

## **Epiphany Worship Series—“The Essentials”**

8 February 2015: Fifth after the Epiphany (Year B)

First United Methodist Church of Arlington, TX

“Like Jesus Did”

Preaching Text: Hebrews 2:14-18

“The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do,  
something to love, and something to hope for”  
(Joseph Addison).

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We call this the epistle to the Hebrews, but honestly this text is probably a sermon manuscript. Before we read our lesson this morning we might note that the original readers/hearers of Hebrews were doubtless an assortment of Christians who had become tired, let down, and dispirited by the tough path that is the road of discipleship. It is hard. It is difficult. It sometimes seems very long. Yet the writer will help these Christians with both a shaky and firm grip on the gospel to hold on—and indeed hang on. The writer believes that God’s promises are sure and just in Jesus. Hear the day’s lesson for the Presentation of the Lord:

14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (Hebrews 2:14-18).

Identification and showing how Jesus is superior to many other sorts of revelations and disclosures that God makes to God’s people is a main theme of Hebrews. It uses images familiar to Jews and depicts Jesus as the great high priest. Hebrews introduces the gospel in Jewish terms and it portrays Jesus as a mediator to God. Remarkably this mediation means that there is a close affinity between Jesus and his followers. We might even say it expands and deepens other New Testament understandings of the doctrine of the incarnation.

Jesus both intercedes for us and invites us to follow in his footsteps. For this reason the author appeals, “let us hold fast the confession.” The exact substance of the confession we do not know, but no doubt it asserts basic Christian faith.

The writer reminds the readers that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” Or more positively stated: Christ is sympathetic to our weakness—yet Christ is without sin. Christ is able feel with us and for us in those circumstances because he “has been tested in every way like we have been.”

We would do well to understand this phrase to mean not that Jesus underwent every specific temptation in identical fashion that we have experienced. Instead, he faced a full range of temptation—without falling into sin. Because he faced the same kind, range, and power of temptations that we face, he is able to understand as high priest. Because he did not sin, Jesus is able to be a sympathetic high priest.

The author concludes that we should approach Christ as the high priest’s throne of grace with assurance and confidence for we will not find rebuff, but rather mercy and forgiveness. Because Jesus has suffered all the pain of human life, he is the high priest who sacrifices on our behalf.

“Jesus is all about giving” certainly is a conclusion we can draw from reading the Gospels and Hebrews. Naturally like almost everything from “open carry Tarrant County” to whether or not one should vaccinate against the measles, we can debate the essentials of everything. Yet most of us would consider giving as essential to our faith.

Maybe you remember the opening line of a book that turned 50 last year: “Once there was a tree and she loved a boy?” And so begins Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*, the bestselling children’s book that turns 50 this year and is still, 10 million copies later, one of the most divisive in the canon.

As its name suggests, the story is a tale about giving. The tree gives the boy her branches to hang from when he longs to play, apples to sell when he needs money, her branches to build with when he asks for a home, her trunk to carve a boat out of when he wants to get away, and a stump to sit on when he must rest his weary bones.

For its fans, the book is a parable about the beauty of generosity, and the power of giving to forge connection between two people. For its detractors, the book is an irresponsible tale that glorifies maternal selflessness, even as the maternal figure is destroyed in the process. Despite the tree being reduced to a stump, the book declares in its final lines, “the tree was happy” (“The uncomfortable truth in *The Giving Tree*,” by Elissa Strauss in *The Week*: October 17, 2014).

For most of us it is not too hard to relate this children’s parable to ordinary life. Many of us know persons who seem totally selfless, and we know people who seem thoroughly selfish. If we can give to others out of a sense of following Jesus and the tracks of generosity he laid down for us, then our giving has meaning within the context of our faith. The incarnation of Jesus is an example of how God became a human being so that we as human beings could become more like God with respect to serving others—“As Jesus Did”—our sermon title for today.

Some of you will be inspired and energized about doing something for others in our “5,789 Mile Mission Project.” For those of you who told me you could not get behind our building/street project the last two years—well now is your opportunity to do something for the less fortunate people of Liberia. The project will finish the construction of a Kaymah H. Warner New Hope Academy—a school in Liberia and a place that we have had a lot of interest and success in mission. There is a lot of information in the bulletin insert for this morning—but we will do much with this project as a church for this next 11 months.

Our financial target is around \$75,000. Like our ONE MILE MISSION our “5789 mile mission” invites every small group, Sunday school class, youth group, children’s team, or collection of preschoolers to make or create a mission tactic to benefit this mission. We do for others like Jesus did for others. If we are his disciples, should we not do as Jesus did? We are a church known for worship, Christian education, and mission. We have a reputation for these things and have for many years. In fact a lot of folks take us for granted because they know we can always be counted on!

The employee with the perfect attendance record after twenty years on the job usually gets a plaque and a round of applause—maybe a few handshakes, but little more. The person who climbs Mt. Everest for the first time attracts more recognition than the many Sherpas who’ve ascended the peak for decades. There’s just something about consistency that reduces fascination to near-apathy over time.

But we do not do what we do for recognition or salutes—we do it because not only does Jesus identify with us as high priest, but we identify with Jesus because he is our Lord and we follow his words and example. **Welcome to our “5,789 Mile Mission Project.”** Amen.

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