

Dear Children of God: Dear Beloved Children

INTRODUCTION

When was the last time you opened an actual love letter? One written by hand, perhaps, on fancy stationery? It's rare, to be sure. But there is something special about that mode of communication—something personal, something human. A letter is a reminder of a relationship. Therefore, it was to be treasured, read and reread, maybe for years. It may seem odd, after that prologue to launch into a series from Hebrews. Written by an unknown hand to an unknown and scattered audience, the letter to the Hebrews seems more like a theological treatise or a sermonic exhortation than a letter. Yet, we reflect on the human side of faith as we engage in this ancient but ever-new conversation. We invite you, dear children of God, to join us in the dialog.

Desire a Better Country

August 10, 2025

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

[Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16](#)

PLANNING NOTES

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for..." I remember being a teenager and having a Sunday evening lesson at youth group on Hebrews 11. Even at that time, I was drawn in by the enticement of a definition. Finally, an authoritative definition of faith! Something I can wrap my mind around and understand. When we start breaking down this definition of faith, it becomes unmanageable. There is still substance to it, but not a substance I can hold in my hand and figure out. It's more like a substance that sweeps us up in a current, taking us toward a better country, to quote the author of Hebrews.

As we enter this third part of the "Dear Children of God" series, I encourage you not to lose the verve and vitality that flows between the lines in the letter to the Hebrews. The letter can feel quite academic, especially since many academics over millennia have unpacked it bit by bit by bit, trying to understand the mysteries of the faith that the letter explores. Yet underneath the dense prose is a passion for the gospel, a need to plumb the depths of our faith, not to hold it and contain, but to revel and wonder at the profound work of grace and divine love that saves us into union with God and, by extension, in loving community with one another.

So, as you plan worship during this series, carve out spaces to marvel and reflect. In this first week, consider how to add stories of faith from your community to the litany of stories in Hebrews 11. "By faith, Grace UMC... By faith, Robert... By faith, the Youth Group..." These stories feed our faith; they bolster and strengthen our assurance that we can set out to find and build a better country, the kingdom of God.

Take moments to sing the songs that are the soundtrack of your church's life together. Is there a song you always sing as a prayer during a potluck? Sing it during worship! Is there a song your children particularly love or your youth ministry sings often at its gatherings? Sing it during worship! Is there a song that almost every saint in your community has had sung at their funerals? Sing it during worship! Tell the story of the song's place in your community and then sing as a communal act of remembering and re-membering your community of faith.

PREACHING NOTES

With both kids grown and gone, our household is just my wife and me and the two left-behind cats. Nothing apocalyptic about that, they were just left behind when my daughter set out for a new life in a distant city. She argues with her mother about whose cats they are now, but they live with us. There is Dora, the substantial cat, and Cato, short for Catastrophe, who does her best to live up to her name. Above anything else, they want out. They are indoor cats and enjoy the comforts of our home. But we have a walled-in patio out the back door, and they want out. They will sit at the sliding glass door and stare out, sometimes lifting a paw to pat the glass as if to make it magically open. They love being out as much as humanly possible. Feline possible? They love out.

The problem is, out doesn't always live up to expectations. Sometimes it is wet, and sometimes it is cold. Sometimes, it is too windy or scary as other "out" creatures enter their patio. None of that stops them from wanting out, however. Even if they just ran in from the rain or the cold, in a few moments, they'll be back at the door wanting out, believing, it seems, that this time it will be a better "out" than the last time. No matter how much we try to convince them that the "out" is still the "out" they have experienced, they still want to try. They still want to believe that there is a better "out."

The writer to the Hebrews tells us the story of the people who longed for a better "out": "As it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:16 ESV¹). That is what drives them, we're told. It explains the exemplary lives written about before and after this statement. It shows the desire for something better, something more.

That "more" takes us beyond escapism. It isn't that the people named here are just tired of where they are and fed up with the brokenness surrounding them. They aren't dissatisfied with the political leadership and are looking for a better country to which they can immigrate. Certainly, there will be and perhaps needs to be some dissatisfaction with the way things are, but a negative emotion or a rejection cannot motivate the way a larger vision can. You can't sustain a passion based on discontent. You need something more, something that builds up, something that drives, something that encourages.

The writer of Hebrews says that is faith. Faith is defined here as an assurance. "For I am sure," writes Paul in the eighth chapter of Romans, or "I am convinced," in some translations, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV). "I am sure."

