

“Hebrews 13:8”

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 13:1-6

I. Introduction

a. Good morning, and welcome to the first Sunday in Lent!

“Hebrews 13:8”

Hebrews 13:1-6

b. I want to thank Pastor Matthias for the opportunity to speak to you this morning

i. There are some things on my heart that I’d like to share with you

c. But before I do that, I have a story I need to tell you

i. It directly relates the message I’d like to share.

ii. But my stories are kind of unpredictable – sometimes they take a left turn on me and I end up saying something I shouldn’t say behind the pulpit! Dang!

d. Well, that is not going to happen today. Today, I’m going to come out here to tell this story!

II. Andy Dotson

a. This should be a safe story – it happened in church – First United Methodist Church in Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

i. That is where Debbie and I met



ii. That is where we got married

iii. That was part of an eighteen-year involvement with that church.

b. That was a pretty big church, and they had a lot of nice programs – but my favorite program was Tuesday morning United Methodist Men Prayer Breakfast.

i. About 6:00 AM a few of the brothers would go down to the church kitchen and start making breakfast

ii. About 6:30, the rest of us would start to arrive.

1. We’d drink coffee and swap lies until 7:00

2. Then, we’d eat breakfast, have a prayer request/praise time, and . . .

3. Then one of the brothers would give a devotion

4. Afterwards the young guys would go to work, and the retired guys would go home.

iii. Now, there were three or four of us young guys who were comfortable speaking in a crowd, and we gave a lot of the devotions.

1. And that was fine – everyone appreciated the work.

iv. But there was another crowd there – older, WWII vintage guys

1. They were fine, ethical, principled men
 2. But they were quieter – they didn’t talk as much and they rarely gave the devotion
 3. But they had a pact amongst themselves – every year each one would give the devotion one time!
 4. And every time one of the old guys signed up, we were all amped with anticipation – “Hey, we are going to learn something about Charles – or Woody – or Chet!”
- c. Well, one day this old boy named Andy Dotson signed up
- i. He was from a small town in Iowa, and he’d served in the South Pacific in WWII
 - ii. He was a wiry, animated little guy – very likeable – and we were really excited to hear his devotion.
 1. But Andy was kind of a loose cannon, and you were never sure what he was going to say!
 - iii. Well, when it came time for Andy to give his devotion, he marched straight to the front of the room.
 1. He didn’t say “Boo”, “Come here”, or “Sic-em” – he just launched into this story about his days in the South Pacific.



- iv. Now, you probably remember this from your history books. There was a point in the war when the Allied troops collected in the South Pacific, with the goal of sweeping north, dislodging the occupying Japanese forces, and ultimately to attack and conquer Japan.
 1. The big battles – Wake Island, Corregidor, Guam – were part of this offensive
- v. Andy was part of that. His unit shipped out – headed north – and came upon a small island held by the enemy.
 1. And they attacked – you know, jumping out of the boats and going ashore – like Saving Private Ryan.
 2. It turns out the island was lightly defended
 - a. They defeated the enemy forces with minimal casualties
 3. They left about 100 men to defend the island, and the rest of the force headed north for more fighting.
- vi. Well, Andy was one of those 100 men
 1. At first they were all secretly relieved – this was pretty light duty! Way better than going ashore on another island and getting shot at!
 2. But they noticed something – after about a week the menu at chow time was getting pretty narrow!
 - a. You see, they really weren’t provisioned to be an occupying force!
 - b. They were an attack force!
 - c. And after about a week and a half they were down to dry food – beans and cornbread!
 3. At first, they were grateful to have anything to eat.
 - a. Well, that lasted about a day!
 - b. Then tensions began to rise!
 - i. I mean, can you imagine nighttime in a barracks with 100 men who’ve been eating nothing but beans!
 - ii. The campfire scene from Blazing Saddles comes to mind!

