

PROVOCATION

November 15, 2015

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

24th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

Text: Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,

Hebrews 10:22-24 (NRSV)

From cowardice that dare not face new truth
From laziness that is contented with half truth
From arrogance that things it knows all truth,
Good Lord, deliver me.¹

Will Willimon a great preacher in his own right, says that a memorable sermon by Fred Craddock, a master preacher of our age and a teacher of preachers presented a message before a national gathering of the Disciples of Christ in 1995 in which he said that many clergy deal gently with people in the church and that the concept of provoking one another is something with which we cannot deal well.

¹Quoted in May, 1997, lecture by Martin Tel, Princeton Theological Seminary, Prayer from Kenya in *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, George Appleton, gen. Ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

We preachers are more courageous really, from our pulpits, and seemingly less able to tell what we know to a resistant world. Naomi Wolf, writing in a September issue of *Mademoiselle* says that for many people in the secular world, talking about religion or personal spirituality is strictly taboo. She says that the modern career-oriented person can talk about anything - “addictions, affairs, neuroses” but spiritual things are out of bounds. In fact, “admitting to an interest in God is . . . something that provokes the social embarrassment that used to be caused by a boorish, off-color joke.” Wolf believes that many people in society today may secretly long to connect with others about spiritual issues, but are held back by three fears.²

- ◆ **Talking about God makes you look dumb.** Many people associate being religious with being anti-intellectual. This stereotype has existed for quite a while, dating back to the Scopes trial. Wolf speculates that spiritual conversations can be intimidating to successful people because it calls their education, career, and values into question, as if to say: “Maybe all my training and hard work are nothing compared to whether I’m a decent person.”
- ◆ **Talking about God makes you look intolerant.** Because many of the voices in society today that claim to speak for God also condemn certain groups of people, interest in spiritual things is all too quickly associated with intolerance. Wolf believes that when spiritual conversations come up, we need to withhold quick judgments and assumptions about where another person is coming from spiritually. Instead, we need to actively listen to others non-judgmentally as they open up about their own spiritual search.
- ◆ **Talking about God makes you look uncool.** Many people fear that talking about spiritual things makes them appear unsophisticated. That fear may be as real for most adults as it was when they were teens. Atheism, materialism, and a drive for power and professional status are the accepted cultural standards. The qualities many people are secretly searching for such as “humility, gratitude, reverence, and service,” are considered terminally nerdy by the culture. This fear keeps people from discussing spiritual matters. Despite these fears, Wolf believes that more people will be coming out of their spiritual closets, driven by a need to be real and to share what’s really

²Naomi Wolf, “Coming Out for God,” *Mademoiselle*, September 1997, Vol. 103, No. 9, pages 158+.

going on inside.³

Lexington Paper

³ Thoughts preached by b. g. boak on November 16, 1997 at Christ Presbyterian Church, Canton, Ohio rooted in similar texts as today, but especially Hebrews 10:22-24

We don't want to do something that would be provoking. When we are provoked we do some horribly unusual things. Listen to this 1995 clipping from a Lexington newspaper. *Firefighters rushed to the home of Lisa M. Ash, 24, last November to extinguish a fire. They pulled out of her oven a smoldering voodoo doll made from cloth and twigs that she said she was using to cast a spell against a neighbor, based on advice she said she received from a telephone psychic line.*⁴

James W. Moore and 20/20

James W. Moore, author of *Some Things Are Too Good to Be True*, writes about a segment he saw on the television news show 20/20. It was called, "Neighbors at War." It showed how next-door neighbors do battle with each other - fighting, fussing, suing, and sometimes even shooting at each other because of a barking dog, a noisy power tool, or a bouncing basketball. Neighbors at war! Can such things really happen? Is there a solution? Of course there is. "Take 'em to court is our usual approach."

We know what it is to be easily provoked and it usually stimulates an angry response in us. We feel deep down that both are at fault, the one who is angry at the noise of the bouncing basketball as well as the one who is inconsiderate and is bouncing the ball at 3:00 o'clock in the morning. According to this week's D & C, angry neighbors are now being stirred by the sound of leaf blowers and yearning for the more silent days of leaf rakes.