Sit with that for a moment: an assurance. Can we be sure of anything these days? Faith is hard at the best of times. So, let's make it worse. Let's add in the rest of Hebrews 11, verse 1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 NRSV). We live in a Doubting Thomas era – unless I see ... I will not believe. Not seen: We base everything on something we cannot see. No wonder we are often the objects of ridicule. "Not seen" doesn't seem to be a great motto for moving forward. There doesn't seem to be a lot to hang your hat upon. There's not a lot to feel secure about. We tend to want a stronger foundation than that, don't we?

¹ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by [Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.](#)

How about “things hoped for”? That doesn't seem any more secure, does it? Or does it? Hope is, as Emily Dickinson famously said, “the thing with feathers.” But does that refer to hope’s fragility, its ephemerality? Or to its power to lift, to move, to set the one who hopes on the wing? There is power in hope. It starts with a dream, with a vision of a better world and a better way of being. It begins with a better “out,” one that sustains us even when the “out” we encounter doesn’t live up to the dream.

Our assigned text skips over Abel and Enoch and Noah, though it might be worth adding them back in to get something of the sweep of the text. Sure, we know Abraham better. It makes sense to rest there, to remember the miracle of life out of death, of procreation, of legacy when there was barrenness and emptiness before them both. Abraham and Sarah can represent those who make the best of the world we have, even while they long for a better one; and not just long for it but believe in it; maybe even see it.

Can we see justice prevailing? Can we see equity performed? Can we see a welcome offered? Can we see promises fulfilled, community built, and a future restored? The vision that drives all these we name in our text this week enables the people to move forward, to put one foot in front of another. That is not a denial of the reality in which they live, but a burning hope that lives within them that one day there will be a better country, a better “out.”

Excuse me, the cat is at the door again.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Beloved, we gather today as inheritors of faith in God’s salvific work, a faith handed down to us over generations that we claim and proclaim today in this community.

By faith, we follow God’s call as we journey toward a better country.

By faith, our grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and friends shared God’s love with us, a love that longs to draw us all as members of the Body of Christ.

By faith, we follow God’s call as we journey toward a better country.

By faith, we remember the story today, the story of God’s desire for all creation to be reconciled to God and one another.

By faith, we follow God’s call as we journey toward a better country.

By faith, we carry the faith forward, building a community of belonging, provision, and care as we journey with God toward a better country.

By faith, we gather to nourish and encourage one another on the journey toward a better country as we build God’s already-but-not-yet kingdom here and now. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Prayer for the Day

Now faith is
the assurance of things hoped for,

the conviction of things not seen.
We come convinced of many things
but trusting very few.

Holy God of limitless surprises,
meet us here
in this place
as we touch that which we cannot see,
that which we have not dared to hope.

*Written by Katherine Hawker. Posted on **Liturgies Outside**. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/07/opening-prayers-hebrews-11.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

God of Abraham and Sarah, God of Jesus Christ, God of our mothers and fathers, you are a God who acts in history. Yet we confess that we are too busy with our own lives to perceive you at work in our time. We fall into fear and despair about our troubled world, as if you had no care for us. Forgive our lack of faith and help us to join you as you labor to bring new life on earth; in the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

*Written by Ruth C. Duck, **Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated**, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 117.*

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Benediction

Children of God, by faith, God has brought us this far. Go now in the blessing of the God who goes before you and behind you, surrounding you on all sides with grace as we journey toward a better country in our neighborhood, our community, and beyond. Amen.

*Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, **Discipleship Ministries**, February 2024.*

For the Sake of Joy

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

August 17, 2025

[Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#)

PLANNING NOTES

Joy can be a hard thing to nail down. Last week, we talked about defining yet not grasping faith. The substance of faith sweeps us with it toward the “better country.” This week, we turn to joy. But not just any joy—Jesus’ joy. Have you ever thought about Jesus having joy? We encounter Jesus suffering in the Passion, but we don’t often think about Jesus having emotions. Yet surely he did. Fully God and fully *human*. Fully human people tend to experience emotions. But then, is joy an emotion? Or something more? Like, an emotion+? I’m not going to pretend to have all of the philosophical answers to this, and philosophers, theologians, pastors, and lay people have spent a lot of time and ink to write about all these things and more. But, if we plan worship around joy, then worship has to include joy. Our congregations don’t need to just hear about joy. They need to experience it.

