

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
October 4, 2009 – World Communion

Genesis 2:18–24
Hebrews 1:1–4; 2: 5–12

STRENGTH OF OUR BROKEN PLACES

I told those at the 8:30 service that even though I've been looking at this passage for days now, every time I would close my Bible and come back to it, I had to search a little bit for Hebrews. It's a hard book to find—even with the page number. I remember in seminary, Walter Brueggemann (I think, I may be mistaken) came to speak to us. When a big name comes to campus, even the professors dismiss classes. It's amazing. He stood up to speak, opened his Bible, announced the scripture, fumbled around a little bit. He noticed that the president of seminary had his Bible open, so he went over and said, "Here, let me have yours; you've given me a Bible without Hebrews in it." After that, I always felt a bit self-justified when I couldn't find a book; if Walter Brueggemann could struggle like that when he knows the Bible by heart.

We laugh a little bit at those parts of life that are sometimes so serious and real that it's difficult for us. Imagine how difficult it was to follow Jesus in the first and second centuries. Imagine leaving the synagogue and the Jewish family you had always loved, and worshiping outside because you were no longer welcome to bring sacrifices along with your family. Imagine how easy it would be to doubt, even having witnessed miracles and healings and multiplications of loaves and fishes and calming of seas. Jesus has died and risen and ascended back to heaven, and you're living the confession of his divinity come down to earth and taking our sins upon himself.

We think we have it more difficult today to live as followers of Christ. We have so many distractions. And we know so much more than what they knew then. But in truth, the book of Hebrews was written to a people who were at the epicenter of doubt and trouble and suffering. It's like a great sermon offered to encourage people who are living out their faith every day in public, not just in private.

We think our culture is hostile to the church. Imagine how hostile it would have been toward a minority of people who were claiming something as radical as the Messiah coming? When we face struggles and difficulty, we do so with a little bit of humor.

Some of you know that this past Christmas my mother came to live with us; it worked for a while, but then her needs became greater than we could sustain. And so she's now in a home about five miles from our house that meets her needs almost perfectly. But while she was at our house our children got to know her a little better. The struggle was she wasn't the person she was before. My children had heard the tales of my childhood in a very, very religious family—religious in the sense that guilt was the means of getting anyone to do anything, especially church. They knew how much she would enjoy hearing scripture; so one afternoon, they were in the living room together, the three of them,

and my son began to read. Then he handed the Bible to my daughter, and he left the room; before she could begin reading, my mother said to my daughter, “He seems like a nice boy; does he come from a nice family?” And my daughter said, “Not really.”

Not to make light of Alzheimer’s or dementia, but it’s an example of one of those serious life circumstances—in many ways the epitome of suffering, I think, is to be lost in your own thoughts and be guessing at the right answers to questions and situations. I think that’s more what these early Jewish disciples felt—a kind of self-doubt that we witness when we are truly saddened to our core—at the loss of capacity, the contradiction, the struggle; and so, by God’s grace, we eventually learn to smile, to laugh at all that is too real to be ignored or too serious to be considered without a sense of “there, but for the grace of God, go I.”

I wonder this morning if we can admit that the message of Hebrews is a message that was delivered in such a way that people could remember it. The words kind of sounded similar. The alliteration was there in the original language, something that we miss today. But I wonder if we would take that Hebrews means something like this: In a world that couldn’t care less, we are to be a people who cannot care more. We are called to care in spite of this world’s cruelty.

Well, maybe it’s like making the promise of reconciliation. And recognizing that more reconciliation towards your intent is broken because both parties came to forgive but neither party came prepared to be forgiven, which is so much harder, isn’t it? Sometimes the obvious eludes us. But it is to the obvious that Hebrews is pointing this morning.

Remember the story of the little boy who is practicing his piano. Back in the day the salesman used to go door to door. Now they call us, but then they used to make rounds of streets. The salesman knocked on the door, but the little boy didn’t hear him; and finally the salesman peeked through the living room window and caught the boy’s eye. The boy stopped playing and came to the door and the salesman said, “Is your mother home?” And the little boy looked at the salesman and looked at the piano and said, “Are you kidding me?”

