

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
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I Samuel 2: 1–10
Hebrews 13:1–5, 15–16

ENTRUST BECOMES LOYALTY

In selecting Hebrews for our lesson today, we diverge from the Lectionary—and the roof hasn't fallen in. Hebrews is a book of considerable insight for people who are still so bold as to claim and announce—people who are willing to confess with their lips and live with their lives the affirmation that there is a God. No matter how unpopular that becomes in our culture, there will always be a remnant who will boldly say, “I know there is a God.”

That God has come to me. Jesus comes to us in the book of Hebrews as a pioneer of salvation, or so it says in the second chapter. This statement not only redefines temple worship for the people who read Hebrews when it was first written, who heard it repeated from the school of Paul, if not from his lips, themselves—these people saw a well-established system of sacrifices—one where they had become abused, and Jesus comes to bring healing. Jesus ushers in a fresh understanding of what God is doing when God goes about the business of saving God's people—men and women constantly being saved from themselves and from their own disillusionments.

We are people today who boldly say that Jesus is central to our past experience and to all that God has done in working with humanity. Maybe because we're so familiar with one another, that doesn't sound very radical. But in fact, it is out of step with so much of what others would have us believe. Jesus is central to our present experience of God at work in human history. And Jesus is central to God's work for our children and for our grandchildren—future generations of men and women, even if the world fails to believe Jesus really is exactly who he says he is.

Now based on this trust, we begin to understand and live just as the people who first read the book of Hebrews—a radically new truth. We are being retrained by this book. It is the basic training manual for every Christian. Often when young Christians come to faith, they are told to go read the book of Romans. I still have a hard time understanding Romans. But Hebrews is easy to understand. It's basic training.

Now, what do you suppose the first thing is that a good soldier learns in basic training? Yesterday our church was filled with retired military—men and women who had served their country and still do in many ways. And so I circulated in the crowd and asked them what they had learned at OCS or at basic training. Some said *duty*. Some said *the meaning of honor*. But they all stressed *a sense of unity* that undergirds everything they believe about their commitment to this country and to the military.

When you read training manuals by experts, they tell us that learning to trust what is taught by their drill instructor is the first thing a good soldier learns. And that quickly

evolves into a loyalty, the first value taught to those who live—duty, honor, country.

Where do our loyalties lead us today? How do we move forward? The book of Hebrews tells us our supreme drill instructor would have us show hospitality to strangers—literally, to treat strangers like they were members of our family.

Remember the prisoner and those who are tortured. We are told, in essence, that this reminds of us of the Hebrews—they too were once the oppressed and they should be careful now not to become the oppressor. Isn't it sad that in our culture we know that many people who were abused in their early years grow up to become abusers. And yet, somehow, we in the faith think that we're immune to such temptations. We who have been liberated from so much should never go about heaping guilt on others.

Hebrews says: "respect the bonds of marriage." This is an injunction which reminds us how faithful God always is to us. When Malachi sought to restore some sense of integrity to his faith community, he didn't begin in the temple. He began in personal relationships. He began by asking people to rededicate and renew the vows of their marriage.

Hospitality – Justice – Faithfulness: these really are the truths we look for when we want to see Jesus alive in our midst. But we are tempted to forget our basic training—tempted to resist that love which God gives us which is pure and undefiled. People who read the book of Hebrews must have known the words from Timothy: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. And those who are eager to be rich have wandered away from their faith, piercing themselves with many thorns." As for those who are rich in the present age, remind them not to be haughty, not to set their hopes on uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who provides for all of us everything and for our enjoyment.

They are to do good—to be rich in good works, generous and sharing and thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future so that they may take hold of the light that really is life. Again, the word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

I remind us as Christians, just as young recruits, we are asked—we are called—to trust: To trust in God more than in our material possessions. And just as belief in God goes against everything our culture tries to impose upon us, so does trusting in something besides wealth.

If in the realm of military life the lessons of basic training result in a trust that becomes loyalty, when *Semper Fi* becomes more than a motto, so does stewardship become more than an ideal. It is our physical exercise, our calisthenics, if you will, and pardon the pun.

So today, our proportional giving is survival training. It's mental reconditioning. It's relying on God who leads us to loyalty where we see our actions for this day as making a difference, first in our lives, and then in the lives of one another; and, ultimately, in the lives of those who will come here after we are gone.

I have to share one consistent experience that I've had. It comes from the courageousness of people who have accepted the call to become part of a stewardship committee. I dare say it may be the least popular committee in any church. But across the decades of being an ordained minister in the church, at some point everyone who has overcome their fear and made the attempt to embrace biblical stewardship has given me the same message of truth. They've offered me, in essence I believe, the word of the Lord. Not a new revelation, but one consistent with all that the Bible teaches us about money. Without exception, in one form or another, every stewardship committee person who has taken stewardship on in a new understanding—as a way of life, a discipline—has said these words to me (and I heard them only this week): “Imagine what we could do if everyone tried to tithe.” And we know it's true, Right?

Imagine what we could do as a congregation if everyone tried to tithe. Let me close with one final story. Once upon a time there was a woman who woke in the middle of the night from a nightmare. She was in a cold sweat. She elbowed her husband awake to share the details of a horrible dream. She explained how she was in church, delivering a Minute for Mission on stewardship. “Yes,” her husband said, “that sounds like a bad dream, but not a nightmare, c'mon.” “Let me finish,” she interrupted. “When I sat down from sharing my testimony about stewardship, and they passed the offering plate, I looked in my purse and I couldn't find anything smaller than a hundred dollar bill.” Oh, come on, the rest of y'all, get it.

Take hold now of your Estimate of Giving cards, which are in every bulletin. In just a moment you'll be asked to say the words of the affirmation of faith. I want you to be holding this card. I want you to allow your trust in God to be come loyalty to God and loyalty to one another and imagine all that we could do—all that we could be, all that would change in this place— if we each did what we're about to say we believe.

Amen.