So, what can we tease out about joy from this passage? First, joy is an emotion connected to purpose. Joy points us toward the kingdom of God that is both here and not yet. Second, Jesus is the model for living in joy. “Who for the sake of the joy set before him, endured the cross...” We do not wait to experience joy until suffering and difficulty are past. We can encounter joy amid hardship because joy points us toward the reality of God’s dream for all creation. Third, joy has something to do with community. Throughout today’s passage, we read story after story of people of faith who came before, all of which culminates in the call to persevere in the faith because we are surrounded by the cloud of witnesses. That cloud of witnesses are the saints who have gone before, yes, but they are also the saints that surround us when we gather for worship or potlucks or Sunday school, or when we go grocery shopping or pick kids up from school or stand in line at the DMV. We practice the joy that Jesus demonstrates in community.

We must also remember that it is not our job to manufacture joy. We want to avoid any temptation to manipulate or force happy feelings in worship. This defeats the purpose of practicing joy even in the midst of adversity. We do not have to *feel happy* to encounter and experience joy in the midst of worship. So, select music that reminds your church of their story. Lift up prayers that address the difficulties in your community while also pointing to joy that is before, the ways that the kingdom of God is breaking through. Share stories of hope and encouragement. When you pass the peace, maybe you also pass the joy—“The peace and joy of Christ be with you...and also with you.” Pray for the Spirit to renew a sense of joy in your worship, then trust that God may surprise you with joy from unexpected places. And then, bless your congregation to go out and be attentive for joy to take them by surprise because the joy set before us is real and lasting, already here and not yet fulfilled.

PREACHING NOTES

"This would be a great job if it weren't for all the people!" I've heard that from all sorts of folks. I've even said it myself a few times. You know how it is: you get to the point where you quote that old saying - "Everyone is crazy but me and thee, and I'm not so sure about thee." People, can't live with them, can't ... Well, you get my point. Sometimes, some people just get under our skin. Sometimes, some people just get on our nerves. Sometimes, some people ...

The communion of saints is one of those ideas that sometimes sounds better in the abstract than it does in the concrete. The reality of people, all sorts of people - even saintly people - is sometimes hard to take. Yet, we are encouraged, in fact, required, to live in community, to live in relationship. Relationships take other people. Community implies other people. We cannot be in a relationship with ourselves or be a community of one.

Granted, this is not All Saints Sunday, so why is there an emphasis on the communion of saints? Well, because the text does so. The theme we chose for this week is about Jesus, and the statement at the end of the text about the joy set before him. But to understand this joy, we have to look at the run up to these last couple of verses, which are all about those who have gone before. We are naming the great cloud of witnesses.

So, we are stuck with community, and we might as well learn to enjoy it. We find that people, all sorts of people, are endlessly fascinating if we take the time to explore. We might even find that our salvation is wrapped up in those around us. At least, that is what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews would like us to understand. You have to go back to the beginning of Chapter 11. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That's a powerful description of faith; it's hard to find one better in the whole Bible. But from this rather abstract statement comes a whole chapter of people. It is as if the writer is saying that the only way to understand faith is to look at the lives of the folks around us. Sure, the first ones named are the heroes of the faith. But by the time we get to the passage for today, we discover that there are so many that we've run out of names. They are just stories of suffering and triumph, pain and peace. When we listen closely and think deeply, we realize these are stories of people we know, stories of people like us. And we are encouraged by their faith; we are lifted up and given a sense of hope and promise.

But the writer tells us that their journey, though it is done, is not complete. They still await fulfillment. They wait for us. And now they make up the cloud of witnesses that has gone before us and encourages us to run. They wait for their own completion, even as they press us forward toward ours.

Wait a minute. They aren't done? Well, I suppose if you talk about the people that the writer to the Hebrews talks about, it makes some sense. After all, they were all Old Testament figures, so their stories couldn't be completed until Christ came, right? But then, by the time of this letter to the Hebrews, Christ had come. So, they would have had their chance. Right? Hmm. Maybe something else is going on here then.

Maybe what we are supposed to understand is that none of us is complete until all of us are complete. Maybe we are supposed to hear that our salvation is not a personal issue. Our faith is not a private matter. Maybe we are supposed to understand that we are, by the nature of this faith, a community. We are the communion of saints.

