

Provocation
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Hebrews 10:11-25

11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God’, ¹³and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

¹⁵And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

¹⁶ ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them

after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts,

and I will write them on their minds’,

¹⁷he also adds,

‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’

¹⁸Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let 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. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Beginning in October, we’ve read a lot out of the book of Hebrews and the author has firmly established that Jesus is the ultimate priest who has sacrificed his own life that our sins might be forgiven once for all. What we read today serves as an answer to the question, “What’s next?” “Since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary” and “since we have a great priest over the house of God,” we can get on with living, instead of stagnating in guilt and weighed down with despair. And not just any way of living but a way of living in faith. To do that, we are to approach God with a true heart, to hold fast to hope, and to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.

To provoke one another! As if the use of the word “provoke” weren’t daring enough, the original Greek word, *παροξυσμὸν* (*paroxusmos*), typically means not “to provoke” but “to incite or irritate.” Such an understanding is reminiscent of an *agent provocateur*, “French for ‘inciting agent’...[someone] who is employed to act undercover to entice or provoke another person to commit an illegal act.”¹ Or that Greek word, *παροξυσμὸν* (*paroxusmos*), might sound familiar as the foundation of the lesser used word, *paroxysm*. If you haven’t heard or used that word in a while, as a reminder, it means, “any

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agent_provocateur

sudden, violent outburst; a fit of violent action or emotion.”² Imagine any of these meanings in association with Christianity!

Earlier this week I was in a meeting with a group of which I am a part, the Spiritual Life Advisory Board at Carroll University. A staff member who is also a graduate, Katy Launius, was talking about her days spent at UWM before she transferred to Carroll. She said the UWM campus was very politically active and very active in discussing issues in general but she found that Carroll wasn't nearly as active in engaging in difficult conversations. Dr. David Block recalled the campus conversations which happened years ago, called “confrontations,” not because of any implied confrontation between those in discourse but because students and faculty were confronting the topic at hand. He said the language fell away presumably because of its negative connotation and eventually so did the conversations.

I posed a possible reason for both. As Christians, I think, we live by the ethos that we are supposed to play nice, get along, so people know we love them. And, as humans, we tend to avoid conflict. Being Christian just makes it easy to avoid conflict, gives us a valid excuse to avoid conflict. I'm not going to fight with you; it wouldn't be Christian. Not so fast; not that easy.

If we buy into that message – not fighting equals loving – then we are ignoring the gospel message. Jesus loved people, this we know for certain, AND Jesus challenged people, he confronted people. And all this he did in the way we are encouraged in the letter to the Ephesians: “Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”³ Following Christ's example were people like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who faced Hitler and Nazi Germany head-on and was executed for it; following Christ's example were others whose names we may or may not know.

Cirque du Soleil is an artistic company of actors and athletes who are constantly stretching the boundaries of entertainment. They are innovative and their productions are both breath-taking and beautiful. Their creative mission centers around three words: invoke, provoke, evoke. Their aim in creating is to invoke imagination, provoke the senses, and evoke emotion.⁴ I have been to more than one of their shows and I cannot help but affirm that they do indeed fulfill their mission. I've yet to meet someone who was unimpressed and unmoved by a show, who wasn't transported, who didn't leave sensing the world was a little brighter, a little bigger than it had seemed before the show.

² Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, second edition (Random House, 2001)

³ Ephesians 4:15-16

⁴ <http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/press/news/2011/creation-process.aspx>

The provoking done by people like Luther and Dr. King and Bonhoeffer could definitely be considered inciting and irritating, especially to those whose ways were challenged. But their provocation was also like that of Cirque du Soleil via Hebrews. Invoke / let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith: call upon God, rely on God, with confidence that God will answer and be present because Jesus has offered, has become that bridge. Any great work of Christians must begin with prayer, with the invocation of God's name and the desire for clarity around God's will. And we invoke God's name with confidence because we hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

Provoke / let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds: we do not provoke like younger (or older) siblings provoke, merely to get a rise. We provoke to incite something better. We provoke because the gain is greater than the risk. Again, think on Luther and Dr. King and Bonhoeffer. Such provocation is naturally emotionally evocative. We don't like conflict. When faced with it, and especially when inciting it, our emotions are heightened. Whenever I am in the middle of a tremendously daunting conversation, I get the chills and I shake as if I were standing in a freezer. For obvious reasons, I don't seek out such experiences unless absolutely necessary. As I mature, I realize, though, that the flood of emotions that strikes in those times is both necessary and temporal. It will pass and avoiding the experience usually does more harm than good in the long run.

Am I suggesting that you go out today or tomorrow or Thursday and provoke someone? Maybe provoke someone toward a change that you think they need to make? No, that's not the biblical imperative. We are to provoke one another **to love and good deeds**. And before we even provoke them, we are to consider how. The author does not say "decide how to provoke" but "consider how to provoke." Be thoughtful. Be very thoughtful. Invoke God first. Hold fast to hope first. And then *consider* how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. And, after provoking one another, *meet together*, don't avoid one another, and *encourage* one another. Be thoughtful. And be courageous, courageous in provoking one another **and** courageous in receiving provocation. We can't always be the *agent provocateur*; sometimes we must be enticed, provoked, incited. And that's okay. Provocation is both necessary and temporal. The discomfort will pass. Love and good deeds will grow. How else will we grow up in every way into Christ if others do not speak the truth in love? In provoking and being provoked, be thoughtful, be courageous so that the body may grow in building itself up in love.

Let us pray: God, we approach you with confidence. Help us to hold fast to hope, to prayerfully consider how we might provoke one another to love and good deeds, and to prayerfully receive provocation from others. Amen.