

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Getting Right with God”

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Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, ‘he sat down at the right hand of God’, ¹³and since then has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’ ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

We had a major crisis in the church office the other day. Our internet went down. Now this might not seem very important but when suddenly you are unable to read email, send informational notices or do some sermon research, you discover just how much you depend on the internet. We did what we have been advised by our advisor Frank Maynard to do- we waited. We waited over an hour and there was still not internet service. So Nancy, our office administrator called our internet provider. After waiting on hold for fifteen minutes, and then waiting to speak to a technician for another fifteen minutes, we started getting to the source of the problem. It seemed our modem had no power. The technician was puzzled and asked us to check the connection to the back of the modem and computer. When we told him that all of the signal lights were dark, he was prepared to call our equipment dead and send out a service technician with a new modem. As a last resort he asked us to try plugging the modem’s power cord into a different electrical outlet- just in case one of our outlets had gone bad. As I followed the power cord to the outlet I discovered something embarrassingly obvious. It was unplugged. Somehow, while fishing through books or papers or reaching for a granola bar, I had unplugged the modem. All that time we were searching for a complex answer when the solution was as simple as plugging the cord back into the outlet. Boy, did I feel stupid!

A future bride and groom entered my office for the first time and we began to talk about their upcoming wedding plans. The first part of the conversation was easy: where

did you meet, where do you live, what do you do for a living, etc. It was then that the groom said something very interesting. He said, "I have to be honest with you Reverend. I am not a religious person. I am very spiritual but I don't believe in religion." I had heard this line a few times before and I usually let it pass. But this time I asked the young man to explain himself. He said, "Religion is too formal and stifling. You have to obey laws and rules and meet all sorts of obligations. Religion means you have to go to church and give money to a church. Religion for me is a bunch of people trying to save themselves according to their own standards. I don't like thinking that in order to find God, you have to jump through hoops."

I nodded attentively. My first instinct though was to jump over to his chair and place my hands around his neck! Didn't he care whom he was talking to? Where did he get off using this stereotype of churches and the faithful? Did he really want this minister to officiate at his wedding? Fortunately I restrained myself and we moved onto a discussion of something safer. Fortunately too, a few days later the future bride called me back to say that they had decided to let a civil official preside at their wedding.

I often think about that young man's words because as much as they made me angry they also contained a kernel of truth. He was talking about the messy material part of religion, the stuff we human beings have created and brought into the business of doing God's work. I think about how some of us try to stay in good health. We exercise regularly even when it takes up our time and causes us pain. We try to eat right even if our cereal resembles sawdust and our green vegetables are as tasty as the bark of a tree. Chances are we don't engage in any of these healthy behaviors because they are fun or appetizing. We do it because it gets us somewhere. The reward of such action is good health.

In a similar way we might find ourselves trying to get healthy with God. We might attend worship in the hopes that it will place us one rung up from those who choose to sleep in or read the paper. We read the Bible hoping that perhaps God will be impressed with the book we carry around. We pray once in a while, well- at least when we remember to negotiate with God about our needs and our desires and what we can do to receive them. We obey most of the major commandments, at least the ones that seem to still have relevance today. We carry with us a mental scoreboard of the gold stars we have earned to get us to some kind of eternal reward. We behave ourselves, we keep our noses clean, and we try to appear worthy in the eyes of the Divine who may be judging us one fine day. That is what our mind tells us that we need to do to establish a right relationship with our Creator. But that is also what causes us worry and anxiety as we contemplate the serious nature of getting right with God. Have we done enough? Are we doing the right thing?

In his book *What's So Amazing about Grace*, author Phillip Yancey writes that Benjamin Franklin believed that there were thirteen virtues that needed to be followed in life. These virtues included such things as silence, frugality, industry, and tranquility. Franklin kept a book of these virtues, with one page for each, choosing a different virtue to work with each week. He daily recorded his failure, starting this process all over again so as to cycle through all thirteen virtues, four times a year. For many decades Franklin kept the book with him, striving to make it through a thirteen week cycle clean of all failure. But as he made progress toward his goal he found that he was struggling with another defect-pride. His attempt at virtue had led him to a false sense of humility.

Keeping a record of his virtue had led him to yet another sin. And now he had something else to worry about. So much for Franklin's attempt to get right with God in an organized fashion.

In the tenth chapter of the book of Hebrews, the author compares the work of Christ to the work of the temple priests. In a sense the writer is contrasting the grace of God through Christ to our own frantic human attempts to make ourselves right with God. The priests offered many sacrifices to attract God's favor. Christ made a sacrifice once and for all. The priests had lots of work to do to bring people into line, scouring the books of the law and keeping watch over the multitudes. Christ finished his work and sits at the right hand of God, confident that what was needed to bring people back to God was already done and that somehow people would respond to God's grace.

The author of Hebrews suggests that there is nothing we humans can do to add to the work that Christ already has done. Nothing, not even our biggest and most sophisticated efforts at being religious or spiritual can enable us to get closer to God. While we experiment with meditative behaviors, keep our noses extra clean, appear in public to be super righteous- all of that is really an frantic attempt to save ourselves. Jesus has already done what we cannot do. In Jesus we are shown that have already been made right with God.

I once read of a company that developed a new instant cake mix. It seems that all you had to do was add water. It sounded simple and just great! The problem was that the cake mix didn't sell. The company did some research and found that the buying public felt uneasy about a cake mix that only required water. People thought that just wasn't enough. So the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for the addition of one egg to the mix. With that small addition, the sales of the cake mix jumped dramatically.

At times we view our life of faith like people viewed that simple cake mix. We are more comfortable making more of it to get ourselves right than God requires of us. In his book *Health, Money, and Love*, Robert Capon says that we incorrectly use religion as our human attempt to get a handle on the key of life. We worry about and work toward getting right with God. We breathlessly try to find the key or we stand outside beating on the door waiting for God to answer. All the while, the door is open. While we worry about the work that must be done to make ourselves right, the grace of God has already done the work for us.

Perhaps that young groom-to-be was correct that day long ago in my office. Maybe we do think of religion too much as a way to achieve rightness with God. Maybe we use our faith as a way to control God, to negotiate our standing, to make sense of our climb on the ladder to eternal reward. We use religion to create for ourselves- faith, hope and love. But God responds to us with grace. If we are to get right with God, it will have little to do with what we do and everything to do with what God has already done. We have been made right with God. We simply need to let go of our foolish attempts to live a complicated life earning favor and just live faithfully in the arms of a God who has already accepted us as a beloved child. The work that Christ has finished has made all faith, hope and love possible.