Saint, of course, doesn't mean halo-wearing and perfect-acting reasonable facsimiles of human beings. A saint is simply someone who has said yes to Jesus Christ. And if that is the key criterion, then we should know how fallible saints can be, how incomplete saints can be, and how needy saints can be. Because we are they! We are saints, and we have trouble wearing the halo without embarrassment.

So, if there is a cheering section encouraging us forward while we lay aside the weights and sins that drag us down and then run the race set before us, then it IS about us, after all. Right? Uh, no. Sorry. First of all, it is about him. "Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Our goal and our training regimen is to become like Christ. It is about him and our efforts to incarnate him in our own lives and communities, in our hearts and in our hands.

Jesus is the model; Jesus is the measure. It can't be about us because as good as we can be, alongside the depth and power of his love, ours seems feeble at best. As soon as we begin to get full of ourselves - and we do way too often - then we look to Jesus and are reminded how far we have yet to travel to the destination. As soon as we begin to fade, convinced that we are far from the goal and—more than that—incapable of ever reaching it, then we look to Jesus and see an invitation and encouragement. And something more. We see joy.

That's what we want, whether we can name it or not. We want joy—the joy that Jesus lived every single day. The joy of knowing we are where and who we are supposed to be. The joy of knowing that no matter our purpose, our value cannot be taken from us because it comes from beyond and within. The joy of knowing that every action, thought, and desire is focused on fulfilling our purpose. The joy of living not for ourselves but for the kingdom of God, the community of faith, and the communion of saints.

For the sake of this joy, Christ endured the cross. For the joy of loving us, for the joy of including us, Christ gave his life. And now, we find joy in loving as he loved. That's what it means to be a part of the communion of saints.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, for the sake of the joy, we gather...

We gather to worship, to encounter grace, to grow in faith.

For the sake of the joy, we proclaim...

We proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, the love of God that surrounds us and forms us into a community marked by love for God, self, neighbor, and all creation.

For the sake of the joy, we respond...

We respond with our lives, ready to embody our faith as agents of God's already-and-not-yet kingdom.

For the sake of the joy, God sends us...

God sends us into the world to meet our neighbors with the defiant joy and persevering love of the gospel today and every day.

Come, let us worship the Triune God who dwells with us as we gather, proclaim, respond, and go forth from this place.

Come, let us worship! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Prayer for the Day

(Unison)

Glorious God, we thank you for the cloud of witnesses, the multitude of the faithful of all ages, who surround us. Considering their example, and looking to Jesus, may we run the race of life faithfully. Encourage us, that we may not grow weary or fainthearted. Help us accept your gentle discipline, through the grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Written by Ruth C. Duck, *Flames of the Spirit: Resources for Worship*, ed. Ruth C. Duck (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 50.*

Prayer of Confession

Being human, we never find it easy to ask for forgiveness. But as God's children, called to live in relationship with one another, we know we must speak of how we have hurt others, so we might be forgiven and restored to new life. Please join me as we pray to God, saying,

Unison

What more can we say, Expectant God, that you don't know already? You long for justice for all people, but it is washed away by the flood of violence in our world. You hope that righteousness will walk with us, but you hear the clear cries of those we mistreat. You ask us to speak up for those in need, but we shut our mouths and turn away.

Forgive us, Righteous God. Have mercy when we do not bear the fruit we could. Even though we have not lived our faith to the fullest, may we receive the promises of hope and grace you have given to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Written by Thom Shuman, posted at <https://pilgrimwr.unitingchurch.org.au/?p=5840>.

Benediction

Children of God, go now in the presence of the great cloud of witnesses and in the blessing of God who forms us for community. May you find in God and one another the joy to persevere as we follow after Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, as we seek God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Cannot Be Shaken

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

August 24, 2025

[Hebrews 12:18-29](#)

PLANNING NOTES

“The wise man built his house upon the rock. The wise man built his house upon the rock. The wise man built his house upon the rock, and the rains came a-tumblin’ down.” If these few sentences have now triggered an earworm you can’t get out of your head, you’re welcome! I loved this song growing up. I loved the hand motions and the tune but also came to love this image of building a house—a *home*—on the rock. As I grew in life and faith, I started to recognize that this song (and the parable it is based on) centers around a foundational assumption: the rains will come. Or, as in the case of our text from Hebrews this week, the rains, the fires, the shaking, the darkness and the gloom are all going to come. The question is, have you found your home in the Rock that cannot be shaken?