Hardly anyone imagines folks trying to put into practice those lines from Jesus, when he is asked what is the greatest commandment of the law - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second greatest commandment is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There, he passes on a secret about human relationships which has been a backdrop for so much of what the New Testament will have to say.

Spiritual Stuff and Not Going to Church

But, we think, "This is spiritual stuff it really doesn't have much to do with how we are going to be able to live. It is a dog-eat-dog world out there." And yet I continue to maintain, that if nations want to make their tiptoeing in a free market economy work, then they will need to act on the moral heritage that has been in place through Christian faith and not rely on the

⁴Lexington Herald-Leader, February 18, 1994, p. 21. Bgb had paid special attention since it was about Ohio where he was serving as a pastor.

dismantled approach of a strong state or dictatorship, religious or otherwise. People without the approach of the gospel will forever be provoked and may never be truly free.

You've heard them say it, too, "We don't go to church. . . . No, on Sundays we turn on the television, and if we want religion, all we have to do is flip on our favorite religious channel. There are plenty from which to choose with ROKU or Apple TV. We can have all the church we need right there. In fact, we feel a lot more religious here in our living room in front of the TV that we do when we are at church."

You can see his point. After all, who doesn't feel more vaguely "religious" sitting alone in the safe cocoon of your living room, watching preachers who may gyrate a little more than Carrie or I or Josh and Ron at the end of the block? We should comfort and not offend, and that is certainly easier when there is no one sitting beside you on the pew to challenge you or make you uncomfortable. Is this why the author of Hebrews wrote,

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together . . . ?

Paroxysms

It's a curious word used there, the Greek word *paroxysms*, translated here in Hebrews as "provoke." Elsewhere it can be translated as "stir up." Yet this is the only place in the New Testament where this word is related to encouragement.

You are probably aware that the letter to the Hebrews is not a letter at all. It is an early Christian sermon. Here some early Christian preacher uses every means at his disposal, every possible image and argument to grab our attention and to move us. The passage began,

. . . since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus . . . since we have a great high priest . . . let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering . . . let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

Provoke one another? This is a word from the Old Testament when the divine patience wears thin and "the Almighty was provoked." It is the same word Fred Craddock notes that is used in the Book of Proverbs to advise someone who has entered into a foolish contract with his neighbor. What is he supposed to do? Proverbs advises, go to the neighbor and pester him until he finally relents and cancels the contract. The word "pester" is the same word. Provoke him, pester him. Well, that's certainly a text that is to our liking. We like to

provoke and pester. You can find this same word in the Greek in I Corinthians 13, “love is not irritable.” Love is not easily provoked. Which suggests that if we plan to provoke one another to good deeds it will be an anxious rather than relaxed thing to do.

Luke uses the word to describe Paul in Acts 17 where he enters Athens and sees all of these idols which the pagans have before them and says, “Paul’s spirit was provoked.” Deeply disturbed. Distressed. Same word.

Whenever Paul and Barnabas separated from each other as missionaries, Luke says that they had a “sharp disagreement.” It is the same word. They were provoked with one another. We know about provoking. When provoking gets out of the river bank that controls its flow it can even have to do with revenge.

Revenge – Supermarket Mom Janine Brooks

Sometimes it's called sweet revenge. This report is from London. Janine Brooks was a dental student when a man ran into her car and drove away. That was ten years ago. Her damaged car resulted in a considerable financial burden on her student income but the man motorist neither apologized nor ever paid for the damage he had done. Now it is 10 years later. Janine Brooks, the former student, is a dentist, and guess who comes to her office needing a tooth to be pulled. He did not recognize her; she did recognize him. She told him it wouldn't hurt: she lied.⁵ Sweet revenge.

The scene is outside a supermarket in the middle of a torrential downpour. Under a canopy where shopping carts could be unloaded, a man waits in a parked car that occupies most of the space. With his car squarely in the way he watches with calm detachment as a woman seeks to transfer her small child and groceries from two carts to her automobile. First she makes a mad dash around his car to put her child into her vehicle. Then, dripping, she unloads the carts item by item because by this time the rain has destroyed her bags. At last, soaked to the skin, she is finished except for one last maneuver: Gathering all the empty carts left by other shoppers, she calmly encircles the man's car with them. No way could he move without going out into the deluge to clear a path. Then she drives off, giving the shocked fellow a grin and a wave. Sweet revenge. Some of you are taking notes, aren't you?⁶ We can

⁵Source: *Sermons Illustrated*. by Wayne Rouse

⁶ John Kloc in *Reader's Digest*.

laugh about such acts of retaliation until they get out of hand. Then they are no longer funny. Somewhere, somehow, we need to learn how to break the cycle of hurt and revenge. We need to learn to forgive.