The obvious. The risen Christ proclaimed that we are to forgive. Now when I grew up, as I said, in a very religious home—traditional religion, maybe a little right of tradition—I was taught that if you want to be a recipient of Christ’s forgiveness, you have to be forgiving. An article in the Christian Century some years ago said that the risen Christ pardoned us, not to have us be forgiving, but rather at last to set us free to forgive. The difference may be so obvious and subtle at once that we don’t grasp it. But do we forgive out of obligation? Or is there a step in forgiveness that goes beyond just having to, where we see forgiveness as liberation from ourselves.

I was talking to someone (no one in this church) recently by phone—someone close to me, but from my distant past; and this person (I will use the masculine person here, but this doesn’t depict the sex of the person) had just entered into care for being an addict. I

asked the individual if he knew why addiction had taken control of his life. The person stumbled, and I said, “Do you think you liked yourself when you were in the midst of that addiction?” The answer was, “Oh no, not at all.” And it’s the story told time and again. Finally I said, “Do you know why you didn’t like yourself?” The answer: “Well, because I’m addicted.” I challenged him and wanted to know if maybe he’d forgotten that he began to self-medicate, not because he was addicted but because he didn’t like himself. It had actually come in reverse. And I asked him if he knew why that self-loathing had taken over his life. There was a long pause. And he said, “You know Carl, you’re not so perfect yourself.” I thought, “Oh, no. I’ve hit a nerve. I’ve gotten a little too close.”

The passage in Hebrews is one that offers us the humility and the willingness to forgive the way Christ has forgiven us—forgive in a manner that sees the offender as the person who is injured as well. Henri Nouwen called it the wounded healer.

When we forgive someone, we usually believe that somehow we are paying the price. But forgiveness exacts a price from both parties. There is a terrible brokenness; and there is a need for God-saving power, not only for the offended, but for the perpetrator as well. We should never tell another person he/she has to forgive. But it is my duty this morning as one who is ordained to Word and Sacrament to remind us that it is every Christian’s responsibility to confess to his or herself: there’s a self-loathing in us that only Christ can make right.

Jesus who suffered our sin even unto death calls us now to forgive so that God’s purposes can be accomplished. Now get this: not only in us—because of the way Christ has brought salvation about—but so God’s purposes can be accomplished for the one that has offended us. Maybe that’s why Jesus talked so much about loving your enemies and praying for those that persecute you, and heaping kindness on those who make your life miserable.

Carol Luebering Said it this way: Let’s get one thing straight. Forgiveness is something you do for yourself. Feeling the pain. Bridging the barrier that separates you and another person, admitting honestly to yourself at first; and then it’s absolutely necessary to admit your anger and rage to the other. Then acknowledging, even owning that there is pain for the offended. And so responding to that with kindness with expressions of love, with overt opportunities, to go beyond what is minimally required.

Remember if you do nothing else, you can take your Bibles and mark in the middle of Hebrews the real meaning of the whole sermon. Chapter 4, verse 14: Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus, the son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet he was without sin. Tested in the same way we have been tested. And yet he was completely obedient. Let us, therefore, approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.

Jesus lived with us. He was wounded for our transgressions, Bruised for our iniquities. And his resurrection is our healing; this, as surely as his suffering is our salvation. Can we imagine what it would be like to live our lives in such a way that no one could ever doubt again our true believing—our identity? That it would be obvious? Let us so care for one another that we know again what it means to have a priest who is not untouchable but has suffered even as we have. God will prepare our hearts for the sacrament and God will meet our needs; even the ones that we haven't found the words to express. The ones that are like a deep muscle pain within our hearts—the needs that are more like groans and whimpers than they are intelligible words, the needs that we haven't even admitted to ourselves, much less anyone else. Allow this to be that time of invitation, of this the peace-making offering of our denomination.

May the Lord bring you peace that this world can never offer. May the Lord bring you peace that this world can never take away.

So let us worship the Lord.