

Sermon for August 25, 2019
Heb. 13:1-8
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
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Spirit of God, mold my words and make them yours so that they may be heard by your people. Amen.

Being Good Stewards

My daughter and I share a common fondness for list-making. We make grocery lists and vacation lists and things to remember lists and music lists and book lists and Netflix lists and, especially, to-do lists. While at times the lists may look overwhelming, there is a certain satisfaction in seeing what needs to be done laid out in black and white and then, yes!, checking the items off one by one.

But I wonder how many of us write down spiritual to-do lists? I wonder how often we stop to contemplate what we have been instructed to do to be stronger stewards of our Christian faith? Those other lists might be fun or even helpful, but groceries, vacation, books, Netflix, even writing a sermon are all temporary. They themselves cannot hold living water.

I do know of one spiritual list maker. His name was Paul, and he was an avid apostle of Jesus Christ, though he never personally was in Christ's company of disciples. He wrote lists about the persecutions he received as a believer and lists about what kind of persecutions and hardships believers can expect, and lists about how to live as a believer and safeguard the faith. What we find in our passage from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning is a spiritual to do list, a very clear list of the steps to take to be good stewards of our faith, and if that faith is truly important, we would be wise to listen to, and follow, the list. But first we need a little background.

How many of you would consider yourselves well-versed in the Letter to the Hebrews? I, for one, cannot claim to be so. I had to do a bit of prep before tackling this scripture, so let me share with you some of what I learned. While we often attribute this letter to Paul, the authorship of the letter has been in question since it first started circulating between 56 and 95 AD. For many centuries, some scholars have held that the Apostle Paul, who died in 64 AD, wrote it while in prison in Rome to the church in Rome. Just as many other scholars have held that while the theology matches Paul's, as do the lists, the sophisticated writing style does not, so they believe that a disciple of Paul's wrote it. To this day, no one can say with 100% certainty who wrote the letter, but here it is, part of the canonized Bible, so it must be important.

To whom was the letter written? To "Hebrews," of course, as the title states. But who were these Hebrews? Again, there is no consensus. Maybe it was written to those

“Hebrews” (Jewish Christians) living in Rome, or perhaps it was written to other Jewish Christians in Jerusalem or other parts of the known world where the teachings of Christ were spreading. It may have been written to those known as Hebraic Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah but who still held firmly to Jewish laws and rituals. Or, it may have been written to Hellenist Jews, those who believed in Jewish as the Messiah but who mixed and mingled Jesus’ teachings with their own Greek philosophy. Remember that the epistles, the letters in the back of the bible, preceded the gospels which were not written down until much later in the 1st century. The letters were clarifications and reminders of what the gospels, being proclaimed verbally, not read, were about; and the people hearing those words were accepting something considered radical and dangerous. The Letter to the Hebrews, whoever they were, was a letter written to keep the faith alive in the time of persecution and paganism. There is much in this letter that speaks to us today.

Stay with me because there is another piece of important information. We’ve heard of Jesus being described as the “Great High Priest.” That title comes from the role of Jesus outlined in the Letter to the Hebrews, and it has to do with the responsibilities and privileges of “sonship” and covenant. As son of God, Jesus carried out his responsibilities to the Father, sacrificing himself as the lamb upon the altar, and then reigning with God forever. We, the followers of Jesus, have that same kind of relationship with Jesus; as sons and daughters in kinship with him, we, too, have responsibilities and privileges that are a part of our covenant relationship with Christ. This letter clearly enumerates those responsibilities and privileges.

The Letter to the Hebrews issued a clarion call for all followers to let go of whatever remnants of Judaism they still clung to in order to fully embrace Jesus Christ, whether Hebrew or Greek. We may not have any Jewish remnants that we still cling to, but, if we are honest, we do have attitudes, positions, allegiances, and beliefs that sometimes run contrary to the gospel. This call is for us, too, a call to total allegiance to Christ, not the world or leaders of this world or our whims, as well as a call to practicing good stewardship of our relationship with Christ, something that Paul and his disciples took very seriously, so seriously they were willing to be jailed, tortured, and killed for it.

Nothing in this list should come as a surprise to us; indeed, the list includes the basic responsibilities that our relationship with Christ require. What is startling, though, is that in a time of possible persecution, the author didn’t say “Be prepared to flee,” or “Go into hiding,” or “Bury your valuables,” or “Safeguard your family at all costs,” but instead gave a list of actions that had to do with love, and it was that kind of love, love made visible, that made the gospels radical and dangerous two thousand years ago. Today, we may find them just as radical and dangerous, if we really embrace them. We, too, as Christians, are in a kind of persecution as we find our religion losing significance and our churches becoming little islands in a big sea of secularism, partisan politics, distrust, and

angry division. What we find in Hebrews is our to-do list to steward our faith, in good times and in the not so good. And that checklist is founded on love.

