

A Tale of Two Congregations
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn
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Texts: 2 Corinthians 8:1-7; Hebrews 10:24-25

Last week, we launched our season of discipleship here at Caldwell. This is a time to pause, think and pray deeply about all that we've been given and all that we can give back to the God who is the source of every blessing.

We began with a focus on giving God ourselves in prayer. What better place, after all, could we begin? As we continue today, we turn our focus to how we give ourselves to God in worship, this counter-cultural tradition we uphold here every Sunday, this ancient and, to many outside observers, odd act of gathering, praying, singing and listening for a word from the Lord.

As you know by now, our Discipleship theme this year is "Abundant Joy, Overflowing Generosity." Your discipleship committee chose that theme because it so aptly describes our experience here together. You are, in so many ways, a joyous and generous people, similar in many ways to the community believers Paul had in mind when he wrote the words we heard again today from 2 Corinthians.

Paul was describing a congregation in a place called Macedonia, a small and rather insignificant kingdom in ancient Greece. We will be getting to know this little congregation today and over the weeks to come . . . because this was not your average group of believers.

Despite being poor and persecuted, they were extraordinary disciples. This morning, we will take a look at how vastly they differed from another congregation we find in the New Testament. We'll listen closely to scripture to find what made the Macedonians so remarkable.

So, with apologies to Charles Dickens, let us consider this morning's sermon "A Tale of Two Congregations."

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So, who were these Macedonians whom Paul held in such high regard?

We don't know a lot. In Acts, we read that Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia saying simply, "Come and help us." So Paul and his fellow evangelists did just that. They immediately sailed from Troas, in what is modern day Turkey, across the Aegean Sea to what we would know as the former Yugoslavia in southern Europe.

Paul didn't stay there long at all. But what he saw impressed him greatly. So much so that he held up the Macedonians as a shining example to other early Christian communities. When he wrote the letter we know as 2 Corinthians, he chided the more affluent Corinthians to be as generous as the Macedonians. Despite being persecuted for their newfound faith in Christ, Paul pointed out, the Macedonians gave over and above their means. Paul says they even "begged" for the "privilege" of giving money to help the movement spread.

Imagine, begging for the chance to give away more money than you really should ... and considering the chance to do so a true privilege. When, if ever, was the last time we saw that kind of generosity in our day?

Do you recall the film from a few years ago called "Pay It Forward?" Well, they were so touched by God's gift of grace in Christ that the Macedonians paid it forward – in the name of Christ - even when they didn't have it to give.

So that's a bit about the Macedonians. Now, let's turn our attention to a second congregation, one we find in the book of Hebrews.

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If the Macedonians could be described as being "on fire" in their faith, this other congregation was barely a cooling ember.

Unlike 2 Corinthians and other New Testament books known as epistles, the Book of Hebrews is actually considered more of a sermon than a letter. Its audience was a group of early Christians, probably with Jewish backgrounds, probably second-generation believers. They had been persecuted for their faith, most likely by the Romans and their Jewish brethren. They were weary from looking for Jesus' return. They showed signs of giving up this whole "Jesus was the Messiah" thing. As disciples, they were, perhaps understandably, out of gas.

The author of Hebrews sought just the right words to rally these tired, dispirited souls. Like a lot of Bibles, my study Bible breaks its chapters and verses into sections, each with its own subheading. The subhead that introduces the verses we read earlier from Hebrews is "A Call to Persevere."

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” the author writes.

There is a lot of “persevering” in the New Testament – have you ever noticed that? Those early Christians paid the price for their faith. In those early years of the church, after Christ’s life, death and resurrection, those early believers thought Jesus was coming back next Tuesday, as my seminary professor loved to say. When he didn’t, they found out the true meaning of faith.

Faced with the challenges presented to those early Christians and faced with the challenges of our day, how do we understand our faith? The author of Hebrews spelled it out for his audience just a few verses after today’s reading. He offered what has become one of the best known definitions of faith: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”¹

Hope and conviction. Do not mistake those things, brothers and sisters, for flimsy, ethereal and insufficient promises. In Christ, the author of Hebrews was saying, they are certain, even when the evidence seems lacking. In Christ, hope and conviction are fully underwritten. In Christ, the kingdom of heaven has arrived and begun and we are all called as disciples to help in its construction.

Stop and think for a moment about what those words would have meant to those beleaguered early disciples. Their faith was literally a matter of life and death. Stop and think about what those words can mean to us today.