- c. And, as you might expect, they took their frustrations out on the cooks!
- vii. Now, the head cook had the job of posting the menu and who was on KP on a given day
 - 1. And the day rolled around where he just could not bring himself to write “beans” into the slot for dinner and supper.
 - 2. So he wrote “Hebrews 13:8” in the meal slot instead!
- viii. Well, the news spread like wildfire through the camp!
 - 1. **“We are having something new for supper!”**
 - 2. **“Don’t know what it is, but it ain’t beans!”**
 - 3. And the men were crowded down at the mess hall well before meal time.
 - 4. When meal time arrived, the men came flooding in, and to their immense disappointment, the meal was beans again!
- ix. Well, they almost had a riot! “You are feeding us beans and lying about it!” The health and longevity of the cook staff was highly in question!
 - 1. But you know how there is always one religious guy in the unit?!?
 - 2. Well, there was this one guy who carried one of those little New Testaments around in his shirt pocket.
 - 3. And while the rest of the crew was about to lynch the cook, he pulls out his Bible, thumbs his way to Hebrews 13:8, and says **“Wait, fellers! It’s okay! Listen to this: ‘Hebrews 13:8 : Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever!’ Cookie ain’t lying – he is just saying that our supper is like Jesus – it ain’t never going to change!”**
- x. Well, the story has a happy ending.
 - 1. They didn’t lynch the cook
 - 2. About a week later, a ship came
 - a. They weren’t bringing provisions – they picked up the men to join the fighting up north.
 - 3. Andy got in on some of that, took a piece of shrapnel in the butt and got sent home with a Purple Heart and a commendation.
 - 4. But to Andy, knowing that the same Jesus that he’d asked into his heart as an eight-year-old boy back in Nowhere, Iowa – knowing that same Jesus was with him when he found himself stranded on an island in the South Pacific – that was a source of strength and encouragement to him all of his life.
 - a. And I admire and respect him for that.

III. Transition

- a. Well, that story has been on my mind a lot lately . . . And until a couple of days ago, I couldn’t tell you why it was on my mind.
- b. You see, the thing that occupies most of my mental band width is the situation with my wife – Debbie.
 - i. Many of you are aware of this . . . We’ve been on the prayer list enough.
 - ii. Briefly, she is home today, doing well and continuing to recover from the amputation of her left leg.
 - iii. This is brought on by complications due to diabetes
 - iv. And this last event – 20 days in the hospital and well over \$100,000 in medical bills – is not that unusual – it is just another day in the life of chronic disease.
 - v. And this is a battle that has gone on for the past 10-15 years.
- c. Now, as I try to do, I want to understand the events of my life in the context of scriptural teachings.
 - i. But I will confess, this one has been a challenge – and I’m far being able to say I understand all this.

- ii. But I do have some thoughts I'd like to share with you, and oddly enough, they were explained to me by that goofy story about Andy Dotson being stranded on an island with nothing to eat but beans!

IV. The Key

- a. The thing that caused the penny to drop is the simple question – “Why did the author of Hebrews feel the need to remind his audience the Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever”?
 - i. What kind of people need to hear a message like that?
- b. Well, Hebrews is a mysterious book. We don't know who wrote it. We don't know who the original audience of the book was.
 - i. However, the book itself reveals that the audience is a church that is undergoing persecution.
 - ii. Tradition has it that the church was the Roman church, in the time of the emperor Nero.
 - 1. You remember Nero!
 - a. Crazy guy, hated Christians.
 - b. Liked to set them on fire and feed them to lions.
 - iii. And this detail brings the message of Andy Dotson and his Hebrews 13:8 story right into focus.
- c. The sequence of thought for a church under oppression – or really, for oppressed peoples of any stripe – is pretty well understood.
 - i. Those Christians of early Rome knew they were different
 - 1. They didn't worship the same as their neighbors, and they didn't do some of the things their neighbors did for moral reasons.
 - 2. But basically it was live and let live, most of the time.
 - ii. But then, there was a shift in the political climate – in this case, the crazed Emperor Nero – and suddenly they know fear
 - 1. Their neighbors start treating them differently . . .
 - 2. And then one day, armed men show up in church, and they insult the women and slap the men around, and haul the preacher and the lay leader off to jail.
 - 3. And now they – the persecuted church – really know fear.
 - iii. As the weeks and months go by, they hear rumors of other events like this, and they never leave the house without fear
 - 1. Some of the brothers would take meals to the preacher and lay leader in jail, but that just marked them as targets for more fear
 - 2. And one day they each realize they can't really remember a time when they weren't afraid, and can't imagine a future in which they are not consumed by fear.
- d. This is the state of mind of the persecuted church, and if they stay in that state of fear, they just can't survive. They will descend into despair.
 - i. And so the author of Hebrews just gently reminds them that Jesus the Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever . . .
 - ii. And he has saved them once, and he is in the process of saving them again!
 - iii. Hang on, brothers, until help arrives!
 - iv. And praise God, a lot of them heard this message, hung in there, and passed the faith on to the next generation!

