

The Priest Who Sacrificed Once and for All
Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, November 17, 2024
Hebrews 10:11-14, (15-18), 19-25
Choctank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends. We're so glad that each of you has gathered to worship the living God! Today, we conclude our study of the Book of Hebrews. As we have seen in previous weeks, the Preacher repeats information, and then he builds on it. Notice that after speaking about Jesus' "single sacrifice for sins," he then "sat down at the right hand of God (10:12).

Verse 18 shares some really good news with us: "Where there is forgiveness of these [that is, sins and lawless deeds] there is no longer any offering for sin. Why? Our sin has been forgiven and so no offering is necessary. We can approach God boldly and with confidence because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross. I wonder, though, if everyone accepts this forgiveness completely and moves on. I know there are times when I keep beating myself up over something that Jesus has taken care of, but that I can't let go of. The cause of my anxiety is not usually earthshaking, but it continues to haunt me for days, perhaps even longer. Maybe you've had the same experience. When this happens, we may come to worship with a guilty conscience, or worse, fail to come at all! We see ourselves as "bad" and "unacceptable" to God. But we need to acknowledge our wrongdoing...and then give thanks that Jesus has got us covered! We are grateful that we have been cleansed and are able to draw near to God, believing that each of us is his beloved child.

We find some new information in verses 19-25 that is very important to us, not only as individuals but also as a community of faith. *The Message* speaks of it this way:

So, friends, we can now—without hesitation—walk right up to God, into "the Holy Place." Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. The "curtain" into God's presence is his body.

So let's *do* it—full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.

Here, the Preacher is calling us to be encouragers. The following quotation from a sermon by David Owens helps us to probe the kinds of people we are.

Keith Miller, in his book *Passionate People*, which he co-authored with Bruce Larson, describes two kinds of people -- "basement people" and "balcony people."

"Basement people" are the discouragers in our lives. They may be people from our past, or present, but their words go with us everywhere we go. They are the negative influences in our lives and their words go something like this: "You can't do that." "That's a stupid thing to do." "When are you going to get it right?" "You will never get it right." "You will never amount to anything." Basement people divert us from our hopes and dreams. They constantly point out what is wrong, rather than what is right with us. Basement people cause a room to light up when they leave.

In contrast to them are the "Balcony People." They are people who are full of

love and cheer us on. They encourage us to be loving, courageous followers of Christ. They sit in the balcony of our lives like a heavenly cheering section, saying, "You can do it." "We believe in you." "You are special to us." Balcony people are the great encouragers in our lives and we all need them!

The question for all of us is, who will we be? Will we be basement people or balcony people? The choice is ours. Balcony people try to lift people up to where they are, but basement people try to drag people down to where they are.

There is no question who God wants us to be. He wants us to be balcony people, and He will help us to be balcony people.

Rev. Owens' words really speak to me and bring to mind a special friend, the late Bishop Joe Yeakel, who served both the Baltimore-Washington and Peninsula-Delaware Conferences from 1984-1996. Craig and I got to know Bishop Joe very well when we were doing some special projects for the Baltimore-Washington Conference. We kept in touch after he retired. He was delighted to learn that Bishop Peggy had enlisted my help—temporarily, as you'll remember—for the Choptank Charge. He died two years after I arrived here, but I did share with him what I was doing. Never too sure of myself then, or now for that matter, he'd always say to me, "Nan, I'm in your balcony!" I had never heard this phrase before, though it remains dear to me because I recognized that I was truly privileged to have such a great encourager.

But let's be honest. Although I was very fortunate to have Bishop Joe and precious others in my life who have encouraged me, many other people are not so lucky. As the body of Christ, we need to do all that we can to encourage each other to be assured that we have been forgiven. And having been forgiven, we are called upon to confidently enter God's sanctuary. We are also to use our time, treasure, and talent to serve God and our neighbors.

One way we're to do that is to urge people to attend worship, or put another way, "to meet together" (10:25, NRSV). Being in the presence of God amid brothers and sisters in Christ and being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us is a transformational experience. As we saw last week, research by the Barna Group has shown that many people attend services to please themselves, not to worship God. Their lenses are out of focus! We need to inspire people to attend worship so that they may praise God, pray, sing, hear the Scriptures read, and be challenged by a sermon. What we're doing is not just for this week or this month, but instead helps us to move toward the approaching Day of Jesus' return. As the old hymn says, "What a day of rejoicing that will be" ("When We All Get to Heaven," UMH, page 701). I don't know about you, but I sure don't want to miss this. And I am blessed to come to church to continue to worship God and prepare myself for the big Day!

