

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

Unforsaken

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 17)

Analysis by Douglas B. Chamberlain

Hebrews 13: 1 Let mutual love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. 4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 6 So we can say with confidence,

*"The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?"*

7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ...

15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for

such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

DIAGNOSIS: Negligent Hosts

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Inhospitable*

Entertaining angels unawares. Imagine you put the teapot on the stove for guests and wind up entertaining heavenly beings in your living room (v. 2). Hoping for such good fortune we open our doors to strangers anticipating that we just might serve angels. Such hopes are dashed quickly when those entertained turn out to be plain earthlings like us. (Of course, these strangers may not be like us at all. They may be imprisoned, tortured [v. 3], or simply strange.) Either way, when we discover that those at our table are not heavenly angels but earthly sinners like or unlike us, we wind up disappointed. Our disappointment soon turns to inhospitality. After all, who wants to entertain such mundane earthlings when we had hoped for heavenly beings?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Malcontents*

Such disappointment and eventual inhospitality betrays a deeper dissatisfaction. We are not content with what we are given. Not just the stuff: the cars, the houses, the clothes, the spouse (v. 4!), the children, the church. But a deep dissatisfaction with those visitors whom we'd hoped would prove heavenly—those whom the writer of Hebrews hints might be heavenly. Our dissatisfaction doesn't rest on the stranger, though. It moves from the gift to the Giver. We are content with neither what we have been given nor the One who gives it. Now it's not the stranger who disappoints us, but God himself.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Left Behind*

God judges fornicators and adulterers (v. 4b). Our disappointment in the earthiness of those given to us may not

have turned to outright adultery and fornication, but it sets us down the very same road toward the very same judgment. Will we who have neglected strangers and forgotten the imprisoned and the tortured find ourselves left behind? Maybe we don't care. After all, God himself has turned out to be the biggest disappointment. However, our carelessness is just further grounds for God to abandon us.

PROGNOSIS: Steadfast Host

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Unforsaken

But while we fail to care for and identify with the plight of others, there is One who identifies completely with us, remembering us sinners as though he were a sinner like us (cf. v. 3). And this One really does come from heaven! Not to be entertained by us, mind you, but to show the ultimate in hospitality. Rather than leave us behind, this One stays close by, promising never to leave us or forsake us (v. 5b). While we love stuff, neglect hospitality, and forget those who suffer, Jesus Christ remains ever vigilant in his attention to us. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (v. 8). He steadfastly identifies with us and never forsakes us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Satisfied

Our leaders were content with that, those who spoke the word of God to us (v. 7). As we receive that word we share their faith, imitate it, say with the same confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" (v. 6). Certainly nothing can drive Jesus Christ away from us, nothing can stop him from identifying with us, and nothing can cause him to forget us. This One whom God the heavenly Father rewarded with an eternal seat next to his, has declared "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Now, what could be more satisfying than that?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Hospitable

Such steadfast love rubs off, gets imitated, continues (v. 1). This mutual love plays host to strangers, not in the hope of entertaining a hidden angel, but in genuine love for one like or unlike us. This mutual love is content to serve earthly visitors and prisoners and the tortured. It is a love for the one with whom we share the marriage bed or for the one who occupies our guest bed. Such a mutual love refuses to sacrifice the stranger for an angel, sacrificing instead what we have (v. 16) for the good of others. It praises the One who is steadfast in his love.