V. The Analog

- a. Now, why am I telling you this? Why am I babbling on about the persecuted church?
- b. Please understand me on what I'm about to say.
 - i. I'm not trying to overdramatize this or hold some kind of pity party

- ii. And I know these two kinds of hardship are nowhere near being equivalent . . .
- iii. But those of us with chronic disease in the family understand the mentality of the persecuted church!
- c. Considering all that has happened recently, I have to work really hard to recall memories from the time before diabetes, and I when I look ahead, all the possible outcomes include diabetes and the ramifications thereof.
 - i. That is the very definition of chronic disease!
- d. And it is not just chronic disease that has this chronic effect!
 - i. I had a friend who hated his job.
 - 1. His boss was a jerk, and his coworkers were lazy leeches
 - 2. It was the definition of a toxic work environment
 - ii. But the job paid well, and he had kids to raise, and child support from a previous marriage, and he couldn't quit the job.
 - iii. So day after day after day, he had to endure this chronic, toxic situation
- e. And if we cast our minds about, we can recognize other chronically broken situations that defy solution – situations where we have to settle with making the best of the situation.
- f. The question then is how do we – as Followers of Jesus Christ – make the best of these chronic situations?
 - i. It stands to reason that our faith should be an advantage to us, right?
 - ii. We have access to spiritual resources not everyone has, right?
- g. Well, I am trained as an engineer.
 - i. And an engineer likes nothing better than to find someone who has already solved his problem – or one like it – in a similar context!
 - ii. We engineers call that “an Analog”. Behind your backs, we refer to it as a “Big Payday”!
 - iii. And the psychology of the persecuted church is enough of an analog to the psychology of those who deal with chronic disease and other chronic dysfunction that I am very interested in hearing what the author of Hebrews has to say to the Persecuted Church!

VI. Hebrews 13

- a. Well, our scripture reading for today – Hebrews 13:1-6 that Riley just read for us – is certainly instructive.
- b. I won't read it again, but it included sound instruction like . . .
 - i. Keep on loving each other
 - ii. Show hospitality to strangers
 - iii. Visit those in prison
 - iv. Honor your marital vows
 - v. Don't lust after money
- c. I'm sorry, but doesn't that sound like every other list of Christian instructions?
 - i. Freaking boring, right!?!?!?
 - ii. Well, yes it is – and that is actually the point!
- d. The author of Hebrews is saying . . .
 - i. “I know you guys have had a hard time. You've had some losses and you've seen some things you shouldn't have to see. And that was wrong.
 - ii. **But none of this interrupts God's plan for your life and His desires for your work in the Kingdom!**
 - iii. **He still has you in His plans, and He still expects you to honor your Christian Principles.”**
- e. Essentially, nothing has changed! How can this be?
 - i. **Because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever!**

- f. You know, I can well imagine the Persecuted Church saying “Hey, go a little easy on us! We’ve had a tough day!”
 - i. The author of Hebrews replies “I’m sorry. I feel your pain. But for your own good, we are not going to dwell on your sorrow. We are going to get on with life and get on with the business of being God’s people.”

VII. II Corinthians 12:7-9a

- a. So I thought “That might be a little harsh. Maybe this Hebrews scripture is an outlier, and doesn’t reflect Biblical consensus. I need to dig a little deeper.” And I thought of Paul the Apostle, and his famous ‘thorn in his flesh’.
- b. Hear these words from II Corinthians Chapter 12

II Corinthians 12:7-9a

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

- c. Christians over the years have wondered what exactly that thorn in the flesh was. The Greek text strongly implies that it was physical affliction.
 - i. Some think that his eyesight was ruined from writing many long letters in dim light
 - 1. That certainly could be.
 - ii. Others speculate that he had chronic stomach distress resulting from a case of Mediterranean dysentery. I can relate to that!
 - iii. But it doesn’t really matter
- d. What matters is that Paul asked the Lord three times to take it away, and the Lord declined!
 - i. I can imagine Paul saying “Lord, I could be a much better apostle for you if you’d fix my problem.”
 - ii. And the Lord replies “**Paul, you don’t know it yet, but you will be a far better apostle for me if you keep your thorn in the flesh and learn to rely on my grace.**”

VIII. John 9:1-3

- a. Dang! That didn’t help!
- b. So I thought I’d take one more crack at finding a sympathetic ear in scripture. I remembered a story in the gospel of John that I thought might help.
- c. Hear these words from John Chapter 9

John 9:1-3

¹ As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” ³ “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

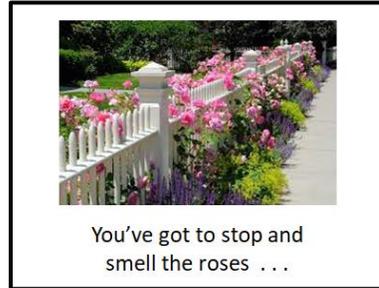
1 As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3 “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.