So, what if worship planning this week is not about answering a “have you” question but a “how will you” question; that is, “How will you—how will we—build our home in the unshakeable Rock, the Triune God? How is worship part of building that home together?” Week by week, we gather to sing, pray, and proclaim our praise of God and the good news of the gospel as a community. How might you help your congregation connect that the work of worship is also the work of building home together in Christ?

Certainly, one approach is to choose songs and prayers that resonate with the identity of your community. If your church loves the “old hymns,” sing “My Hope Is Built” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 368) or “Blessed Be the Tie That Binds” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 557). If your community prefers newer hymns, consider singing “Welcome” (*Worship and Song*, 3152) or “When God Restored Our Common Life” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2182). If you like to incorporate secular music with sacred themes into your service, you might want to sing “Find Your People” by Drew Holcomb and The Neighbors (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuNxyszq-5M>) or “Crowded Table” by The Highwomen (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPfI8zBWub4>). There are many ways to sing the identity of your community while also living deeply into the unique character of your congregation.

That said, the Hebrews text is also a “stretching” text. It challenges us to face the realities and uncertainties of this world while also living deeply into the mystery of the Triune God whom we worship and in whom we make our home. How do we build our home in and with God, who is an all-consuming fire? Perhaps it requires us to pray prophetically—to confess our complicity with injustices in the world, to name the forces in our world that work against abundant life for all, to ask God with fear and trembling to push us into building the kingdom of God in places that resist rather than embrace God’s dream for creation. Perhaps God’s all-consuming fire also calls us to listen to voices that are often marginalized. Who in your community doesn’t get to tell their story? How might you incorporate their voices in proclamation and/or response to God’s good news in worship? Because all of our voices, all of our stories are necessary for building home in God, even as God uses our voices and stories to refine the church, forming us to become God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

PREACHING NOTES

Biblical scholars have wrestled with the letter to the Hebrews for centuries. What is it? Is it really a letter and, if so, then who is the audience? If not a letter, then what? Some have called it a sermon. That makes some sense. It is a treatise and exhortation both, teaching and encouragement side by side. I could go with that, as one who appreciates a good sermon. But I'm not completely sold. Some things are missing, and there is another dimension to these words that I don't want to miss.

I'm leaning toward a work of art. Hebrews is a symphony, perhaps a choral work. It is a canvas of Guernica-level scale. It is a poetic work on the scale of Eliot's *Waste Land* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Like many works of art, Hebrews can be interpreted on many levels simultaneously. The previous texts told some real but powerful human stories and brought a deeper understanding of the human condition through their remarkable experiences. But now we stand at the precipice of glory as we attempt to grasp something of the God we worship and the faith we follow. Regular words don't work so well. We need to turn to poetry.

So, think of a three-stanza poetic work that attempts to express our experience of faith. Or maybe four, depending on how you want to work the ending. There is some flexibility here. The first stanza begins with "You have not come..." And let's be reminded that punctuation is problematic in these translations. It might be helpful to replace the first comma with a period. "You have not come to something that can be touched" (Hebrews 12:18 NRSV). Then, see the contrast in what follows. Neither have you come to something that is untouchable – a blazing fire, darkness, gloom, or a tempest, or the sound of a trumpet, or a voice that made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. Except there aren't "ors" in that verse; there are "ands." It is as if it is a combination or different facets or elements of the one untouchable whole. And don't argue that you can, in fact, touch a blazing fire – even though you shouldn't. This is not, however, a denial of the reality of this untouchable God. That's why the verse about Moses was included – to describe a true understanding of the God we worship. This does indeed describe God as God has been experienced in the history of God's people. But something has changed.

The second stanza of our poetic text begins with "But you have come ..." Emphasize the "have" when you read it. You have something; something has been given. You are gifted with special access, a special relationship, a blessed something that makes approaching this God a wholly different experience from what has gone before. You haven't come to burning, tempestuous, blaring, gloomy darkness. Instead, you have come home. That's the feeling of this second act of the drama. The first is walking into a headwind; the second is being welcomed home. You've climbed the summit to the highest place and found your way into the city of God, where there is a party going on, where your relatives gather, and where God takes a turn on the dance floor. Everyone is better than they have been in a long time; the host, the doorkeeper, and the welcome at the door are none other than Jesus, the one who handed out the VIP passes that got you in.

