

“We Are An Offering”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

Though it is my habit to try and support the small, private book sellers of which we are blessed to have many in this small city of Stratford, every so often I need to go to Kitchener or London to drop in at Chapters or Indigo, the major, big box bookstores. Invariably after a time of browsing, I end up in the “spirituality” section not just because as a clergy that is an interest of mine but because the books in that section and their titles fascinate me.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed or whether you are even interested in it, but the spirituality section of any major bookstore provides a treasure trove of advice for living a better life. Practices both ancient and new are presented in ways that allow any and all to help themselves to a better life. People in our day and age want to live better and love better, to enrich both career and personal life and if spirituality is the way to do it, so be it – as long as it doesn’t necessarily include worshiping in a church.

Some of the best-selling Christian authors package their spiritual direction in the form of advice that will make people healthy, wealthy, and wise. Lots of preaching advice today directs the preacher to present messages that are “PowerPoint friendly,” presenting the distilled word of God in practical, bite-size portions for the postmodern audience. Faith, it seems, is relevant if it helps us in our pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Faith is redeemable as long as it offers us things that are reasonable and practical enhancements to life.

Well, my friends, if that is the spiritual teaching we seek, then the opening verses of the 13th chapter of Hebrews, today’s second reading, sounds like they are made for us. In the first five verses we get five things we are called to do, five very reasonable, very practical pieces of advice. First, we are to “Let mutual love continue.” In other words, as Jesus taught – love one another. Second, we are to “show hospitality to strangers.” Third, “Remember those in prison” or “those being tortured.” And, in the context of Hebrews, there were the persecuted fellow Christians, so it is a call to take care of the less fortunate among us. Fourth, we are to honour our marriage commitments. Fifth, we are to avoid falling in love with money and be content with what we have.

These five aspects of Christian living resonate deeply with similar instructions throughout the New Testament, so they sound quite faithful to the tradition.

Wouldn’t you agree that all five of these instructions, if you think about them, provide reasonable, practical advice that will lead to richer lives. In a world where relationship and community are hard to find, loving one another makes sense. Providing hospitality to strangers, while not often a natural action, can lead to an expanded view of the world. And, if we are indeed encountering angels, it can’t help but enhance our souls, therefore it, too, makes sense.

Caring for our brothers and sisters in distress creates community and resources we can rely on in our time of need. Holding on to our relationships keeps us from lives lived in turmoil. While we need money to operate in the economic world we inhabit, loving the money is certainly a path of unhappiness.

We know these things. The advice is reasonable, practical, and even helpful. It seems that the assertions are true. Christian faith is good for you.

Then comes verse 13, and here I better explain. I don’t know if you noticed but today’s second reading, as listed on the back of the bulletin, is Hebrews 13:1-8, 15, 16, that’s what you have before you. This happens occasionally in the lectionary. Well, one of my habits, like looking at the spirituality section in

a major bookstore, is checking out the verses that are omitted, trying to figure out why they were left out. I did that in preparing for this sermon and it became rather clear why the powers that be omitted the verses.

Read verse 13 and the whole nation of faith as reasonable, practical advice that is good for us falls apart. This is what it says: "Let us go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured." The writer of Hebrews asserts that we are to bear the same fate, the same abuse that Jesus suffered. As is said so often in the gospels, we are to bear the cross as Jesus has done.

I suppose this should be expected in this sermon letter that calls Jesus the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." However, it kind of blows the "spirituality as practical advice" approach to preaching. How are we supposed to "bear the abuse he endured" and how could it possibly be good for us?

The next verse complicates matters further – "we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." This is an acknowledgement that the rewards, the benefits, of following Jesus are delayed. The things we are to do have no immediate value in a world that would reject the pioneer of the faith. Our actions, our lives are to be offered up as a sign of what is to come.

The final verses of the passage for today, verses 15 and 16 harken back to the opening instructions – do good and share what you have. The reason, however, is completely different than what we thought. We do these things because "such sacrifices are pleasing to God." We are to "let mutual love continue" not because it benefits us. In fact, when practiced mutual love can lead to betrayals, vulnerability, and hurt. We are to do so because Jesus did, and because that is where the world will end up.

We are to welcome strangers in with warm hospitality in a world where strangers are feared, because that is what the new city of God will look like. We are to stand with those who are afflicted for no other reason than they so often are the ones who the world hates and God favours. We are to honour our promises to our spouses, because God honours God's promises to us. We are to be content and not love money, because there is no currency in the reign of God.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let me be perfectly clear. We don't follow Jesus as a matter of self-help or personal improvement. Because Jesus died for us, we are an offering. Because his blood has opened the way to life in the reign of God, we are an offering of love and welcome. Because the world is broken and Christ has paved the way to healing, we are an offering to the oppressed and the broken-hearted. Because Jesus dared to go outside the gate and give himself, we are an offering of worship and praise for the sake of the world. We love because we are an offering. We welcome because we are an offering. We are faithful and content because we are an offering to our God. AMEN.