

Proverbs 25:6-7; Psalm 112
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Our first lesson, from the book of Hebrews, starts off with that wonderful verse: “Let mutual love continue.” (13:1) That is, I think, one of the most difficult tasks for most Christians, to “let mutual love continue.” Now in the Greek, that phrase is *philadelphia menoto*, which I know you don’t quite know, but means literally, “brotherly love remains.” Because the word *philadelphia*, (not the city) is a feminine noun, and so that we know that “brotherly” is not meant in that male kind of way. It’s the “brotherly” as in “brethren”, “brotherly” as in “fellow believer”. So “let the love of fellow believers remain (or continue).” Francis Gench, in her commentary on Hebrews, suggests that our greatest difficulties and most painful disputes are often with those whom we live and worship. Whose foibles and follies we observe at very close range. I can see that only too well. No one can bug my son Benjamin, the way Evan can. They know how to push each others buttons. And the same is true as we gather together in the body of Christ. Dr. Gensch goes on to say that love in the New Testament is not something that you feel, it is something that you do. Love seeks the well being of others and is embodied in the concrete efforts in their behalf.

But that verse is followed, obviously verse one, is followed by verse two. But verse two goes “do not neglect to show hospitalities to strangers.” Or literally again, do not neglect hospitality, for by this without knowing it some have entertained Angels. Oops, I forgot to read all of the verse, sorry. Now we need to understand first of all that the world of the people that the author of Hebrews was writing to could have been written in the last part of the first century, somewhere around eight or ninety AD, and it is being written to second and third generation believers. Now these believers came from Jewish heritage. Their parents or grandparents had been raised in the Jewish tradition and so their parents knew the stories, but they themselves, the people to whom the letters being written had been raised within this new Christian tradition, and so they didn’t know all of the stories. They didn’t know the traditions from which they came, and so the author of the letter to the Hebrews is reminding them of who they are and where they came from. So that they might better understand where they are going.

Life in the first century was in some ways similar to life today, but in many respects, they didn’t have a Motel 6, they didn’t have cell phones or photo ids. An individual would probably not travel all that far from home unless they were very wealthy, or in the military, or were a merchant or belonged to the government. You probably otherwise stuck pretty much close to home, and so you wouldn’t be known from one place to another. In order to be known your reputation would somehow have to precede you or you would have to have a letter of introduction. You didn’t have your drivers license to show people who you were, you couldn’t prove who you were by whipping out your credit card. No, if you needed to go into some new setting, you needed to

figure out some kind of a way to fit in. And so the author encourages them, the believer, to look after the fellow traveling missionary. The ones who are getting out and going from town to town. These folks needed a place to stay, they needed a place to eat, they needed to know where to go to preach. And thus this strong opening emphasis on helping other believers. For the church at this point is still relatively young and rather small and is not all that strong, and so the author is making a play on the Golden Rule, "Help one another as you yourself would like to be helped."

Now today, we as a church, as a denomination have difficulty with this letting mutual love continue or being hospitable to strangers. We struggle in our personal lives, in our professional lives, even in our religious lives at accepting strangers. In part because of our culture. Look at the animosity that we have to endure from our two political parties. The ads that have been going on lately. It is almost to the point of I don't care who is saying what, I just don't want to hear them any more, and their like two bickering children. But, we have that going on and one side is telling us that this person is a liar and the other side is telling us that that person is a liar. And so we struggle with who do we believe? Well if we can't believe these people then we have trouble trusting even on a closer personal level.

In keeping with our gospel even our political parties remind me of the guest who seated himself at the head of the table, only to be ask by the host to take an lesser seat. Their each trying to put themselves in front of each other. But what does this mean, to let et mutual love continue or to show hospitalities to strangers? I think at the very lease we strive to treat our fellow believers regardless of their religious denomination or their ethnic heritage, no matter what their language or anything about them. We don't let that interfere for we show them the same Grace that our Lord shows to us. It means as well that when we go some where new we seek out other believers and introduce ourselves as such. And when others come to us, to worship with us, we welcome them. We don't mumble with them that they are sitting in our spot, we don't complain when they don't quite come in at the right liturgical moment, but we welcome them. For we, as Christians, as believers, are called to care for the sick, the poor, for those who cannot take care of themselves. We are called to these actions regardless of wether the individual is a believer or not, but we are called even more so when they are a believer. We are called even more so when it is a believer with whom we do not agree. Called in spite of our selves to serve our God , so that *we*, as in the words of the author, to the letter wrote; "may not neglect to do good and to share what we have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

May we go forth in that mutual love, offering hospitality.

Amen