- d. Now my heart goes out to this poor blind guy. Here he is, living in the dark all his life, and these guys are speculating on whether he or his parents are the biggest sinners in town!
 - i. But Jesus says “Hey, he is not a sinner – he is the lucky one! He is about to see the works of the Lord displayed!”
 - ii. Do you catch the irony here? This blind man is going to see the works of the Lord!
 - iii. And Jesus healed him and the story progresses from there.

IX. What Does It All Mean?

- a. Now, at this point, I have to invoke the “Full Disclosure for Preachers Act”.
- b. You’ve not heard of this legislation? Well, under the “Full Disclosure for Preachers Act”, I have to admit it when I give advice that I myself struggle to follow.
 - i. And I will emphatically state that I struggle with every Biblical concept that I’ve laid before you this morning!
 - ii. I’m not ready to think diabetes can be a blessing!
 - iii. I’m not ready to think amputations make us better followers of Jesus Christ!
 - iv. I’d like nothing better than for Debbie to experience some kind of miraculous healing and grow her feet back!
- c. But when I embrace the reality that chronic disease – indeed, chronic dysfunction of all types – seems to be a part of living in this fallen world . . .
 - i. Then I find these Biblical messages enormously comforting as well as challenging!
 - ii. When the choice is either think about the situation in God’s way, or descend into death by despair . . . the choice is pretty easy.
 - iii. And we do have spiritual resources available to us that reveal a light – and not just a light at the end of a tunnel!
- d. You see, the Bible – from front to back – is a story of redemption!
 - i. A story of lost things being found
 - ii. A story of stolen things being bought back
 - iii. A story of the proverbial silk purse being made out of the proverbial sow’s ear
 - iv. That is just how God does His business!
- e. The challenge – for those who find themselves in the Chronic Struggle – is figuring out how to cooperate with God’s redemptive purposes.
 - i. For me, the first step was – I had to get a new picture of God!
 - 1. I won’t tell you what the old picture looked like, but sometimes my new picture God looks like a 70’s lounge singer
 - a. Curly, blond white man Afro
 - b. Flowered shirt and bell bottoms
 - 2. And He’s singing “I beg your pardon . . . I never promised you a Rose Garden!”
 - ii. But that is okay!
 - 1. Once I accept that life is no Rose Garden, I can start to think about how God is going to work in our situation.
 - 2. I can look for ways in which He will redeem Debbie’s suffering.
 - 3. And in the process I can welcome every sign of the in-breaking Kingdom of God!

- f. And this is where you see the hand of God at work!
 - i. You know, one of my other pictures of the Lord has him singing “you’ve got to stop and smell the roses!



- ii. I believe when you are in a chronic battle, the Lord sends little messages of encouragement – if you can shake off your gloom enough to see them.
 - 1. These things are like flowers you see along the way.
- g. And in our situation, most of those flowers have been people
 - i. You people are at the top of that list
 - 1. You all have been so generous
 - 2. The cards, the calls and the prayers
 - 3. The many offers of help
 - 4. The honest concern
 - 5. The Diet Dr. Pepper that mysteriously arrives on the porch!
 - 6. Thank you!
 - ii. The doctors and nurses without exception have been competent, warm and generous
 - 1. And this is in a time when they are suffering their own chronic work distress dealing with COVID and stubborn folks who had to learn the hard way.
 - iii. But the thing that just cracked me up and brought me to tears at the same time happened at work – up at school.
 - 1. One of the seniors popped into my office one day and says “Burt, we noticed you’ve been looking like hell lately. But we heard you and your wife were having a tough time, and we wanted to help, so we thought you might use some good takeout. So we all chipped in and got you guys a gift card to – what is their favorite greasy spoon takeout place.”
 - 2. Now, I’m pretty sure it would kill me if I try to eat their favorite food.
 - a. Me and the Apostle Paul have something in common!
 - 3. But I was touched by their thoughtfulness!
 - 4. I remember how self-absorbed I was as a 20-year-old male engineering student!
 - a. One of my professors could have been dying at the front of class, and I wouldn’t have noticed!
 - b. And none of my class mates would have either!
 - c. Someone might have said “Sir, before you croak, is this going to be on the test?”
 - iv. The fact is – In real time I got to watch our eternal Lord cause a bunch of 20-year old male engineering students to feel empathy and sympathy for a fellow human being!
 - v. And if He can do that, I am confident that our eternal Lord can see us through whatever adventures our chronic diseases and dysfunctions can serve up!

I offer you these words in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit! Amen.