Forgiveness – Forrest Gump – Not Enough Rocks

FORGIVENESS IS SERIOUS BUSINESS. If anyone has ever done you a serious wrong, you know how serious forgiveness is. You may remember a heartbreaking scene in the movie FORREST GUMP. One of the central characters, Jenny, returns to her old home after her father has died. The old farm house is dilapidated and abandoned. As she reflects on the sexual abuse that she endured as a child, she is overcome by rage and begins throwing rocks at the house. The photography is powerful as it shows her rapidly reaching for rocks then violently throwing them at the house. Jenny finally falls to the ground in exhaustion and the scene closes with Forrest Gump philosophically saying, "Sometimes there just aren't enough rocks."⁷

There never are enough rocks. If someone has abused you, lied about you, cheated you; if someone you loved has betrayed you, deserted you, destroyed you; if deep in your heart there is a hidden place where there is so much resentment toward another human being, that secretly you wish them dead, there never are enough rocks.

Unresolved Anger in None of These Diseases

S. I. McMillen wrote a book titled *None of These Diseases*, in which he detailed the effects that unresolved anger and hatred have on us. He writes: "The moment I start hating a man, I become his slave. I can't enjoy my work anymore because he even controls my thoughts. My resentments produce too many stress hormones in my body and I become fatigued after only a few hours of work. The work I formerly enjoyed is now drudgery. Even vacations cease to give me pleasure . . . The man I hate hounds me wherever I go. I can't escape his tyrannical grasp on my mind. When the waiter serves me porterhouse steak with French fries, asparagus, crisp salad, and strawberry shortcake smothered with ice cream, it might as well be stale bread and water. My teeth chew the food and I swallow it, but the man I hate will not permit me to enjoy it . . . The man I hate may be many miles from my bedroom; but crueler than any slave driver, he whips my thoughts into such a frenzy that my innerspring mattress becomes a rack of torture. The lowliest of the serfs can sleep, but not me. I really must acknowledge the fact that I am a slave to every man on whom I pour the vials of my wrath."

⁷Cited in the newsletter, *in Other Words*.

Forgiveness is serious business. Forgiveness is essential to our mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health. How do we forgive? How do we let go of our hurts and resentments? I know only one way: WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT WE OURSELVES HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN. Somehow when we acknowledge our own sinfulness and receive God's grace, we find it easier to forgive those who have wronged us.

The writer of Hebrews in our lesson for today tells us that Christ, who is our great high priest, has made an offering in our behalf. It is an offering that makes it possible once and forevermore, for our sins to be taken from us. All our misdeeds, all the times we hurt someone who loved and trusted us, all the times our lives have been shoddy and disappointing, all the times we have been less than God created us to be, all those sins have been buried in the bottom of the deepest sea by the one sacrifice that Christ made in our behalf. When we realize the weight of our own sins and that Christ has removed those sins from us, then out of gratitude and praise, we are able to forgive others.

Doug Sparks – Long Story about Forgiveness

The daughter and son-in-law of Doug Sparks were killed by a drunk driver, and their little boy was injured so badly that his brain will never function normally. A friend said to him after the accident, "Doug, it's going to work out for good for you and your family." Sparks answered angrily, "Yes, but at what price?" Sparks said, "For several days I wrestled with the price. I was angry. There's nothing wrong with being angry when something like this strikes you. You just need to stay in contact with God and deal with your anger."

In a time of prayer, it seemed to Sparks that God was saying, "Doug, I know how much this is costing you. I know the price you're paying. But I also know the price I paid." Sparks continued, "In times of tragedy we must always look to the Cross; the price God paid for a suffering, dying world. Immediately the Spirit witnessed to me that I must go to the driver who had caused the tragedy and forgive him." He visited the hospital where the driver, an undocumented man in our country, lay strapped down with a broken neck and back and a spirit that was broken even more, sure that God had forsaken him.

