

January 31, 2021 A Better Way Pt. 3 Hebrews 7:18-28

Dearly Beloved;

Once again I am writing a note to you, in hopes that the poverty of my words, will help you to bear the constraints necessitated by the current pandemic. It is hard to self-isolate. We miss the fellowship we once took for granted. Not only were we able to gather to worship, greeting one another warmly, shaking hands, and hugging, but we were able to be together for an extended time, sharing bread and soup, cake and pie. When we came together to worship and sing praises to the Lord our God, we knew something like a party would follow.

There will come a time when we will be able to do all of those things again. But not yet. If you are watching the numbers, the post-Christmas lockdown is having an effect. The numbers are headed in the right direction at the moment. I mention that because we have genuine reasons to hope the pandemic will come to an end soon. Vaccinations will begin to ramp up in another week, and the Prime Minister is still assuring us that in due course we will all be able to get our shot or shots, depending on the vaccine used in our area.

The kicker in all of this is that the virus is mutating in such a way as to become even more infectious and more easily able to infect us. Therefore, I am trying to prepare you, that we will probably not be the first church to return to in person worship. Your discipline has been inspiring in your following the Public Health Guidelines. To my knowledge, no one in our attending circle has been stricken with Covid-19. I

will be doing everything in my power to keep it that way. We are protecting lives by reading sermons published on the web site and watching videos of the reading of the sermon at the dining room table.

I say again, we have reason to hope for better times, recalling the past experiences of fellowship and fun and worship at St. Andrew's. Keep the faith, and stay safe. With that I will turn to the word.

This week we are still in Hebrews chapter 7. I will pick up the reading at verse 18 and run it to the end of the chapter, verse 28. Please read that passage on your own.

In the opening chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews we are told that what has happened in Jesus Christ is a "better way" than the Judaic dependance on trying to be good, by following the Law (codified commandments of God). It is true that the rules serve a purpose. They have a definite power to teach us what sin looks like in real life. The stabbings and shootings that have occurred in cities during the pandemic are an easy illustration. Killing is sinful. We are called not to do it. The fact is, in real life, the human tendency is to break the rules. There can be no denying, Christmas shopping this year is the biggest single reason, Covid-19 blossomed, as it did, requiring this current lockdown. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbours every bit as well and as much as we love ourselves. It is a better way, than simply trying to follow rules.

Last week we spent our time looking at what the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews said about hope. He proclaimed that we have a better hope in Jesus Christ, than we do in trying to live perfect lives by following the rules. Our hope is not the result of our becoming good, it is the result of Jesus having saved us from sin by his dying for us, rising for us and gifting us with eternal life. That does not mean life is easy...the proverbial piece of cake. Ask the martyrs. Following Jesus in a hostile world is not easy. Never was. Ask the Hebrews to whom this letter was written. Rome wanted them dead, for the simple reason that they dared to believe in Jesus, and invited anyone who would give them a hearing, to join them in following Jesus as Lord and Master. When they used the word King, everyone wanted them dead, including their Jewish relatives.

Here is a fact that is helpful in understanding what the Letter to the Hebrews is about. Jesus said that HE is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To follow HIM, to serve others in HIS name, to trust HIM, even as the lions were let loose to devour, or as the executioners did the Empire's will, was to follow a better way. The better way! In fact before the movement that began in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples and the crowd listening to them, was ever called the "church," or the people involved, like Peter and Paul, were called Christians, they were called, the followers of the WAY. We are followers of the WAY. The WAY is Jesus.

There is a key phrase in the portion of chapter 7 of the Letter to the Hebrews, that I have chosen to focus on for

this time together. “Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.” (Hebrews 7:22) Here is what we have come to. This Letter tells us there is A BETTER WAY than struggling to keep the rules as if God were keeping score. Check mark: you didn’t kill anybody. Oops, an X beside your name because you did not respect your parents as you should have. This better way involves faith as a life force on our part, and grace, as the reality on God’s part. G-R-A-C-E, God’s redemption (forgiveness) at Christ’s expense.

