

“Irritable Love” (14Nov21)

Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8, Daniel 12:1-3

For those in this room, I bet it feels pretty darn good to see each other. For those participating online, maybe it's at least bittersweet, that even if you can't be here you can find some goodness in seeing others here. At least one of you pointed out how disheartening it could be to see your pastor sitting mostly alone in a room by himself. (And no disagreement there; nobody really needs to see me. But to see each other: that's good stuff!)

So, for the first of three times, why don't you turn and notice somebody you haven't seen for a while or don't recognize and give a wave or sign of peace. If you're not here, you might make a note to reach out to someone.

Given the goodness of relationships, it's almost surprising that our reading from the book of Hebrews included a line admonishing you not to “neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some.” You may, rather, be among the “some” who find meeting together to be such a habitual part of your nature, bred into you from a young age or established as a valued pattern, that you've lamented months when you haven't been able to meet together in the same way.

Of course, this reading isn't about regathering and safety protocols for COVID, but is about Jesus, and having access to God, as this reading describes it. That access to God is a good thing, probably even a stunning thing.

See, we've got readings that are crammed full of rotten stuff, and we feel like our own days are brimming with it, too. Jesus lists wars and conflicts, and bad news or rumors of conflicts, and natural disasters and human misery.

In Bible study this week, when we read the words from Jesus, Linda Pettersen said it sounded like he was describing now, with our own realities of ongoing pandemic, of political conflict, of gun violence and its aftermath, racial unrest and trials seeking justice, of refugees, students protesting for safety, inflation, and then the slight matter of the fragility of our planet itself in the face of climate catastrophe.

I invite you to turn for a second time to somebody and share which issues are at the forefront of your own concerns.

While we may be freaked out by that, Jesus doesn't really offer a solution, a way out, either with the assistance of human efforts or a sense of godly relief parachuting in. Maybe instead what Jesus offers is that we shouldn't invest those things with extra meaning. They aren't signs. They aren't sent by God as some divine message, about retribution, much less about the endtimes. Instead, Jesus seems to say that all of those other major problems shouldn't get in the way of your faith. Daniel probably goes a step further and says that even death can't get in the way of your relationship with God, can't stop God's promises for you.

In Hebrews' terms, this is access. You have access to God. You are not ever restricted from God's presence. You don't need to be concerned about your sins or questionable deeds or any aspect of yourself. You don't need to seek signs for how God feels about you, or about our destination or predestination for the end. In that, you may be assured, confident.

With everything else going on, the amusing perspective from Hebrews, as Jed pointed out, is that we now “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” Again from Bible study, David Keesey-Berg suggested that it's my role to be irritating in trying to compel you to this. I may be irritating, alright, but you also provoke each other to love.

It seems almost like an oxymoron. The other places in the Bible this word is used, it's about an emotional response, about getting angry or upset, again as Jed suggested for classroom behavior. It's translated disagree, revile, affront, wrathful, contentious, indignant, despising, and more, in an almost entirely negative portrayal. The Greek word itself is paroxysm, which carries over into English for an outbreak or convulsive, stabbing attack, shaking your whole body.

As we provoke one another to love, it's like we grab hold of each other and shake, shake, shake. We insist on it so deeply that we irritate each other into love. I'd like to have you turn a third time and get to shake each other, to jab and needle and

coerce and provoke love. But I guess I'll have to settle for you pointing and gesturing firmly, or in another translation of "spurring" to love, to goad and kick with your spurs.

I'll invite you to hold onto the fun of this, the amusing notion. Since you don't need to worry about your access to God and what you need to do to approach God's goodness or how to clean up your act to be acceptable, you can consider irritable love. And since you don't need to look for answers behind all the bad stuff happening, you can practice irritable love. When there is violence and destruction and famine and outcasts and hatred and enmity and death and condemnation and all the rest, you get to focus on provoking love, in your relationships with each other, as how this faith is lived out.

Of course, this is what we celebrate in our commitments for the stewardship season, on how we have provoked each other for love in our shared MCC ministries, with our volunteer time and your deeply important financial pledges that fund so much of what we can do.

Still more, to end this sermon with a commercial and a chance for ongoing sharing, there's a new opportunity starting tomorrow to tell about how you're provoked to love. There's even yet another QR code for it. In the MCC Vision-Tending Team meeting on Monday, Don Tubesing mentioned that his faith compels (or provokes) him to help children at the southern border, and to guide somebody who'd been in jail to find a way back into society, and in his relationship with his wife Nancy, and on and on.

You may find the instigation and irritation to love in relationships in your family, in your efforts in school or work, in friendships where you try to care, in ways you're trying to make our community or country or globe better—less dangerous or hurting. This is "Ministry Wherever We Are."

Jon Anderson, an Awaken Dane coach, says we don't like to brag, but should share stories because "God is up to good things." So if I can be a bit irritating, I'll nudge you to sign up for a slot and share with others, so we can further provoke each other to love, while we're not neglecting but

cherishing this community, and living with confidence and the full assurance of faith in Jesus.