

“So What?”
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
August 29, 2010

For many, many years, my family drove from Statesville to Winston-Salem to attend the 11:00 PM Christmas Eve service at St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church. My parents continued to that tradition long after my sister and I moved out. One Christmas Eve, they called and said, “We didn’t make it to the service.” Why not? “There was a couple having car trouble on I-40 and we stopped to help.” My first thought was, *Seriously? I cannot believe what I am hearing. After all the lectures you’ve given me about safety, tell me you did not stop to help in the pitch dark on the side of interstate 40.* “Yeah, we stopped. But, they were standing there with the cutest little dog, so we thought they would be ok.” Parents! What can you do with them?

But, perhaps what got into them that night is the same thing that gets into a lot of us especially on Christmas Eve – a spirit of peace on earth, good will to all – a desire to be braver in our goodness, more adventurous in our hospitality and warmer in our welcome. While I will not argue that we all need to stop on I-40 late at night for families with cute dogs, I do realize that the world is often made a little better, a little sweeter when we step outside our comfort zone and take a chance with our actions and experience things in a new way.

We can do that with God, too, you know. The writer of Hebrews spends a lot of time telling readers all about experiencing God. Experience what it means to live in covenant with God. Look at how your ancestors did it. Look at their faith. Experience a better way to live. And, oh yeah, Jesus is that way. Whatever you’ve known before, Jesus is the better revelation of God, the better name, the better leader, the better priest, the better sacrifice. That’s the gist. But then we come to Chapter 13, and the description changes. The soaring, eloquent words of the previous chapters stop and an abrupt “to do” list begins: let mutual love continue, welcome the stranger, visit the imprisoned and tortured, honor marriage, be content with what you have.

It seems a little disjointed, but what the writer does here is sum up our grand and glorious faith with an answer to a question every good preacher has to ask. "So what?" "Yes, Jesus is the better revelation, name, leader, priest, sacrifice and so on, but ‘so what?’ What difference does it make?" Actually, that is not just a question for preachers. That’s a question for every person who dares to call themselves a Christian – so what? What difference does it make?

What difference SHOULD it make? If we have a Christian sticker on our car, should it influence our driving? If we wear our Wilson’s Mills CHRISTIAN t-shirt, should it serve as a filter for our words? If we wear a cross around our necks or a WWJD bracelet on our arms, should it make any difference in our actions? When we carry the name Christian, what difference does Jesus Christ make to us this day in this place? We believe in him, but so what?

There are probably as many answers to that question as there are people in the room. We don’t have to all agree and have a group hug while singing Kum Ba Yah. But, “so what?” is a great question - filled with possibility. Hebrews tells how that possibility came charging into history with the heroes of our faith and eventually Jesus. All that builds to this last chapter that starts with, “let mutual love continue.” That’s the “so what?” You’ve got the history. You’ve got the stories. You’ve got Jesus, so YOU now let mutual love continue. We Christians love us some talk about love! We need to LOVE everybody. Hate the sin, LOVE the sinner. But, Christians don’t always agree on what love means. I learned early on as a minister’s child who sat through a lot of church meetings, that when someone stood up and opened their remarks with “I love you, but....” something less than Christian was about to happen. I remembered that when

I read a book by Dr. Peter Gomes - a good preacher and a professor at Harvard. As you might expect from a Harvard professor, he is a smarty pants and has written a lot of books – some people like his books and some people don't, and he gets letters from all of them. After a particularly controversial book, he said, "I was surprised by the vehemence of my fellow Christians on this subject - the worst letters I got were from self-described Christians who wrote to defend the faith against my views, and who nearly always signed their letters, "In the love of Christ," "In Christian love" or "For the love of Christ and the Church....Such letters reminded me that we have just enough religion to know how to hate, but not enough to know how to love."

When you get slapped with that for the first time, it is sadly the end of your Christian innocence. And, you take your place with other believers who have struggled with this very thing – love is hard and religion can be confusing and personal, and if you put the two together, well, it can be tricky, if you ask me. It's like the writer of Hebrews anticipated this response to his exhortation to "Let mutual love continue," so he immediately gives us what that looks like – welcome the stranger, visit the imprisoned and tortured, honor marriage, be content with what you have. And, it goes on to remember your leaders and offer a sacrifice of praise to God.