Sparks shared the Gospel with him and told him, "Because Christ loved me and forgave me, I love you and forgive you." At that moment, Sparks said he experienced the love of Christ for this man. Ordinary human love could not cause that kind of forgiveness for a man who had

killed your loved ones, only the prayers of forgiveness could accomplish that miracle.⁸

⁸ Doug Sparks, *Hope for the Hurting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 1990), 16, 17. Cited in Billy Graham, *Hope for the Troubled Heart* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), pp. 152-153.

Forgiveness is serious business. Only an experience of the Grace of God can deliver us from the feelings of anger and resentment we may feel toward another.

I have an important reason for dealing with this subject today. Soon, we will be entering the holiday season. We will celebrate Thanksgiving and then Advent and Christmas will pour over the window sill. Christmas is not only a time of joy. It can also be a time of dredging up old hurts. Denis Rainey in his magnificent book, the *Tribute*, tells us how one man made this special season a time of healing rather than a time of hurt.

Growing up in the early 1950s, Robert Lewis always wished his family was like other kids' families. Both his parents were driven, ambitious people who worked hard and left the raising of their sons to various maids. Neither parent spent much time with the boys and neither parent took the effort to encourage the boys or show them affection. But family life was still bearable, until Robert's father, Thomas, began drinking.

Thomas' behavior embarrassed the family, and Thomas and Robert's mother, Billie, began arguing constantly. Christmas became the worst time of year for the Lewis family. Thomas would become drunk, Billie would become angry, and soon they would be out of control, screaming at each other. And Robert and his brothers would cower nearby, seeing once again their dreams of an idyllic family holiday crumble away.

There were some happy times in the Lewis family, but they were usually the exception. Robert and his brothers all reacted to their family situation differently. Robert became very angry, and he channeled that anger into football and fighting.

In college, Robert's life changed dramatically when he embraced Jesus as Lord and Savior. Robert realized that he could trust Jesus that Jesus would always be there for him. The chaos that had been a constant mark of his life was now replaced by the peace he found in trying to live more like Jesus. After he became a Christian, Robert began to think seriously about his family, and his relationship to them. He found that he could forgive his parents for their failings, and he could sympathize with the pressures and pain they must have felt. He realized that he had never given his parents credit for all the good things they had done in his life.

Years later, Robert became a pastor. One night while leading a Bible study, he asked, "What is something you would like to believe God for, but you think is just impossible?" When it was Robert's turn to answer his own question, he replied, "I think it would probably be

impossible for my dad to become a Christian." Little did Robert know how God was going to respond to his "impossibility."

That night, Robert's parents, Thomas and Billie, got into another roaring argument. Though drunk, his father, Thomas, decided to escape the situation. Billie, his mother, afraid of Thomas getting behind the wheel, grabbed his arm to hold him back. Thomas pushed Billie's arm away and left. In his drunken and angry state, Thomas did not see that when he pushed away her arm, Billie lost her balance and fell backward, fracturing her neck on their marble coffee table. Billie lay there, helpless, hurt, and unable to move. Fortunately, her fall had knocked the phone off its hook, and when an operator came on the line, Billie was able to call out for help. An ambulance soon arrived. Billie would spend the next three months in the hospital, her skull immobilized by steel pins.

Thomas did not return home that night, so the next day some friends went to his office to tell him about Billie. The news of what he'd done caused Thomas to suffer a massive heart attack right there in his office. The next morning Robert got a call, telling him of his parents' tragic argument, and its aftermath. Robert, staggering under the weight of the horrible news, traveled immediately to see his parents.

When Robert got to the hospital, he was able to see his father, Thomas, first. Thomas was heavily sedated, and he thought Robert was one of his doctors. He began talking to Robert, telling him all about his family. At one point, he spoke proudly of his son, Robert, who was a respected pastor. Robert had never heard these words of affirmation from his father, and they touched him deeply.

Eventually, Thomas began to realize who Robert was. He explained to Robert how he had hurt Billie, and he confessed that he deserved to go to hell for his actions. Gently, Robert began explaining to his father about Christ, Heaven, forgiveness, and salvation. And when he was finished, Thomas prayed and asked Christ to become his Savior. God had done the "impossible."