That's what has changed from the first stanza. We don't approach the unapproachable because we've been given access. We don't touch the untouchable because Jesus has made it touchable, embraceable. We aren't strangers in the heavenly realm, but welcome family. That's the promise, the guarantee of faith.

But then the third stanza raises eyebrows in all the hearers, or it should anyway. What's with all the shaking? And whom might we refuse? It is puzzling, to say the least. Mostly because we see the promise and the welcome and think that life should be easy from here on out. Once we claim faith and say yes to

Jesus, we believe we shouldn't have to endure hardship anymore. But that is never the promise. The promise is presence, and the promise is access. There is still going to be a whole lot of shaking going on! It isn't difficult to look around us and see that the world we experience isn't the world that is described as kingdom or kin-dom, either one! There is still work to be done, things that need to be shaken out and shaken up until we begin to resemble that inheritance the prophets describe, the eternity that Jesus presents. And what we hold onto during the shaking, when things seem bleak and broken, when God's people are hurting and hungry, is the promise of an unshakeable future, and then we work to build that foundation each and every day, even here on shaky ground.

Like faith that isn't seen and a God who appears untouchable, we see and touch an unshakeable promise and hope in a world of justice and mercy; let those twin goals be our guide.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, we gather today to encounter God.

We do not come expecting to be terrified or dismayed but to be welcomed and embraced.

We gather today to witness the gospel at work among us.

We come to join the assembly of the kingdom of God, to learn to live out God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

We gather today to declare our faith in God's unshakeable kingdom.

We come with grateful hearts, trusting in the secure foundation of God's steadfast love at work among us. Thanks be to God!

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, March 2025.

Prayer of Intercession

Listening God,

Hear our prayers as we come before you.

Hear the ones who are crying with pain in their heart.

Hear the ones who are weeping with grief long into the night.

Hear the ones who are sobbing in their loneliness.

Loving God,

Heal their pain.

Restore their lives.

Mend their broken hearts.

Leading God,

Lead us through the dark valleys.

Lead us through troublesome times.

Lead us to our home with you.

Teach us to listen to your voice,

That we may hear the cry of the needy and respond.
Teach us to love that
We may offer care that brings others to you for healing.
Teach us to lead,
With your vision so that we lead others home in you.

Amen

*Adapted from Rev Abi and posted on Rev Abi's Long and Winding Road blog.
<http://vicarofwadley.blogspot.ca/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/07/prayer-for-others-proper-16-c.html>.*

Prayer of Confession

Almighty God,
You have set before us the path
but we have wandered on our own
to try to find our way.

Sometimes we are like toddlers
and we hear Your call and come back.

Other times, we are children testing boundaries,
ignoring Your call until fear finally makes us look back.

And still other times, we are full of youthful rebellion,
demanding to be cut loose and set free,
not knowing how much we still need
to seek Your wisdom and guidance.

But most of all, too often, we think we are adults
and have figured it all out and know our own way,
only to stumble and stray so far.

Remind us, parental God,
that we are always Your children,
that we are never fully grown up in Your sight,
that we always have much to learn.

Help us to seek You every day,
to acknowledge that we need Your wisdom and guidance,
and help us to return to the path and walk with You.
In the name of Christ,
who is our companion on this journey of faith, we pray. **Amen.**

*Written by Rev Mindi and posted on **Rev-o-lution**, <http://rev-o-lution.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2017/01/prayer-of-confession-walking-with-god.html>.*

Benediction

Go now in the blessing of God's love that cannot be shaken, trusting in God's promises as you work for a world of justice and mercy for all. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, March 2025

Let Mutual Love Continue

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

August 31, 2025

[Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16](#)

PLANNING NOTES

When I was a pre-teen, I got a copy of a Christian magazine in the mail (I feel like I'm starting to show my age already), and inside it was a poster with Hebrews 13:2 on it: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (NIV²). I hung that poster with its vague visual references to angels' wings up on my wall, and it stayed there for years. Unfortunately, the message of that poster and the message I was taught in other contexts about Hebrews 13:2 was, essentially, "Be kind to everyone because you never know when the stranger is actually an angel, and you don't want to miss out on that." Looking back, that's an interesting take on this verse, given that throughout the Bible, people are usually aware when they're talking to an angel and not an "ordinary" human.

