

September 1, 2019
A Sketch and a Shadow
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Hebrews 13:1-8, 16-18

13 *Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶So we can say with confidence,*

"The Lord is my helper;

I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?"

⁷Remember your leaders, those 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.

¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

¹⁸Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

The smarty-pants Bible teachers of the world agree on one thing only about the book of Hebrews: the Apostle Paul didn't write it. As to who did write it – lots of guesses. Some even say Phoebe. Remember her from the first Sunday we read Romans? Scholars believe she was Paul's strong arm in Rome, sent to deliver, read, and implement his teaching, as well as coordinate his mission to Europe out of Rome. Why it's called "To the Hebrews" is also a mystery, since it's not really a letter and there's nothing particularly Hebraic about it other than quotes of the Jewish Bible. But those are from the Septuagint, the Greek First Bible.

Most likely, this sermon for some congregation or congregations somewhere in Italy late in the first century was composed and preached by a well-educated Jew with deep Hellenistic training. I'm going with Phoebe, since nobody knows and it's my only chance

to say “*she*” in reference to the Bible writer. I could be wrong, but no more wrong than most everyone else. For all that isn’t known about the preacher, loads is known about the listening church. Namely, they were worn out from being and doing church. It happens. (That pause was your invitation to say “AMEN” – and now it’s too late. Sorry.)

They were worn out from the week-in, week-out work of worship, fellowship and ministry. (Now it’s starting to feel like a trick, isn’t it?) Plus, in their case the constant harassment by their neighbors and the Romans, the confiscation of property, the persecution, the beatings – “torture,” she calls it here – the jail sentences, the family separations (this is all listed in the early chapters of Hebrews), all of it together had them rather discouraged, rather tired of church life.

They were missing worship meeting (Hebrews 10:25); they were slacking on the ministry; they were really struggling to muster the same joy in the faith they’d once had. In their weariness, the preacher says, they’d begun to act out of fear rather than the once-and-for-all-confidence that comes with salvation in Christ Jesus. In Hebrews 8:5, the preacher describes the church as – and I love this language – “*a shadow and a sketch of heaven.*”

Her entire sermon is a treatise on the nature of Christ, meant to encourage them to remember what they once knew for sure. It is a call to endure this new phase of their life together. They are now grown-up believers in a grown-up church, dealing with the grown-up realities of faith and ministry in a hard world. The “sketch and shadow of heaven” they once cast is not sufficient for the people and church they are now, nor for the world as they can now see it with their grown-up eyes of faith.

She tells them in chapter five, baby believers – and, likewise, baby churches – live on spiritual milk. Grown-up believers and grown-up churches live on spiritual solid food. No way is milk going to suffice for a church under the demands of persecution, imprisonment and torture. Nor for a church full of grown-up Christians who are aware of the injustice and imperialism crushing our world and who are now in their sixth decade of ministry in the same community.

No wonder you are exhausted and depressed, her sermon goes. You aren’t eating right and you aren’t eating enough! She offers this new diet, if you will: *take another look – take a real look – at the Christ you follow.* And she spends twelve chapters walking them back through what they know of Christ and the meaning of the Christ event for their lives and their life together, leaving them to decide: *Shall we be a grown-up church who slowly starve ourselves to death by insisting on eating a baby church diet? Or shall we pull up to the table she has set for us in her twelve-chapter sermon, take it, eat it, and be changed into the sketch and shadow of heaven we are called to be now?*

Let’s pray a little prayer before moving into our text for today: *For new confidence in things hoped for, and new certainty in what we do not see, we pray, O God. Amen.*

Hebrews, chapter 13 is the sermon the preacher preaches after she promised she was done. Some churches call it “the announcements” or “*having heard the Word, let’s do the Word.*” The chapter 13 To-Do List is not exhaustive, but enough to keep most churches busy. I’m calling it a list of seven. Let’s go through them.

1 – *Let mutual love continue.* I read #1 as the umbrella for the rest. The rest are ways of maintaining this mutual love so essential to our life together.

#2 – *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Hopefully, you recognize *entertaining angels* as a First Bible reference to Genesis 18, when the traveling strangers who visited Abraham and Sarah brought them the news they’d long prayed for: Sarah would get pregnant and have a son. But why do we have to be promised angels at all? Is it that we are *afraid* of strangers, or that we mostly just don’t want to be bothered, to be put out; that culturally we’ve come to see **our** time, **our** resources, **our** homes, even **our** church as **our** *resting place*? The faith question might be, *at what point does one become a host instead of a guest in this world? and in the church?* At what point does the shift occur in one’s faith?