Let's begin with the last item and move toward the first. And, let's ask ourselves in the silence of our own hearts before God how many we can check off as "done."

#6. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of faith to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (vs. 7). The pretense of self-sufficiency, that we know all there is to know about our faith, that our answers are the only correct answers, and that we can manage on our own, is not beneficial to good stewardship of the faith. Any of us can look back to other people whose personal influence made an impact on our spiritual journeys. How did they live their lives? Are we, in fact, modeling their faithfulness? We didn't get this far by ourselves, so what a debt we owe them. Good stewardship of our faith always includes learning from someone who is a little farther along the spiritual road than we are, and who exemplifies Jesus Christ. But who are our leaders as we continue our journeys? Are they people of God, believers who practice what Jesus taught? Who we honor is who we become, so we need to be very careful in deciding who to follow. Paul would say the only one to follow is Christ.

#5. "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have" (vs.5). Money, money, money. That's personal stuff, right? Then why did Jesus talk about it so much that his followers also talked about it? Money and possession were a real worry for the audience of this letter because in a time of persecution, they knew that at any moment the authorities could take away their belongings. Then what would they have? The author of this letter reminds them, and us, what is most important as stewards of faith: keeping first things first, and loving and trusting God rather than money. In times of persecution, it becomes clear that we really can't "take it with us." Imagine how checking this off the to-do list could impact not only our lives, but the whole structure of human life. To be content with what we have, and to be grateful for it, would limit so much greed, war, and exploitation in this world.

#4. "Marriage should be honored by all" (vs. 4). Isn't it striking that honoring marriage is included in the list of good stewardship of the faith, especially in a time of persecution? It would seem there would be more pressing problems. Perhaps in a time of persecution, though, it is easier to decide who is more essential than another, or who is the master, or whose rights are most important. We see those arguments daily in life around us. But here, we are told there is a mutuality—not that the husband should be honored, or the wife should be honored, but that that kind of relationship, one of mutual trust, of reciprocity, of covenant, should be honored. What might happen if we asked ourselves this question: "How am I taking care of my relationships with my spouse/friend/child/neighbor spiritually, physically, and emotionally?" Good stewardship of our relationships is primary to being good stewards of our faith.

#3. “Remember those in prison and those tortured as if you yourselves were being tortured” (vs. 3). If the author of this letter was Paul or one of his students, he knew about prison and torture, and he asks that followers of Jesus remember those who suffer for the sake of Christ, as any of them might have at any moment. The strong solidarity among Christians made a vivid impression upon outsiders and drew others to them. It takes true courage these days to live out, as a friend put it, “the red letters in the gospel,” those words of Jesus that have to do with turning the other cheek, seeking the lost (instead of waiting from them to come to us), noticing the person on the fringes, offering healing and hospitality, forgiving one another, and speaking the truth in love. Those actions can put the believer in all sorts of prisons, not just ones with bars, but prisons of ridicule, or hate, or isolation, or attack. The spirit in which kindness and compassion are shown was essential to Christians, and our world seems to have lost that, and at what a price.

#2. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Even in a time of persecution, a time of risking losing one’s possession, status, or life, the author of this letter cautions followers of Jesus about hospitality, about opening one’s life, one’s heart, one’s church, one’s home, one’s country, to someone who is not one of them. Good stewardship of the faith not only involves our love for those who pray like us, believe like us, look like us, and act like us, but it also includes extending that love to the stranger, the one who is different, the one who is also a child of God.

And finally, the number one to-do is what Jesus Christ preached, taught, and modeled: **“Let mutual love continue.”** Mutual love, covenant love, a two-way relationship. We know who we are called to love: God, our neighbor, and ourselves, but can we truly check this one off, or are there people we know that we do not, and do not intend, to love. When we break the bonds of love with one of them, we break the bond with Christ, and when we break the bond with Christ, we fail in our good stewardship of the faith.

Everything that this author reminds the Hebrews to do to keep the faith can be pared down to love. “Faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love,” wrote Paul. Practicing good stewardship of our faith may very well include a black and white written “to-do” list so that we remember and are accountable. Surely our faith and our relationship with Jesus Christ is worth that. Surely we want our faith to be the well that holds every drop of living water.

May it be so.