

It has been exactly six weeks since Easter Sunday. If you are wondering, “Haven’t we heard enough about the Cross and Jesus’ blood? Can you just tell us what we should do?” Well, no. But after spending Sunday mornings in the Gospel of Mark from January through Easter, hearing about Jesus and his work of salvation, Hebrews 10 may be just what we need. This week’s Scripture is steeped in Old Testament imagery, but it reveals what it means to follow Jesus.

What to do as a Christ follower comes after returning to the book of Hebrews’ favorite theme: Jesus’ superiority to Jewish law and sacrifices. We risk our spiritual well-being by trivializing what God has given us in Christ. So, if you’re thinking about slipping back into an old way of living, please stop. The writer of Hebrews won’t have us do any sort of thing. He reminds us that Jewish priests had to keep doing the same sacrificial work over, and over again, before Jesus came. There wasn’t even a place in the old sanctuary for them to sit down and rest from their work because their work was never done.

Simply stated, there’s the problem with religion vs. faith. In religion you’re never done, *because you can never do enough*. In that sense, Christianity really can’t be called a religion. Religion is not and never will be the way to establish a right relationship with God. Of course, God’s people sometimes *treat* Christianity as a way to keep God happy or make God like us. We sometimes assume we have to think, do, or say just the right thing to connect with God.

Will Willimon observes that religion, including some forms of Christianity, can be a one-way ticket to fatigue, if not failure. After all, just when we children of God think we’ve got it figured out, someone comes along and says, “What about this?” “Have you considered that?” At about the point the church has worn us out, the church comes along and asks, “Shouldn’t you teach this?” Or “Would you organize that activity?” And there we go again, chasing our religious tails, trying to get right with God.

The Bible calls Jesus’ followers to receive God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible also calls Jesus’ followers to *respond* to that grace by doing things like praying, studying, giving, loving our enemies and caring for the poor. Yet none of those acts establish our relationship with God. In Jesus Christ, God has already established a loving relationship with his people.

So, God’s sons and daughters don’t have to work, or run around or follow any ritual to connect to God. Verse 12 says, “*When this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for*

sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (v. 12), speaking of Jesus. We can get off the religious treadmill of trying to chase the right beliefs, the right words, or the right actions.

In verse 19 it says, since God has already graciously connected himself to us, we dare to do what no faithful Jew would ever dare to do. What is that? We can enter "*the Most Holy Place*," that is, the symbol of God's presence among his people. Hebrews 10 is telling us to "Come right in!"

In the time of the Old Covenant, only the High Priest dared to do that, and he dared do it only once a year. Now, says Hebrews' preacher, God's sons and daughters don't have to be afraid of God. Of course, because God is so holy and majestic, we don't approach the Lord casually or carelessly. But because of Christ's finished work, we can let God draw us near to himself. It can be easy to miss what an amazing claim this is. Hebrews insists God's people don't have to avoid the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of everything that is created. Because of Christ's finished work, we can draw close to God the way children approach a loving parent.

Hebrews' preacher offers several ways God draws his children close to himself. Of course, if Jesus' followers don't look closely enough at *why* we do them, they may seem like more steps on the religious treadmill. On top of that, some non-Christians often do some of the same things to which God summons his people. That's the other reason why Hebrews' author returns once again to Jesus' identity and work. The writer of Hebrews wants to remind Christians that our doing of those things are *responses* to God's act of connecting us to himself in Jesus Christ; not a way to get God *to respond to us*.

God invites us to draw near to him as those who know God has accepted us in our baptism. Of course, baptism is only a visible sign that God has graciously forgiven us so that for Jesus' sake we are acceptable to God. On top of that, God invites Jesus' followers to draw near to God by "*holding unswervingly to the hope we possess*" (v. 23). And what verse 25 calls "*the Day*," the second coming, is yet to come.