Perhaps the issue with this reading of Hebrews 13:2 is that it is removed from Hebrews 13:1—"Let mutual love continue." What if the writer of Hebrews is trying to tell us that when we pursue mutual love, we start to recognize strangers as angels, as messengers of God's good news, as image-bearers of the divine? What if that is our call in worship this week, to practice mutual love that enables us to meet strangers and neighbors alike as embodied messengers of God's goodness and grace?

Now, you may be thinking, that's all well and good, but what about the ornery tenor who refuses to listen to directions? Or the congregant who always has something to complain about immediately after worship? Or the person who wanders in partway through worship and makes a commotion? Yeah. Them too. That's kind of the point of Hebrews 13. The author is not suggesting that mutual love makes living our lives modeled after Jesus easy. Just the opposite. Mutual love requires us to grapple with just how hard it can be to love our neighbors...and ourselves.

So, we encourage you to approach worship planning with honesty about what it means to be a community of mutual love. Pray for the courage to love people who seem hard to love. Preach about the importance of boundaries and that boundaries are necessary for mutual love to exist and flourish. Sing about love as a gift and a choice. Give time to reflect silently on the difficulties of loving ourselves. If this is a Sunday where you celebrate Holy Communion, use the Communion liturgy to reflect on the Table as a place where we come to receive love and grace *as we are*. Invite those gathered to recognize God's grace at work not just in their lives but in the life of the gathered community as you sing, pray, and receive Holy Communion together. All of these and more are acts of mutual love, moments to practice love in community together, and to open the hearts of the community to God's grace that forms us to practice mutual love wherever we go.

² The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.®](#) Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

PREACHING NOTES

In this long, personal (handwritten?) letter we've been sharing in these weeks, we've covered a lot of ground. There is, of course, much more to the letter to the Hebrews than what we have seen in these four weeks. Perhaps continuing with a Bible study to examine this rich but sometimes complex part of the New Testament would be a way to follow up on this series. But even in these brief passages, we've touched on theology and philosophy as we examined the nature of faith and the person of the Christ. We've touched on history as we let the lives of those who have gone before inform us and maybe even transform us. We've even dabbled in poetry and art as we explored finding words and descriptions of the indescribable and attempted to touch the untouchable. So, with what shall we follow all these profound thoughts and deep discussions? Ethics, of course.

Wait, wait. You're rolling your eyes. However, reflection on ethics is not a dry, removed academic exercise. It is answering a basic question. Remember the response to the fiery preaching of John the Baptist? In Luke's version of the story, John comes out of the wilderness and proclaims a call to repentance and warns of the wrath to come. "And the crowds ask him, 'What then should we do?'" (Luke 3:10 NRSV). That's an ethical inquiry. What should we do? How will we act in light of all that we have explored? What patterns of behavior, rules of interaction, and priorities might we develop because of this unseen and unseeable truth in which we have faith?

Let's be clear, however. This ethical standard, this list of behaviors and priorities, isn't what gets us access to that city and the party that is taking place in a festal gathering. This isn't an argument for works righteousness. The list we examine this week is a response to all that has gone before. It is the inevitable – should we say required? – response to the encounter with the welcoming Christ and the receiving of the unshakeable inheritance all through a faith that is an assurance of things hoped for and a conviction of things not seen. It is a response of joy, not fear. Required, even commanded, doesn't work here, not really. It's an outpouring of the love that has been poured into us. It is the realization that the world we live in looks different than we thought it did. We see differently than we used to see. The colors are deeper; the music is intoxicating; the people shine with the blessing of God even when they don't realize it. Because of that new vision, relationship, and reality, we long to live a life reflecting this unshakeable kin-dom, this promised kingdom.

What then should we do? That has to be the question that comes to mind after all this. And the writer of Hebrews has a ready answer. The conclusion of this letter, this sermon, this symphony is simply this: "Let mutual love continue." You can stop reading here, if you like. This explains it all. This is the blueprint for the life of faith. Let mutual love continue. There is more, and the writer gives us some nuance and some images for what this might look like, and we always need images. Draw me a picture, then I know what this faith life looks like, this seeing the unseeable and touching the untouchable. But dwell here for a moment. Let this seep into the marrow of your bones before you look for further manifestations. Let mutual love continue.