There is one common denominator in all of those things. None of them has to do with ME getting more of my needs met. None of them says, "If you are living in mutual love, here is what you GET." Instead, "if you are living in mutual love, here is what you DO. Get yourself out of the way and do this: welcome the stranger, visit the imprisoned...show a little hospitality and be happy with what you have and so on."

Now, one point of order. When we talk about getting ourselves out of the way, this does not mean putting ourselves in danger. It does not mean to hand cash to the man who is high on drugs and plays guilt games with us because he says he has read the Good Book. It does not mean to endanger our lives by picking up potential Unabombers standing by the side of the highway. Or to mortgage our homes for the compulsive spender. Or to support anything that is unhealthy or violent or criminal. It means being accountable to our higher calling – like Jesus.

Jesus got his personal interests out of the way or he never would have ended up nailed to a cross, BUT he would not have been a good chair for the hospitality committee. There were times when his love exploded with indignation: "You hypocrites! You Brood of Vipers!" That's hospitality Jesus Style– getting someone's attention. And, he was quite a worthy host for someone's attention – whether that meant turning over strangers' tables or feeding 5000 strangers, hospitality for him was making room for others to make room for God. Sometimes he did that in a way that made him seem like Mrs. Santa Claus– all warm and happy with cookies and milk. And, sometimes he did that with the force of a tornado. But, at all times, he invited people closer to God. He was restless because he knew how many people had not experienced the love of God. He wanted to give them that experience. As his Body today, that is our higher calling – to be restless because others have not experienced God's love and to invite them in.

I've been thinking about that a lot lately – the mission we have of inviting others in. Actually, I think about this at the end of every August, because we are not yet to Labor Day and summer attendance is traditionally not so great, and I end up fielding a lot of anxious questions about 'why aren't more people here?' Sometimes, just so you know, I'm tempted to ask back, "How many people have you invited?" But, I know that people go out of town in the summer a lot – and it is good to spend time with your loved ones and not be rushed. But, I honestly cannot tell you why the pews aren't filled up every Sunday. I don't understand it myself.

However, if I spend too much time pondering numbers, then I get off kilter. I start thinking we must be good if we have X number of people. I start thinking we must NOT be

good if drop below y number of people. What I should be thinking about is the fact that we have God - that is more than enough, and we ought to be restlessly praying about how we can fully participate in the experience of this God knowing all the while that if the Bible is true, than that experience is a messy one that comes with a whole lot of people attached to it – and that’s the point. We experience God most fully with others. We get the God experience when we show hospitality to strangers. When we remember those who are held captive whatever the reason may be. When we honor relationships and faithful love. When we focus more on people than on money. That is the God experience. It’s the difference between separating yourself – neglecting to meet together as Hebrews 10:25 puts it –keeping a tight rein on who is qualified to be in your life. It’s the difference between THAT and intentionally putting yourself in the paths of strangers, being the first to extend your hand, knowing that you might get hurt, but in the end, it will be ok because Jesus can repair any scar and broken bits of our lives that end up at his feet.

That is the God experience that this church can offer. We exist to serve. We exist to host others and welcome others so that they, too, can experience God. When we lose sight of that, we lose our Christian heart. This is especially true today in the world we live in where so many people are hostile to the church – this is why it is so toxic for the gospel when Christians picket and boycott and complain about how bad the world is. As Rob Bell has said, “Why blame the dark for being dark? It is far more helpful to ask why the light is not as bright as it could be.”

How can we shine a little brighter? What could we do if we took as our motto “Experience God with Us?” It is surely true that you can sing about God louder someplace else, but you can experience God with us. You can read more books about God someplace else, but you can experience God with us. You might can attend more small groups someplace else, hear better preaching someplace else, but you can experience God with us. We are a small group, but what if each one of us went out of our way this week to invite someone into the experience God? The last hurrah of summer! Would you say a silent prayer for a stranger while sitting at a light? Would you introduce yourself and really listen when you ask ‘how are you?’ What would our deacons do in terms of service to invite someone else to experience God? What leadership would our elders offer? What would our women’s group do? What would our men’s group do? How could we worship? What could we teach? What fellowship and outreach could we share? What could each of us do to open our own hearts to the experience of God and invite others right along with us? All questions worth pondering. We are Wilson’s Mills Christian Church. What do you want our answer to be when God looks at us and asks, “So what?”