And since Jesus is faithful, his adopted brothers and sisters can trust his promises to usher in a day when justice will flow down like a roaring waterfall. When death and pain will die. When no politicians or voters will scream at, or even lecture one another. When everyone will have a place to live and enough food to eat. God's people don't know when God will finally keep all of those promises, but we cling tenaciously to our *hope* for what the Apostles' Creed calls "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

God invites his children to draw near to him with what verse 24 calls “*love and good deeds.*” Some of us may be surprised to know this is not first of all a way to get closer to each other; but as a way to get closer to God. Yet the Scriptures insist when we do things like love our enemies and care for creation, God somehow draws us closer to himself. Yet we naturally prefer to let someone else do that sometimes-hard work. So, Hebrews 10 challenges us to strongly encourage each other to do things like mentor children and youth, share the gospel, feed the hungry, and pray for our leaders.

Finally, God invites us to draw near to God by what verse 25 calls “*meeting together.*” While we usually think of that as going to church, Hebrews doesn’t actually say that. It simply calls Christians to meet together. This can mean Christians meeting together not just for Sunday worship, but for fellowship, food, Bible study and possibly serving others in need. After all, God has graciously adopted us into his family. God has transformed you and me from God’s enemies into God’s children, from strangers into siblings. So, when Christians meet together, we are coming to a kind of family reunion.

Yet Hebrews’ preacher insists meeting together is more than that. When we meet together, as Tom Long notes in his commentary on *Hebrews, whether it’s a high mass or a prayer service, whether in a cathedral or a house, with hundreds of other Christians or just two, God draws us close to himself. But even I understand why some people give up the habit. I get it. I get that worshiping by ourselves on a mountain trail can seem far purer than meeting with the motley bunch that shows up in church on Sunday (present company excepted). A colleague of mine says, “we can get tired *in* worship and tired *of* worship.” (Sometimes I notice that when eyelids drop 😊. What’s more, as Tom Long points out, there may be more drama on TV, nicer people at Starbucks and a better view at the lake than in church. And no one in those places will try to twist our arms into giving money, serving on committees, or teaching Sunday School. *Long, Thomas G. Hebrews. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997.

Yet, we profess that when God’s children let God draw us near to himself by meeting together, remarkable things happen. We will be doing that which we do here, by God’s grace, for all eternity. So we practice for that day “*When every knee should bow in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.*” Yet when we meet together, especially for worship, God also brings us into a mysterious heavenly drama. As God draws us nearer to himself, we’re somehow caught up into the great choir of angels and saints who are worshiping God, even now. Sometimes we have to squint hard to see that.

Doug Bratt repeats a story that Fred Craddock told of an older man named Will. I don't remember in what context it was told, but I believe it speaks well to the eternal nature of *meeting together* which Hebrews 10 says we should *not give up*. Fred told of how when he was a boy, his parents would make his siblings and him dress up every Saturday night. Neighbors would then sit in the Craddock family's living room to read the Bible and sing songs like "Bringing in the Sheaves" from old hymnals.

When Craddock asked his mother why they had to do this, she said, "We don't actually live close enough to a church to attend. But some day we might live close enough to a real church and so for now we're practicing." One neighbor who came every week was a man named Will. Fred once asked him, "Have you ever been in a real church?" "Hundreds," was Will's reply. "What's it like?" "Well, I'll tell you," Will answered. "First off, don't go by appearances. 'Cuz sometimes you'll see some little old white clapboard church up on cinderblocks out in the middle of nowhere and maybe the shutters are sagging a bit and all. But don't go by that. Because sometimes God disguises his goodness—he hides his best stuff in little no-account places like that. But you just go inside one of those and you'll see." "See what?" Fred pressed him. "Well, when you look up at the ceiling, you'll see it's a deep, deep blue. And the stars shine and the angels sing and, well, you'll just have to see for yourself someday, young man!"

Fred and his family attended Will's funeral in one of those little churches God had cleverly "disguised." But when Fred got inside, he was disappointed. It was nothing like what Will had promised. The paint was peeling. No stars shone. No angels on display. But then, remembers Fred, the worship service started. The choir began singing and swaying. The congregation joined in and all of a sudden, somewhere in the middle of all that singing and swaying, Fred looked up, "And the ceiling was blue. And the stars were shining. And ministries of angels sang Will to his heavenly rest."

Because Christ, "*a great priest over the house of God,*" (v. 21) has opened the way and provided free access to God's throne room, none of us should ever hesitate to "come right in."

And let's remember that for now we're practicing, because some day we will live close enough to give God glory and praise without end. Amen.