For the Hebrews, and the Hebrews who became followers of the Way, disciples of Jesus, it was important to remember they were children of the covenant. They did not make a covenant with God, God made a covenant with them. Here is what the Oxford Dictionary gives as the definition of a covenant: “An agreement, bargain. In Law, a compact under seal. In the Bible, a compact between God and the Israelites.” God named the terms. Israel, the Hebrews, said they would live by it. And because people are free to choose in every circumstance that faces them and us, we have moments when we break the compact. Set aside the deal. As Frank Sinatra sang, and Paul Anka wrote so eloquently, “I did it my way.” Not my family’s way, no one else’s way, not God’s way....my way. That is precisely how we fall into sin. How Adam fell. How David the King fell. How I have fallen and stumbled time after time. Knowing what God wants of me and for me, I choose to do it my way.

“Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.” Grace on God’s part, faith on our part. We have noted during the time I have been with you as, your minister, that the disciples, Peter, James and John etc. made mistakes. Paul had a disagreement with Barnabas that was serious enough they went their separate ways. They could no longer play nice in the sandbox. Like the Beatles, they broke up. This better covenant is one God chose to make with HIS people, which included Jews and Gentiles (the rest of us). And Jesus is the guarantee that it will be kept...not you and I.

You may well be asking, what’s this guarantee about. Very simply and frankly it is about the faithfulness of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit. Our part is to believe, and to continue to believe. To keep the faith. And I am going to spend a moment talking about that keeping the faith part. When we became followers of the Way, we simply answered the questions. Do you believe? I do, we answered. Then we stumble, fall, sin. I do that every day. Moments when I take my failures out on those who love me most, my family. That’s what most arguments and outbursts of anger are about. You do something you shouldn’t have, some one calls you on it, and voices get raised in anger. What happens next is important. I like to think when I calm down, I admit I have been wrong, and ask forgiveness. That’s how marriages in the real world last. The people involved forgive one another. More importantly than that, we ask the Lord’s forgiveness because we have broken our word.

It's not that I am soft on the rules, (the law). It is that I am even stronger on this better covenant. When I sin, and recognize I have sinned, I don't walk away from the community of faith. I don't quit trying to be a follower of the WAY. Grace is about forgiveness of very real sins, at Christ's expense. What Jesus did on the cross was HE forged this new and better covenant. It involves forgiveness of sins. His rising from the dead on the Sunday morning is the ultimate sign that HE had and has the power to guarantee that forgiveness. In fact from Jesus own mouth, the only way this covenant can be broken...is if I deny that Jesus can save me from what I do in moments of carelessness. It is called the sin against the HOLY SPIRIT, denying that God has the power to save, even as HE promised. The forgiveness of my sins, and your sins, is the very heart of this new and better covenant. By the way, another word for covenant is testament. The New Testament in our Bibles, is all about this better covenant. Grace. God's forgiveness. Jesus the Saviour. The WAY.

You know if I could change one thing in the way we worship, it would be the way we talk about our sinfulness. Every Sunday we pray the Lord's Prayer together. If you are like me there are moments during the week, when you repeat that recipe for prayer. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." What the flowery language means is, forgive me my sins, as I forgive those who sin against me. We pray it every week, when we worship in person. We pray expecting to be forgiven, and to have to forgive. Because Jesus died and rose

again. It is a better covenant. Grace on God's part, continued faith on my part, your part, our part. It's a better way.

Let us pray,

Lord thank you for the reminder that there is nothing new in this stumbling and falling that we are part of, as we give in to the poorer parts of our nature. Thank you for continually forgiving us when we ask for forgiveness. Thank you for continually encouraging us to follow you in the way of faith in Jesus. We are tempted to let go of YOU. YOU never let go of us. Thanking you for making Jesus the very guarantee, that YOU will love us to the end and beyond. Amen