**Gifts and Sacrifices**

**Hebrews 5:1-10 First Presbyterian Church**

**November 15, 2021 Pastor Dave Carlson**

There was an Episcopal priest who was shopping for a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. The salesman talked about speed, acceleration, risk and how women love to climb up on the back of such a powerful machine. Then, he discovered his customer was a priest. Immediately, he changed his approach. He spoke about good mileage, the advantages of 360-degree visibility and how practical motorcycles are. Writing about the experience later, the priest had this to say: “Have we told the world that being a Christian is more like riding a lawnmower than a motorcycle? Is the life of faith more safe and sound, or dangerous and exciting?

The common image of the church is pure lawnmower – slow, deliberate and plodding. Our task, said the priest, is to take the church out on the open road, give it the gas and see what this baby will do!”

To do that, -to get the church out there cruising along at a nice clip- we first have to know where the gas comes from and how to fuel the church so that it is out there tearing up the open road, so to speak.

Today’s New Testament lesson from Hebrews – in comparing Jesus to a temple high priest – tells us exactly how to keep the church fueled up and moving along. “Every high priest,” says Hebrews, “… is put in charge of things pertaining to God on (the people’s) behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

Offering gifts and sacrifices to overcome the sins of the world – that’s what the church does when it’s fueled up and ready to go. The sinful, fallen nature of this world is the road we travel along, and the gifts and sacrifices we make in the name of Jesus are the fuel of the church. So how do we keep the church and moving along.

To answer that, let’s look at today’s passage from Hebrews. Here, Christ is described as the high priest who offers gifts and sacrifices to overcome the sins of the world. And we know that the church is the body of Christ, the hands and feet and heart of Jesus. Whatever Jesus is accomplishing in this world, he’s doing it first and foremost through the church. Without the church, without us as followers of Christ, the world would not know Jesus.

So, as we learn about Jesus and the gifts and sacrifices he made, we learn about ourselves, we learn about the power and purpose of the gifts and sacrifices we make as the body of Christ.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus is like a high priest who deals “gently with the ignorant and wayward, since (even a priest) is subject to weakness….” This revelation about Jesus as a gentle priest sheds light on one of the things that really frustrates people about the church and the world we live in. It can be really frustrating to give of ourselves as the hands and feet and heart of Jesus while we watch the world struggle so much to get things right. There’s so much suffering in this world, so much struggle, so much hatred and self-righteousness. How do we maintain hope? How do we keep giving of ourselves?

Well, we do that as Jesus did, gently, while always shining light where there is darkness or ignorance, always being a place of guidance and direction for those who are lost or wayward.

As hard as it is to see people miss out on the blessings and guidance of the church, we – like Jesus – deal gently with those who have gone astray, and this means that real and lasting change

takes time.

For instance, as the pastor of this church, I’ve helped countless people over the years on your behalf with financial assistance and guidance. As you might expect, some of these folks prove to be their own worst enemy when it comes to taking the next right step. But not all of them. As a church, we’ve helped countless people through a momentary setback, both members and folks out in the community. We’ve helped people get to the next level of self-sufficiency, where they can really start cruising along in life, and even give back in service to others.

In helping people help themselves, I always try to get to the source of their struggle and create a bridge that gets them over the rough patch. That’s one way we as the body of Christ use the fuel of our faith, our church life to smooth out the twists and turns that people struggle with. And yet, because the church is gracious and gentle with people, because we understand how hard live can be, we have to find a way as the church to be in it for the long haul. It’s not going to be a quick fix. And it seems like things are actually getting harder and harder for people.

And still, we give of ourselves through the church. We give our time and talents and treasures. We participate in the life of the church, for our sake, for the sake of others, and for the sake of the world. We do all this because we know that in Jesus Christ, God will prevail, no matter how long it takes.

As Emily said in our Minute for Mission, next Sunday is Commitment Sunday, the day we bring our pledge cards and place them on the Lord’s Table. This is our celebration of all we do as people of faith, as followers of Christ, as members and friends of the church, working and living the name and spirit of Jesus, in the confidence of his victory, no matter how hard it gets or how long it takes.

We don’t give to the church because it’s easy; it’s not. It’s not easy to pledge a healthy portion of our money – 10 percent’s a good amount. It’s not easy to invest our time and energy in the life of the church.

I mean we’re still rebounding from the pandemic! So many friends and family have yet to find their way back here. So, yes, it’s not easy, but we do it anyway. We do it because we are the church, and without the church this world is lost and wayward, given over to darkness and ignorance when it comes to Jesus Christ. Yes, we are the church, and Jesus is the Lord, our Savior. So we pattern our lives on the life of Jesus.

Jesus is described in Hebrews as offering up prayers with reverent submission to the will of God.

As it says, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him…, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” You can think of reverent submission as our action prayers, the things we do that give rise to the blessings of God.

It’s good and right to go to God in prayer for the needs of this world, the needs of our family and friends, the needs of our community and church. But then we have to put those prayers into action in whatever way we can. Hebrews says that Jesus is “the source of … salvation for all who obey him.” This means that, in order to enjoy the blessings of God, we have to follow the way of Jesus, gathering together in his name, giving of ourselves for his sake, and relying on God and his church to make this world a better place.

As you prayerfully consider what you will give to the life of the church in 2022, do so with Christlike confidence in what God is doing for us and through us. Through this church and all of our ministry programs, God is blessing the world with a heartfelt expression of Jesus’ care and compassion, his welcome and embrace, his guidance and wisdom. Let us all join next Sunday in celebrating this outpouring of Jesus and all that it means for us and for the future of this world. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

Gracious God, Giver of All Things,

As hard as it may be for us to accept, we know deep down that nothing we have is truly our own.  Everything we possess is on loan from you, a trust we take care of as well as we can.

Help us look beyond what we would like to get, to see what we would like to be able to give.  Help us use our time and talent to share with others the treasure of generosity and compassion and love, creating a legacy of people who have come to praise you because through us they felt your care and provision.

We pray for your care and provision for those in need this day, those in financial need, those in need of healing and comfort, those in need of grace and peace.

We pray your Spirit of love and blessing upon our Operation Christmas Child boxes, as they go out this week that Jesus would be known and felt the world over.

And for us, Lord, create in us what we need most of all – the faith to trust that you are able to provide for all that we truly need.

Help us rely on you to take care of our earthly needs while we are taking care of the needs of others.

We pray this in your sure and powerful name, using the words that you taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;**

**and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**