But the road was not all smooth yet. Everyone around Billie was encouraging her to get a divorce. Robert was the only one who asked her to stay and try to forgive his father. Robert drew up a contract of change for his father that stated that his father would get counseling, never touch liquor again, and live a clean life for one year outside his home. His father gladly signed it, and his mother agreed to give her husband a second chance. A year later, a sober and responsible Thomas Lewis moved back into his home. The Lewis' marriage was

restored and celebrated with a reaffirmation of marriage vows.

A few years later, Robert attended a conference where he learned the importance of honoring one's parents, even if they weren't perfect. The conference leader had suggested writing a tribute to one's parents, one that highlighted the good things the parents had done. Robert couldn't get the idea out of his head. He finally sat down and began writing a tribute to his own parents. He didn't gloss over the bad things, but he thanked his parents for the good things they had brought into his life. He told them of his love and respect for them. After hours of sobbing and writing, sobbing and writing, Robert had crafted a tribute to his parents, and had cleansed himself of any vestiges of bitterness towards them.

That Christmas, Robert gathered the family together and told his parents that he had something special he wanted to present to them. And then he read his tribute to them. Robert's father teared up, but wouldn't allow himself to cry. Robert's mother wept openly. Everyone in the family sat in emotion-laden silence when Robert was finished.

Christmases past had been times of anger and bitterness, but this Christmas Robert brought a new spirit into the family, a spirit of togetherness and reconciliation. Robert's parents hung the tribute in the best spot in the room, and they left it there for the rest of their lives. It was moving proof that they had done some things right in their lives, and it meant the world to them.⁹

Mark Eklund Killed in Vietnam

I don't know what kind of hurts you may have brought in with you today, but I do know this nursing grudges, harboring resentments, holding on to the wrongs others have done you will only bring you grief. Christ's death on the cross has released us from the burden of our sins. Why don't you let it release you from the burden of your grievances as well? You have been forgiven now, please, for your own sake forgive others.

I am aware that a major thrust of the Hebrews text for today is to provoke one another to love and good deeds, but the following verse is as much needed because it contains the word "encourage" and the instruction that we are to encourage one another. Glendon Harris, wrote this story down for me and I pass it on to you. Actually it has popped up in several places and so I'm not sure who really gets the credit for it.

⁹Denis Rainey, *The Tribute* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), p.15-21.

One Friday, after trying unsuccessfully to teach a math concept, Helen noticed that her students were growing frustrated with themselves and edgy with each other. She stopped and asked the students to list the names of the other students in the classroom, leaving a space between each name. Then she told them to write the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates. That weekend Helen compiled the lists, and on Monday gave each student his/her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. "Really?" she heard whispered. "I never knew that meant anything to anyone?" "I didn't know others like me so much!" The exercise had accomplished its purpose. They were happy with themselves and one another again. Their ability to do the math greatly improved.

Several years later, Helen learned that one of these students, Mark Eklund, was killed in Vietnam. She attend the funeral, then gathered with his friends at the Eklunds' home. Mark's parents approached Helen. "We want to show you something," his father said. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." Opening his billfold, he removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had been taped, folded and refolded many times. The papers were the ones on which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

Mark's classmates started to gather around. Chuck smiled rather sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home." John's wife said, "John asked me to put his in our wedding album." "I have mine, too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary." Then Vicki, another classmate reached into her pocketbook, too out her walled and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times. I think we all saved our lists."

This is an exercise we sorely need here at First Presbyterian Church. If I could, I'd pass out papers to each of you and ask you to list the names of everyone present today. Then I'd have you write the nicest thing you could say about each one. Of course that might be a little hard, we don't know everybody real well. But, I'd be happy to spend the next week or two compiling all of the lists and would pass them back to you. No, that doesn't seem like a practical thing, but it surely is what we need. Sometimes we feel that people talk among themselves and say awful things about us rather than the nicest things and a church that does that won't do very well in math, in mission, in ministry with each other let alone those outside the fellowship.

But, pause a moment in worship today. Look around at the people here. Each is one for whom Christ has died. He has counted each one to be that valuable. Remarkable, isn't it. If I could provoke us to do anything it would be to live out this text:

(Heb 10:23-25 NRSV) Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. {24}And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, {25}not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.