And yet, for those of us of a certain age, it's clear that church attendance has been waning for some time. We can blame all sorts of things for this decline—work, need to rest, caregiving, sports, shopping, as well as leisure activities, boring services, or unfriendly congregations. However, there is one thing we *cannot* blame this decrease on: a belief that people are not allowed to come into the presence of our Holy God. No, Jesus' once and for all work on the cross gave every one of us equal access to the Father. Still, this downturn in worship participation is nothing new. The reality is that fewer and fewer people have been attending over the last several decades. Many of you from each congregation have told me how full your sanctuary and Sunday school rooms were "in the old days." I understand that the Vacation Bible Schools held at Beckwith were legendary. I believe you, but we know that attendance has

been spotty since the days of St. Augustine, as we read in his sermon from A.D. 391:

An ordinary day it may be on the church calendar, but it's also right in the middle of the December gladiatorial schedule. It's no wonder, then, that the church is only half full. The rest of you must be in the amphitheater, looking more for entertainment than salvation. I could say – "They've given themselves to games of the Flesh, as it were, but have yet to pay attention to games of the Truth!" – but I won't. Ah well, for their salvation as much as for ours, let's pray to God without distractions of any kind.

Well, I'm happy to report that I'm not aware of any absences due to gladiator games! But as I pointed out several weeks ago, "regular" attendance, which previously meant that you attended worship each week, now means that you may be present once per month. Times are a' changin'.

Clearly, people are asking themselves and their neighbors, "Why should I go to church?" And for more and more people that answer seems ambiguous. They don't know why they should do that. Why, indeed? I do believe that people attended because they wanted to worship God and grow in their own faith. Having said that, I can remember as a child in the 1950s that our congregation included a large contingent of men who came dressed in suits and ties. Part of the reason for coming to church was to demonstrate one's respectability within the community. Respectable people wanted to do business with other respectable people, so church was a great place to network and exchange business cards. That wasn't the only reason to attend, of course, but business motivations did enter into one's motives for attending.

An updated answer to the question of falling church attendance is secularization. We live in a society where many people do not accept the narrative of the Christian faith. Some just don't care; others are curious, but just don't find the story of God coming in the flesh to teach, be crucified, buried, and resurrected to be plausible. Such a story just doesn't square with their scientific view of the world, so they dismiss it as a fairy tale. And if those of us who do profess faith in Christ don't act as if we believe the story, why should anyone else believe it? If we're lukewarm about our faith, we won't be able to help others recognize that Christ's once and for all sacrifice on the cross provided their salvation. His resurrection by God assures us of eternal life. And his promise of the Holy Spirit, which was fulfilled at Pentecost, enables the Spirit to dwell in us. All three persons of the Trinity bear witness to the saving work of Jesus.

While all of this is very reassuring, I realize that according to a 2022 Theology Study conducted by Lifeway Research that two-thirds of US adults say the biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrection are accurate. The other one-third either disagrees or says they aren't sure. Although 52% say the Bible has authority to tell us what we must do, many people are not sure that the Bible matters much in their daily lives. I find this lack of connection between what people know and believe about the Bible and the stories it tells, and their day-to-day lives to be tragic. Think about the grace, love, and compassion they are missing out on (<https://research.lifeway.com/2023/04/05/americans-believe-in-easter-resurrection-but-arent-sure-why-it-matters/>). Let's encourage such people to find the truth and hope of Jesus in their lives. Let's also encourage them to worship regularly with the community of faith.

Again this week, I want to close with a story that I hope you'll find amusing, though I do realize that I'm preaching to the choir, since most of you attend worship faithfully.

So, it's not true that you can be just as good a Christian without going to

church. You can't simply say, "Well, I'm there in Spirit... but I don't have to be there in body."

It's kind of like the true story of an incident that took place at a university. This university had a policy that if the professor was 10 minutes late for class, it was cancelled. But one day a professor put his hat on his desk and then went to the faculty room. He apparently lost track of time and when he arrived back at the class he was 10 minutes late and found the room empty. He was furious.

When the class next met, he informed his students "When my hat is here, I'm here!"

His class learned their lesson well. The following day, the professor arrived at 9 a.m. and he was met by the sight of 25 hats on the desks – but no students.

(Albert I. Raizman, *Reader's Digest* 1/05 p. 54. From a sermon by Jeff Strite, Iron Man - The Learning Curve, 6/7/2010).

Well, I'm hoping you don't take this story too literally, because if you do, I may arrive next week to a sanctuary filled with hats And I wouldn't need much imagination to figure out who organized this caper.

Your challenge for this week is to try to encourage friends and family members who may leave their hats on the pew and absent themselves from worship to recognize how important it is for them and for all of us that they be present. A baseball team cannot win if players have stayed away, telling the team they're there in spirit. The church needs all its players too so that we can be the whole body that Christ calls us to be.

Love, Nan