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

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So, let us pause now and compare these two congregations we have gotten to know just a bit this morning.

On one hand, we have the Macedonians. Filled with the abundant joy they found in the assurance of God’s grace that Christ had indeed ushered in the kingdom of God. Overflowing in their generosity in return for that grace. For them, hope wasn’t a bumper sticker or an excuse to kick can down the road. It was real and it inspired them to do extraordinary things to advance the kingdom.

¹ Hebrews 11:1

On the other hand, we have the congregation to whom the book of Hebrews is addressed. They are like a dog that's been beaten too often. Cowering in the corner. Tails between their legs. Lagging in their discipleship. Uncertain that the Jesus Way is a way worth fighting for.

What, we might ask, is the difference between these two communities of faith? What can be said to the congregation in Hebrews to inspire them to match the discipleship of the Macedonians?

And, where does the practice of worship factor in? How does worship relate to discipleship – the discipleship of the Macedonians, the congregation in Hebrews and this congregation at Caldwell?

There is one word in this morning's Hebrews passage that provides at least one clue. It's a rather unexpected word, especially when we're talking about worship. But it's an important word for the church to hear.

"Let us consider how to *provoke* one another to love and good deeds," Hebrews says to us, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some."

When was the last time we thought of worship as an act of provocation, which means to stir things up, to irritate, to stimulate?

When we think about all the reasons we come to worship, being provoked – getting poked and prodded – is probably not at the top of our list. We come to worship for all sorts of other reasons: to approach the Divine in humility and brokenness, to be healed and restored, to be encouraged and inspired, to be lifted up in the embrace of the community of believers, to give ourselves to God and seek direction for our lives.

But, if we were to change the sign out front to read, "Come in and we promise to bug you," how many new members do you think we would attract? What in the world is the author of Hebrews getting at? For that matter, should I really be preaching a sermon about discipleship – a sermon intended to get you to give your time, talent and money to God – that focuses on a promise to provoke you?

But on second thought, there is something to be said for worship that irritates. Worship that stirs us, worship that gets us to feel and think and respond is, in fact, exactly what our Lord desires. God didn't set this hour aside just so we can show off our new clothes, see and be seen, do church business, make a to-do list for the week or take a nap.

God invites us here to incite us. To agitate us. To provoke us. And those verbs should not be heard necessarily as negative. We may need to be shaken out of our disillusionment by the reassurance that God is at work in the world. We may need to be emptied of our hopelessness and filled again with hope.

I don't know about you, but I need to hear our choir sing about about the way up the rough side of the mountain ... and that there is a "happy day" for us in the Lord.

I don't know about you, but my faith is enriched when I hear the joys and concerns of others, whose lives may be like my own ... or vastly different.

I don't know about you, but I need to hear the Word of the Lord, to sing praises to God, to confess my sins and be lifted up by the assurance of pardon and the passing of the peace.

All of that is holy provocation.

Then there is the kind of provocation that may be less comfortable. But it's every bit as important. Worship needs to prick our conscience. Worship needs to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, as the saying goes. Worship needs to shine a bright light into the dark corners of our lives as individuals and as a society.

In the words of the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, worship can "agitate, agitate, agitate," and at times it should, lest we grow complacent and comfortable with injustice, hatred and bigotry that impede the advance of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

That, too, is holy provocation and we should pray that it shapes our discipleship.

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The truth, friends, is that we don't know what inspired the lively, abundant, selfless, overflowing joy and generosity of the Macedonians disciples. We don't have direct evidence of what distinguished the Macedonians from the weary, worn-out congregation in Hebrews.

But I know which congregation I'd want to be a part of. I know which congregation Caldwell should strive to match in all that we are, all that we give and all that we do in worship.

(Walking down to baptismal font.)

And all of this has inspired one more thought. One of the two fixtures in our worship is our baptismal font. Each week it is filled with water, whether or not we are baptizing someone.

(At font)

But here's the thing: That water is still, too still, if we take Hebrews seriously. If we take Hebrews seriously, the waters of our baptism shouldn't always be so calm. From time to time, as often as God sees fit, they need to be stirred up, they need to be provoked, they need at times to roll and bubble with the activity of the Holy Spirit.

So, I have in my pocket one of those old, hand-cranked blenders. (Stir waters with blender). Maybe I will just leave it here and call a meeting of the Buildings and Ground Committee to see how one might be installed permanently ... lest we gather on any Sunday and take our baptism and call to be active disciples for granted.

Amen.