

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 15, 2021

Holy Partners in a Heavenly Calling

Hebrews 3:1-6

With each passing week, the preacher here in Hebrews has watched attendance drop. When he looks out at the congregation on Sunday morning, he sees more and more empty spots in the pews. But the preacher doesn't yield to discouragement, because he knows that Jesus is always in attendance. No matter how weary many in the church may grow, the preacher is strengthened and renewed by the reality of what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ. That's why he keeps circling back to the superiority of Jesus. He knows that's the best way to bolster the commitment of folks who are considering abandoning the faith and dropping out of church.

In this particular case, folks aren't exiting the community of believers because there was a church fight, or because they don't like the style of worship, or because there aren't enough programs for children. No, this congregation's decline is primarily a matter of fatigue from ongoing persecution. As preacher Thomas Long has put it, "The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away."¹

Notice though that the preacher doesn't respond to their exhaustion by putting them down, but by lifting Jesus up. Not that Jesus needs to be elevated. He already occupies the highest place, seated at the right hand of God, reigning over all things. And he got there because of his faithfulness. Now, Jesus' fidelity to God isn't entirely new. There are many other models of faith. Take Moses, for instance. When it comes to faithfulness to God, he ranks up there near the top. But only near the top, because Jesus occupies the very top. This isn't to put down Moses, or to tarnish his exemplary legacy. It's just to say that even as great as Moses was, Jesus is still "worthy of more glory" (v. 3).

Already, the preacher can hear a few "Amens" coming from different spots in the sanctuary. He's tempted to have the music director come forward and lead the congregation in a few rounds of "Majesty": "Majesty, worship his majesty. / Unto Jesus be all glory, honor, and praise. / Majesty, kingdom authority / flow from his throne, unto his own; / His anthem raise."

Just when the congregation is riveted on the glory of Jesus, the preacher turns the spotlight onto them. Clearly, there's no dispute about the solidness and superiority of Jesus' faithfulness. But there are some serious concerns and worries about their own fidelity to God. The answer isn't for the preacher to relentlessly hammer away at their shaky commitment, but first of all to lift up the name of Jesus and remind the congregation of who they are because of him. After all, Jesus' faithfulness isn't just his own. His fidelity to God determines their identity and brings worth and abiding value to the community of faith, the church.

"Brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling" (v. 1). That's what the preacher calls them. Just when they were buckling themselves into their pews, ready for the preacher to really let them have it for losing faith and disengaging from the church, he

addresses them with such affirmation. "Brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling."

We're family, not because of blood, race, personality, shared opinions, or common interests, but because together we belong to Jesus Christ. He fully shared in our humanity, in order to secure our forgiveness and to overcome death. In fact, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (2:11). If that's the way he views us, then we dare not take our kinship for granted. We're spiritual siblings, placed in the same household of faith.

We're also holy partners. Holy doesn't mean we're inherently more virtuous or pure than other people, but that we've been made holy by Jesus in his death and resurrection. Our holiness is less about our moral stature and more about the work that God has given us in the world. We're a collection of redeemed sinners who share together in the ongoing work of Christ. I like the way that Eugene Peterson puts it:

The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called "pastor" and given a designated responsibility ... to keep the community attentive to God.²

That's what the preacher in today's text is trying to do. He's trying to keep the congregation focused on Jesus and thereby attentive to God. He knows that when attention gets shifted away from Jesus, unity is weakened, and the mission suffers.

A. W. Tozer wrote:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So, one hundred worshipers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become "unity" conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.³

Our partnership in Christ is held together by Christ, not by our attempts to be more unified, more diligent, more productive in our ministry. That's because we've been summoned by God into a mission that's not our own. It's Christ's mission, Christ's work. We're simply blessed, by God's grace, to be part of it. As one person has put it, "It is not our ministries that make Christ present; it is the present, living Christ who makes our ministries possible."⁴

Arthur Gossip once served as pastor in a slum church in Glasgow, Scotland. Late one afternoon, at the end of a long day of visiting his parishioners, he arrived at a five-story tenement where the last family on his list lived, at the very top. He was already very tired, and said to himself, "It's too far up. I'll come tomorrow." He says that he was about to turn away when a pair of stooped shoulders seemed to brush past him and start up the stairs with the word, "Then I'll have to go alone." Arthur Gossip added, "We went together."⁵

Sometimes, when the work of faith gets difficult, demanding, and discouraging, spiritual fatigue sets in, and you may feel like calling it quits. But somehow, somehow, you get reminded that it's not just you, and what you're doing, but Christ, and what Christ is doing, in the work of reconciling us to God and to one another. It's Christ's faithfulness, operating in us and through us. It's Christ's obedience, taking shape in us. It's not just a matter of

asking Christ what you may do for him. It's more a matter of asking Christ what he's doing, where he's doing it, and how you can join in.

This is the time of the year when we begin to think even more about how each of us can join in the ministry of Christ through our church. Our Nominating Committee has begun reaching out, asking you to thoughtfully consider, and prayerfully discern, how you can be involved directly and concretely in the worship, work, and witness of our congregation. This is way more than just an annual opportunity for the church to post its version of the help wanted ads. We don't go about this by putting a NOW HIRING message on the church sign. Rather, we all turn our attention to Jesus, we focus on him, and we ask how he wants each of us to share in his ongoing ministry.

"Brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling." This is the time of the year when we reflect even more carefully on how to be exactly that. Not just names on a church attendance sheet. Not just faces that are familiar on Sunday mornings. Not just conversation partners under the front porch or in the parking lot. But partners in even deeper ways, sharing fully in the work of Christ. This means depending on one another, sharing power with one another, distributing responsibilities to one another, being accountable to one another, mutually supporting one another in the areas of ministry that God has entrusted to each of us.

Author Kurt Vonnegut wrote a novel called *Timequake*. It centers on a series of stories about people who have lost control of their lives. Instead of determining their own destinies, they enter a "timequake" where they're forced to repeat the same bad choices over and over again without any possibility of improvement or redemption. Eventually the timequake ends, and the people have the opportunity to live their own lives. But most of them are still beset by what's called "Post-Timequake-Apathy" (PTA), which keeps them immobilized by despair. One of the main characters, Kilgore Trout, is the only one who isn't gripped by this condition. Near the end of the story, he tries to revive others by repeating this motto: "You were sick, but now you're well, and there's work to do." As one preacher has pointed out, "That's a good description of every Christian's experience. I was sick. Now I'm well. And now there's work to do. God in his infinite love doesn't just save, clean us, and dump us. He saves us, cleans us, and employs us."⁶

And here is the summary of our job description: "Holy partners in a heavenly calling." Our church's vocation doesn't start with us. It starts in heaven. And heaven is the goal of our faith. So what ultimately matters is faithfulness to God, and obedience to the will of God, in relationship with Jesus Christ. So remember that as you respond to the call of Christ and share in his work through our church, you help cultivate an atmosphere of partnership in the congregation. You contribute to a sense of mutuality and interdependence. You create cohesion in the fellowship. You help strengthen and refresh the congregation. You encourage and inspire others to do their part, especially those who may be weary or discouraged. As our text reminds us, "We are his [God's] house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (v. 6).

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 3.

² Eugene Peterson, *Leadership* (Vol. 9, No. 4).

³ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (New York: Simon & Brown, 2018) 63.

⁴ Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 53.

⁵ Douglas V. Steere, in *Gleanings. Christianity Today* (Vol. 31, No. 13).

⁶ From Mark Buchanan's sermon, "The House of Love;" Kurt Vonnegut, *Timequake* (New York: Berkeley Trade, 1998) 196-97.