Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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August 28, 2022

*“Voluntaries”* Hebrews 13:1-9, 15-16

Most of you know Pastor Jeannie lived in a very small town in Montana for almost four years. It was her first pastorate. She was at Baker Community Church.

Baker is on the eastern end of the state—the flat part where there is not a lot of water, but they do have cattle and oil. These two things, oil and agricultural money, are what kept that part of the state afloat. Beyond that, eastern Montana is a place of prairies and buttes—so tall hills that are steep side and flat tops; Quite beautiful in a wild, desolate kind of way.

“Wind-swept” is the word that comes to mind when I think about eastern Montana. The winters are often long and gray…perhaps that is why the spring is such a surprise.

Each year, springtime tended to come on slowly. The snowstorms would stop around the end of February, but it was still pretty cold all of March and into April. This means that the last snow would continue to stay on the ground. It would start off being mounds of dusty ice snowflakes that would become slush; this would then harden when the temperatures fell at night. Soon, it would all turn into gray mounds of ice that would not move until the temperatures in the night and the day became warmer.

Most of my neighbors would not wait for warmer times. As soon as the snow stopped falling, they would decide it was spring, and would begin to decorate their yards with baskets of hothouse flowers bought at the Walmart garden shop 80 miles away.

They really loved spring in Baker. Just about everyone would buy or plant flowers in their yards. My neighbors, Don and Judy Dilworth, were no exception. They would fill their yard with flowers and tomatoes—that is what they grew, flowers and several varieties of cherry and grape tomatoes.

One summer—it must have been the first summer I was there—they invited me over for a tour of their garden. They had been hard at work at it all through spring so that now every inch of the place was bursting with color.

Don proudly showed me the neatly manicured bed of irises. He had planted the bulbs last fall and they had stayed in the frozen earth for all of that time before awakening as soon as the earth thawed in spring and summer. There were also deep pink azalea shrubs along one side of the yard, Black Eyed Susan’s overflowing their bed, and rainbow-rows of gladiolus standing strong and tall.

And then, of course, there were the tomatoes. I forget the names of the varieties they had planted, but all were doing very well—grape and cherry tomatoes. We plucked and sampled them as we went by the beds.

Everywhere you looked there was some kind of flowering plant or tomato. It was not only a beautiful garden, but it was also a very well-planned garden. It was even a harmoniously planted garden.

Each plant had also been very carefully and enthusiastically nurtured, fussed over, and raised. Don and Judy had debated whether each one would live well beside or among the other plants, and each had been carefully allotted a particular space in the garden. It was a nice garden, even a beautiful garden, but it was so…regimented, so rigidly planned and executed.

As we got to the end of the tour and sat munching on tomatoes and cheese and bread, I suddenly noticed a big patch of flowers I had not been invited to “ooo” and “ahhh” over. It was a big burst of deep blue that appeared to be sneaking in under the wooden fence that divided the yard from the back alley.

“What are those?” I asked as I pointed them out.

A big grin spread across Don’s face.

“Voluntaries!” he exclaimed.

“They’re called ‘voluntaries?’” I said. “Strange name.”

“No,” said Don. “Their actual name is Bachelor Button, but these are voluntaries—they *volunteered* to grow there all on their own.

“They’ve been around for a while. I didn’t plant them, and didn’t intend to have them, but they found a place where the soil is good and where a good bit of water gets splashed on to them when I’m watering, so they come back every spring, and they grow like crazy. Their roots must be pretty deep by now.”

I was reminded of my time in the Dilworth garden as I thought about how to talk about the passage we heard from this letter to the Hebrews. This passage can read like a list of rules—do this and do not do this. It can be like the Dilworth garden which was so carefully planned out, and which turned out really nice…but without any room for spontaneous beauty…or life—except for the Bachelor Button Voluntaries.

This is what can happen when everything is legalism—rules meant to carefully define, restrict, and limit our lives. If we all follow the rules, our lives would be very well ordered and free of a lot of the strife we currently experience. The problem, of course, is that rules relentlessly enforced with an iron hand can come to lose sight of the human creature they were meant to serve and *pre*serve—when the rules become more important than our humanity.

