep a lot of people from coming to church these days, so it’s refreshing to find out that the church in the book of Hebrews was in a similar situation of declining participation in worship. People had stopped coming to worship. It’s kind of comforting to know that the church had similar issues, since so many of church leaders today beat ourselves up over fewer butts in

the pews. We're experts at pointing out how deficient we are next to the early church described in the book of Acts. In Acts, the church grows by leaps and bounds. In Acts, church people share all their resources. In Acts, there are new converts right and left. But not the contemporary church. We're deficient in every regard. The Jehovah's Witness folks dropped a publication off at my house yesterday that basically said the same thing. It says the decline of the church is the result of contemporary church leaders chasing after all the wrong things.

But Hebrews paints a different picture. Some people in the church are neglecting to meet, the preacher implies, because they don't think they need to. And they don't think they need to meet because the church's message has been so successful. The church has succeeded in communicating that offerings and sacrifices don't get us any closer to God. The message has come through that our practices are not what opens the door to God's salvation. The church has succeeded in communicating that our worship is not what saves us. The church has been so successful in proclaiming that forgiveness is given not because we claw our way into God's favor, but because our good and gracious God chooses to offer it, that people decide they don't need to come.

Apparently, when the church loses the ability to hold forgiveness over the heads of its people, attendance declines. When the church loses the ability to claim exclusive access to the holy One, participation goes down. When the church loses the quid pro quo equation – you give us your time, your commitment, and your resources, we write your name in the register of eternal life - the value of the product that we have to offer goes down.

You don't have to come to church to get information about that good news. It's given away in Bibles you can find in the nightstand of just about every hotel room. You can watch on YouTube videos and the evangelical section of the bookstore, or pull it up on any translation you want on the Web. News about the Gospel can be obtained in a lot of places outside the church. You don't have to go there to get it.

When C.S. Lewis first became a Christian, he came to a similar conclusion. "I thought that I could do it on my own," he said, "by retiring to my rooms and reading theology." He didn't like going to church as he wrote about it bluntly. "I disliked very much their hymns," he wrote, "which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music."<sup>1</sup>

You don't have to come to church to get information about the good news that God is a loving, gracious, forgiving God who is in the process of reconciling all human beings to God and each other. But you do have to come to church if you want to develop your capacity for living in light of this truth, first, because the gospel can't be lived in isolation. It can only be lived through relationships. And second because the church is the theater where the script of the gospel is rehearsed. It's easy to say "I believe that God is a forgiving God," but try offering similar forgiveness when someone in your life wrongs you. You've got to practice the good news God has given. It's easy to proclaim, "I believe that all people should respect each other," but

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Answers to Questions on Christianity," *God in the Dock* (USA: Eerdmans) 1972, 61-62. A friend first brought this reflection to my attention from her C.L. Lewis devotion Bible.

trying living that ideal in a community of people who don't always act the way you want them to. You've got to practice the good news God has given. It's easy to say I believe in loving my neighbor as myself, but some neighbors are hard to love and these darks days in our world leave us fearing our neighbors not wanting to love them.

The hard truth about human beings is if we don't meet to remind each other that God's got the whole world in God's hands the sheer number of the stories on the front pages of our newspapers will erode that conviction; if we don't meet to tell each other that love really is the way, the disturbing images of the violence we consume on our electronic devices will convert us to the ways of death; if we don't meet to practice forgiveness, and truth-telling and community, then we withdraw from the world and each other, our skin grows thick and our hearts turn cold, or we end in despair.

We have to meet not to earn God's favor, but to provoke each other to love and good deeds in light of it. To keep us holding fast to the confession of our faith without wavering especially when violence confronts that confession with fear. To remind each other, that crucifixions of every kind do not have the last word in the world that is coming into being – there's a high priest over the house of God who opens a way for us through the curtain that separates us from the presence of the living God. We have to meet to be the church.

That's the conclusion C. S. Lewis came to. "I thought I could do it on my own," he said, "But as I went on I saw the great merit of [church]. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in [work boots]\* in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit."<sup>2</sup>

We'll baptize Danny in just a minute. We'll sprinkle him with some water and to remind him that he's part of God's family. But you know I don't think he'll need the church just to give him information that God loves him. I know his parents will do a stellar job of giving him that good news on their own. He won't need the church to broker God's forgiveness on his behalf – Jesus has already done that for him. He'll find all that out soon enough.

No. Danny will need the church to show him what forgiveness actually looks like when folk in Baltimore decide it might be the only way we'll ever heal our divides. Danny will rely on the church to see how God can bring people together - Native Americans from Minnesota together with Euro-Americans and African-Americans, and Asian Americans, and Latino-Americans, in Baltimore with all of the pain of our histories and claim that we are brothers and sisters in Christ with a future. Danny will count on the church to hold his hope when he feels like a failure or the world is turned against him. By God's grace, he'll have the church to provoke him to love and good deeds especially when our violent world seems marked by neither.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The church will be there for him just like it's here for anyone who wants to rehearse the script of the gospel so we can step on the stage of our lives and live it without fear.