My friend Cathy and I have six children between us, all born inside six years. In a particularly long stretch with her son who wouldn’t sleep unless someone was holding him, a very wise college-age babysitter told her, *Miss Cathy, I don’t think you’re going to like me saying this, but someone has got to be the parent here. Put that baby down in his bed and let him cry until he can’t cry anymore.* That could be a terrible metaphor if you hear me saying we ought to make strangers cry. It could be an okay one if you hear the preacher of Hebrews telling the church, “Somebody has got to be the grownup here.”

We who have been taking sustenance and comfort from the hand for quite a while now need to realize we are the grown-up church now. And that makes it our turn to turn and show the world the same hospitality we have so long enjoyed. Some of those we are to feed – like the angels – will come to us. Others we will have to go find.

Thus, #3 – *Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.* Some of their brothers and sisters in the faith are in jail. Jail then wasn’t the luxury experience it is now. Prisoners had little more to eat and wear than what friends or family provided. Are you following our local jail situation? The department is cooperating with ICE to separate families, deport members of our community seeking legal status, acting outside the boundaries of their office. They are in violation of federal law – the Constitution, that is.

A grown-up church sees in this situation an opportunity to remember the prisoner and those being tortured. The biblical congregation had brothers and sisters in jail for their faith. Beaten and tortured. Going to them wasn’t safe, but it WAS the definition of mutual love. (So much more I could say on this.)

#4 – *Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.* Adultery – the ultimate detonation of mutual love in a covenantal relationship. Some of us may know someone, a family, broken by adultery. And it's easy to point away from ourselves, even sympathetically. "Wow," we say, "that is so hard."

Less conspicuous is the fact that adultery is just one example of infidelity. And all of us have been hurt, maybe even broken, by infidelity – other people's and our own. Times we broke promises to people that we should have kept. Times we trusted promises from people we never should have. Times people took advantage of our trust, tricked us and lied to us because they were sinful or greedy or weak. Times we let ourselves believe what we knew were lies just because we so badly wanted them to be true, because we were weak and sinful, and ended up ashamed. Times we even believed the lies of things – things that never said a single word, just dangled their promises in front of us and let us fill in the words: jobs, success, reputation, popularity, alcohol, food, money – whatever we give the best of ourselves to, rather than to the one to whom we made our promises.

Notice how the preacher puts sex and money next to one another on her list [Hebrews 13:4-5]. I didn't know till this week there's a word for "the love of money": *pleonexia* (plee ah nex' ee ah). ⁵ *Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."* Adultery. Pleonexia. And what the preacher is finally talking about is the love or trust of anything that displaces our trust in the promises of God to be with us no matter what. As she repeats in verse 6: *So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"*

#6 – *Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.* And then more in verses 17-18: ¹⁷ *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.* ¹⁸ *Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.*

This whole bit makes me feel itchy; I probably couldn't address it save for verse 8. ⁸ *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,"* the verse which sets Jesus as the standard-bearer. The rest calls church leaders to heed their own words, to be the grown-ups they just told their congregation to be, treat Jesus as the standard-bearer in the work of a shepherd. We are responsible. We are to be held to that responsibility, not shrink into some fake humility and say, *"Oh, I'm just a screw-up, don't follow me."* Some of the responsibility is on you, to obey and submit – which I take to mean *let them lead.*

Let them do this with joy and not with sighing— I think simply means, do not make our jobs harder than necessary, *for that would be harmful to you,* she says, which I don't quite

know how to take. Was she threatening them a little, like when a mom says, *Don't make me come up there!*

And *pray for us* – right on! – *as much as you are willing*. Because we – I – really do love this life and want to do it, deeply and with integrity and faith. Amazing how long the announcements can go on, isn't it?

#7 – *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God*, probably the most obvious item on the list – except, the fact that she has to say so suggests it might not be so obvious. Share to the point of sacrifice. When did you last give away something you couldn't do without? – since only then does it qualify as a sacrifice. Everything else is just a gift.

Short of life itself, do you even know what might count for you as sacrifice? Are you willing to consider it, here and now, today? Short of sacrifice, we are still eating the softer food of faith. Short of sacrifice, we can be the church. But we will still and always be as the preacher here described us: *a shadow and sketch* of the kingdom of God we claim to be.

Would you pray with me?