Yet it must be said that these verses also include some vital and enduring truths that are meant to also describe to us who God is and what life with God is like. Instead of merely rules, these verses can be how we may come to live our lives when our hearts, minds, and spirits are rooted in the love God shows us.

That is why our list begins with a call to harmony and generosity: *Let mutual love continue.* (and) *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.* [13:1,2]

Throughout the letter, the author has encouraged the community to relate to the other members as more than neighbors or community members. The writer calls on them to think of the others as their brothers and sisters. The early Christians practiced what is called “fictive kinship” in which they endeavored to really think of themselves as truly related to the others.

This would have been quite a departure from the strict lines of blood relationships and the loyalties mandated by them. This was a breaking down of such barriers and it made for a society where you could count on others to make time in their lives and concern for you—even when no blood relationship existed. This means that every person around you could be counted on to unconditionally love and care for you.

The next rule, the call for showing hospitality to strangers, is a thoughtful way of making sure the community did not become insular or clannish, but instead also looked past their own inner circles to welcome others with the same kind of fellowship. What is more, there is also an element of self-interest involved. The writer tells us that hospitality shown to strangers may cause us to “accidentally entertain angels without knowing it.” The suggestion is that showing such kindness and hospitality may be returned by some heavenly personage who will gladly do some good to or for us.

The writer also calls in us to remember those who are in prison and those who are being mistreated. This is to be more than a show of kindness or compassion. It was also a reminder of some of the hardships many members of the community had faced in the past. They are to remember the cruel and frightening places prisons were in those days. The individuals in such a place would depend heavily on visits from family and friends who would bring them food and other comforts. Without such help, many would not have survived.

So, the people to whom the letter was addressed are to remember their own experience of persecution and to empathize with others going through the same ordeal. Indeed, this was so important to the writer of Hebrews that he urged them to remember the horrors of prison and to treat prisoners as if they themselves were again going through the same suffering.

The remaining advice concerns other aspects of life together that make for a harmonious life of integrity: fidelity in marriage, contentment with what we have and that we should avoid the love money, and he urges them to remember their leaders, especially the ones who may have been direct witnesses to Jesus’ ministry.

Still, all these good instructions can be a burden if we think of them only as rules, and if we try to enforce them without regard of the human spirit. They are a burden when they are used as a means to control people, rather than offering them as a way to live together, and with God, in truth and with righteousness.

A great deal of trauma and unhappiness has been caused throughout Christian history by the church and the community when we have tried to relentlessly control people in this way.

Not that we should ever abandon the advice outlined here. Instead, we should remember what makes all of this possible for us. We should remember the very foundation of our faith, and it is not found in rules and legalisms. It is found in the love and faithfulness of God.

*‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ So we can say with confidence,
‘The Lord is my helper;
   I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?’* [v.5b, 6]

This is something God has promised since the days of the patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible, to the likes of Abraham and Sarah. It is what Moses promises the people and Joshua as they are about to enter the land of Canaan. God will never leave them—nothing will ever cause God to abandon them.

The writer of Hebrews also points to Jesus whose life and whose story has drawn them together in the first place. The love and sacrifice demonstrated in his life will also never change. And because of this, we do not have to coerce ourselves or others into tight little bands of religious-legal warriors looking out and punishing violations to the rules.

Instead, we can be like the Bachelor Buttons in Don and Judy Dilworth’s garden. Like the flowers that attached themselves to good soil and enough water to live on and thrive, and to send down deep, strong roots that keep bringing forth flowers every year, we can attach ourselves to God’s promise of consistent, unwavering love and concern.

We can be inspired, and we can be made utterly confident by Christ’s example of sacrificial love for us. And from that amazing foundation of love and sacrifice, we too can live and grow, and thrive. This is what the writer of Hebrews hoped to instill in the community. It is what God still wants for us to find in our lives together and with God: hearts and spirits that have found a good place to live and grow, a place where we voluntarily and happily follow the One who loves us and will never leave us.

And so my prayer for us all is that we will receive the goodness of God, and live graciously, joyfully, and gladly. May this be so. Amen.