Continue? Yes, think about it. We didn't invent this love thing. We aren't the first, no matter how creative we might be; it doesn't start with us. We stand in a tradition; we follow one who has gone before to show us the way. We follow many who have gone before. Many. There might indeed be some in your congregation who have not ever felt that love or known that they were loved. That is one of the tragedies of human existence, especially as we have configured it in our modern societies that are all about the individual. "I am a rock," someone sang; "I am an island." Living as a rock means you may not know of this love. You may not have experienced being loved like this. But it was there—coming from the

creator of all that is and echoed by a church that wrestles with loving, has wrestled with loving from the beginning of its existence. Every now and then, we get it right, and we love those we are sent to love. A world that is loved.

So, let it continue in us. Let us be the sign that there is love in the world. Even the most broken, the most estranged, the most fearful and hurting, and the loneliest are loved and worthy of love because their creator deemed them worthy. Let it continue in and through us. Let mutual love continue.

Mutual? Yes, this love is too much for individuals. It is too much to wield, too much to bear, too much to maintain. None of us is capable of letting this love continue on our own. Let mutual love continue. This love is about gathering, partnerships, relationships, the called-out body named the church. We practice loving inside so that we can carry that love outside. We love one another so that we can love others. We experience love within the body so that we can carry it beyond the body. Open the circles we have drawn within to include and to welcome. That's why after such a profound beginning as "let mutual love continue," we move immediately to hospitality.

Don't undersell hospitality. It is the face of the community. How you do hospitality determines who might consider staying to become a part of the fellowship. It is more important than we realize. That's why the first manifestation of mutual love that is described in the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews is hospitality. We unpack each of the ideas running through our text – prison ministry, covenant-keeping in marriage, avoidance of greed, and, seeing money as our true savior, honoring those who lead in various ways. Each of these is an outgrowth of letting mutual love continue, and you can determine that word that is needed in your context. You might also ignore the lectionary's suggestion to skip verses and spend time on staying on course in faith – keeping the main thing the main thing.

But come back before you close to the idea that one of the things that keeps us on track and lets mutual love continue among us is worshiping together regularly. And being reminded that our lives are our witness of faith. The letter you write as you preach can be personal and invitational and encouraging, but most of all, it is a sign of mutual love continuing.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, when we witness the needs of strangers and listen to the struggles of our friends, remember:

Let mutual love continue.

When we hear the struggles of those in prison and recognize the suffering of people near and far, remember:

Let mutual love continue.

When temptations to hoard more money, more power, and more influence surround us on every side, remember:

Let mutual love continue.

As we gather for worship, remember: God is here among us, surrounding us with love and forming us to live in love everywhere we go.

We choose to cooperate with God's love today and every day so that mutual love will continue wherever we go and whatever we do. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, March 2024.

Prayer for the Day

In the face of all our realities:
We are the people who heal each other,
who grow strong together,
who name the truth,
who know what it means to live in community,
moving toward a common dream
for a new heaven and a new earth.
In the power of the love of God our Creator,
The company of Jesus Christ,
And the leading of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Adapted from the people of Pitt Street Uniting Church (Sydney, Australia), Prayers Encircling the World: An International Anthology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 212.

Prayer of Confession

Knowing that our God journeys with us in our confusion,
our doubts, our failings, our struggles,
we now come humbly before God to ask for mercy.

For the times we fail to offer hospitality
to those in our world who suffer injustice, oppression, and poverty, we pray:
God, have mercy on us and your people

For the times we lack courage to address the causes
of injustice, oppression, and poverty, we pray to our God:
God, have mercy on us and on your people.

For the times we give in to despair and resignation
when confronted with the injustice of our world, we pray to our God:
God, have mercy on us and on your people.

For the times we allow our fears to triumph
over the call to solidarity, we pray to our God:
God, have mercy on us and on your people.

***Merciful God, receive our petitions.
Heal the brokenness in our hearts and in our world
caused by injustice, indifference, selfishness, and fear.
Open our hearts to hear the cries of your suffering people.***

Support us as we seek to respond in mutual love and hospitality. Amen.

Adapted from Offering Hospitality to Refugees, compiled by Loreto Conroy. Posted on <https://www.crcna.org/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/07/prayer-of-confession-hospitality.html>.

Benediction

Children of God, go from this place in the blessing of the Triune God, our Helper and our Friend, offering your sacrifice of praise and sharing what you have as you spread the love of God in mutuality and care to the ends of the earth and back again. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, March 2025.