

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost • September 1, 2019ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Hebrews 13:1-17 (Luke 14:7-11)

“Anchored And Uplifted”

The first day can seem so important when you're hoping to make a good impression. At the beginning of the school year, there's new people to meet and new routines to learn, sometimes in unfamiliar places. You're trying not to make mistakes or do anything else that might single you out while you're getting up to speed. When you start a new job or get a new boss, you want to appear competent and collected, making sure that you're getting off on the right foot. How the first day goes can set the stage for so many of the days that follow.

We can say that today is the first day in the rest of our life together as God's people in Christ. What kind of impression do we hope to make in the lives of our fellow Christians and in the lives of our other neighbors out there?

In today's Epistle reading, the author of Hebrews is concluding his letter of encouragement to his brothers and sisters in Christ back in the first century, but he might just as well be writing to us today. He's got a lot of things to say about what the life of the congregation should look like – both because of the impression our life together makes in the world around us, and because we as Jesus' disciples are meant to be caring for one another. And in both regards, our attitude towards others makes a big difference.

Consider for a moment how much of time in our society is spent on making a good impression. From a practical standpoint, if people have a good impression of you, chances are that they are going to treat you more favorably than they would otherwise. We seek honor or prestige from the world to get better perks, a leg up to make life a little bit easier. That's why some spend significant amounts of time in curating their social media presence with the best possible image of themselves. It only makes sense, right? Why not take a place of honor if you've got the chance to snag it for yourself?

Well, what if someone else is more deserving of that honor? Where does that leave you? What happens when the honor and privileges are taken away and given to someone else? Where's your hope then?

That's just the illustration that Jesus used when speaking to the Pharisees at dinner in today's Gospel. They knew the value of making a good impression, of seeking honor and prestige in the eyes of the people around them. But they spent too much time focusing on the wrong things. Worldly status is fickle and fleeting. There's something more, something better, something lasting, Jesus says, and it's what he came into the world to make possible: life in the resurrection.

Could you spend your time and energy focusing on gaining honor and prestige in the eyes of the world, even when you know it won't last? Surely you could. But because of Christ's work, you've got something better.

With the Hebrew Christians, we know that Jesus didn't come to win the honor and prestige of the earth. He set aside his power and glory as God the Son and came into our world with unprecedented humility, as a baby without wealth in a backwater corner of a remote section of the Roman Empire. He unjustly suffered a criminal's punishment and execution on the cross, all to take the weight of our sin on himself. And in doing so, he bought us an honor greater than any that the world could ever bestow: the right to be called children of God once again.

As a congregation, we are anchored in Jesus as our sure foundation. As we heard Jesus say today, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5) And the way that he's saying it should really come across as “I will never *ever* leave you or forsake you.” It's the same promise he made to his disciples before his ascension, as he sent them out into the world, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) You and I need not seek the world's honor to make life easier – it never lasts long, and there's usually someone more deserving out there. But in Christ, you have life in the resurrection, life which looks ahead to what comes after this age knowing it can never be taken away. His promise is sure because he is sure. Jesus, the Christ, is the same (One) yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8) Nothing will change God's love for you in Christ. In Jesus, you have true security in an insecure society.

That's why the writer of Hebrews encourages you and me to live as community in the resurrection even now. Life in the resurrection isn't just about what's to come; it's meant for living in service for all the days we have in the present age. Because you have hope in Christ, you don't have to spend your time and

energy building up pride and prestige. We Christians can be people who live humbly and confidently, both because we are anchored in Jesus. And because Jesus lifts us up into new life, you and I can put that new life to use in humble love and service.

Toward the end of today's reading, the author of Hebrews writes, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." (Hebrews 13:16) You serve God by serving your neighbor. In service, point your neighbors – especially those who don't yet know Christ – to hope that looks forward and not to the rewards of this age. As we hear elsewhere in Scripture, you are a holy priesthood, witnesses to the One who is the same yesterday and today and forever. Humbly serving the people God puts in your life, making a good impression of what it means to life in Christian hope, is witnessing to the One who gives you hope. Or to put it this way: Live your faith, share your life.

In the same way, we bear witness to Jesus to the unbelieving world by how we treat one another in this community of faith. Let love, compassion, and humility always be at work here in this congregation, this family in Christ, who anchors and uplifts us. Respect God's holiness by respecting those who share in His holiness.

Today is the first day in the rest of our life together as God's people in Christ. Living as a congregation, as people of the resurrection, may we not go looking for status and privilege in the eyes of the world, but rather humbly put our neighbor first – especially our brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, who is our sure hope both now and into the age to come.

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. – Hebrews 13:8