

A black and white line drawing of four hands, two from the top and two from the bottom, reaching towards the center and holding each other. The hands are rendered with simple outlines and some shading to indicate depth. The background is a textured, light blue-grey color.

HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16

**RADICAL**

*compassion*

JULY 3, 2022

# *RADICAL COMPASSION*

HEBREWS 13:1-8, 15-16

Have you ever heard that it takes 21 days to make a habit? That if you decide you want to introduce a new, good, practice into your life - like exercise, drinking more water, anything really - you've got to repeat it for 21 days, and then you'll have gotten used to it, and it'll be easy to keep at it.

Have you found that to be true for you? I can't say that 21 days always works for me. My good habit formation can be hit-and-miss, with some new things coming easier than others. And if I slack off for a week or so, my good habit is usually gone. The 21 days to make a new habit idea comes from an interesting bit of research done in the 1960's. It's been looked into more recently by psychologists and scientists, and apparently 21 days is optimistic - more of a minimum number of days than a sure thing. Sixty-six days or even longer seems to be a more average amount of time we have to work at doing something new before it becomes easy and routine. Re-shaping ourselves to fit a new mold is a process, and often a long one at that; we don't change easily.

On a more hopeful note, though, these same psychologists also found that it didn't matter if you backslid on your new good habit or messed up a few times; what mattered was that you keep trying, and eventually - three weeks, three months or a whole year down the road - the new good habit will stick, becoming part of who you are.

The Scripture passage that we read today kind of sounds like a list of aspirational good habits to mold a Christian community into a healthy shape. But of course it runs a deeper than that. The entire book of Hebrews, all thirteen chapters of it, is a sermon, written into letter-form: directed at a group of Christians who were struggling. The surrounding society's response to this minority Christian community ranged from indifferent to hostile, so there was considerable external pressure being exerted upon the Hebrews' Christians as they wrestled with their own identity as a group of Christ-followers: who to be and how to live, how to hold on and hold out, while still faithfully worshipping God, caring for one another, and witnessing their beliefs to the larger world around them.

The sermon-writer rounds out the sermon with a set of ethical teachings. More than good habits to adopt, these teachings are intended to show where the tires of our faith meet the road of ordinary daily life: the application of the content of our faith in our real, messy, challenging circumstances.

For the Hebrews Christians, these words taught them about how to live as a community of faith while embedded in a much larger community that did not share their faith. For us, it offers us a sketch of a Christian community, like a church, in which ideas and beliefs about God, Jesus and the Spirit, about scripture and our faith, govern everyone's behaviour and the shape of their hearts and minds. It's a sketch of a life-giving, just community whose ethics are rooted in love and commitment, loyalty and compassion, selflessness and hospitality, fulfillment and worship. That is a community that I would very much like to live in.

It's a short text, but there's a lot packed in there. The sermon-writer states each idea, but pushes it deeper and further, making each one "radical," in the fullest sense of the word: ideas that are the roots of community, foundational, and also extreme, very, very different from the usual or the ordinary.

Canada Day Sunday is an apt day to consider community. A nation really is just one big community, full of shared and conflicting values, seeking to come together over the most important stuff while honouring the freedom to discuss and disagree. No community is perfect; but it's helpful and hopeful to have something to aspire to, to aim for. The simply rendered, yet very rich picture of community with which we are presented in our Scripture text this morning is an ideal, divinely-shaped way of living together. This ought to be what we aspire to as a Christian Church, as a community of Christians here at St. Andrew's; this is the kind of community we must aspire to be an example of to the wider Canadian world.

Believe it or not, there's too much in this short text for one message; so we'll focus on just two: love and compassion. Let's start with love.

"Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters." Love is a major current throughout the Bible, the Triune God's love for us, and our love for all three persons of God, as well as our love for one another, as taught and commanded by Jesus.

Here, the sermon-writer is referring to the love among Christians together. We are not meant to be just friends, or co-members, or nodding acquaintances. Those relationships are easy to form and break, and love might be, doesn't need to be, part of them. We can like our friends, and work around our co-members, and politely avoid our nodding acquaintances. But we, in a church, in a Christian community, are meant to love one another like brothers and sisters - like family.

It is definitely possible to like our family and love them, or to work around our family and still love them, or to politely avoid our family and still, deep down, love them...because they are family. We can argue with family, disagree with choices they make or beliefs they hold, we can be hurt badly by family and rightly sever the relationship, and forgive them, and still love them, too.

We are made into a new family as followers of Christ, and that is a radical way for people who otherwise have no particular connection to one another to treat each other. Radical because it's the foundation of what we believe to be true about Jesus and what following Jesus means; radical, because it is extreme: to assemble what from the outside looks like a random collection of individuals and then chose to love one another like family.

In Christ, we become a community of brothers and sisters who look after each another, who pool and share our resources, who love one another through thick and thin with a love strong enough to get through the hard, hurtful times together, and to celebrate the good times, too. Our church family love doesn't replace other family loves...unless we need it to, because sometimes our family in the world can make love a hard thing to hold on to. But it is a key piece of a community of faith, especially one that is pressed hard on all sides, like the Hebrew Christian community, and to some extent, like many Christians these days: brothers and sisters who love each other with such devotion that they don't easily walk away.

We must always continue to nurture and strengthen those Christian family bonds; but love has an external dimension, too, and that what the sermon-writer gets to next: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

As we show love to our brothers and sisters, we do not wall ourselves in as members of a distinct tribe, that loves only within our own borders. We are also to show love to the stranger by our hospitality.

In the first century after Christ's birth, hospitality was a practical and necessary ethical choice. Travellers of many sorts were crucial to the spread and growth of early Christianity: itinerant preachers, letter-carriers, Christians on non-church business, migrants and others. Inns were disreputable, dangerous places; no Holiday Inns or Best Westerns, with private rooms that lock securely for the night. Given the dangers and difficulty of travel, these visitors needed secure lodging, food, and whatever encouragement their hosts could provide. Even those without letters of recommendation, strangers of unknown character, were received on trust. Radical hospitality, welcoming strangers to the point of risk-taking.

So the sermon-writer reminds his readers that hospitality, welcoming and providing for strangers when and where we meet them, must not be neglected, because some have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. This mysterious-sounding line is a reference to Abraham and Sarah, way back in the book of Genesis, and how they welcomed three "men" who turned out to be messengers directly from God - angels.

Hospitality is radical in the sense that it is foundational: this is one of the oldest and most important stories of our faith. The elderly couple fed and cared for the three visitors, and the visitors in turn proclaimed good news of new life and abundant blessing: Sarah would conceive a child, and that child would go on to be the first son born into God's family, his people, numberless as the stars.

Risky, to welcome strangers so trustingly; but perhaps what we are risking most is receiving a blessing that will bring about the same kind of new life and abundance that Abraham and Sarah experienced, so long ago.

So that's radical love: transforming co-members, friends and acquaintances into brothers and sisters, into family; welcoming and caring for strangers, risking great blessing and new life. Not a bad ethical position for any community to take - church or state - on how we think about and relate to one another, and turn strangers into newcomers with our welcome.

And then, we come to radical compassion.

The prisons of the Roman world were grim, terrible places: crowded, dark, and dank, and rife with abuse. Friends and family on the outside were the only source of adequate food, clothing and goods.

The sermon-writer does not advise the Hebrew Christians to make these prisoners simply objects of their charity, people you donate to. Nor are those who are suffering to be objects of pity, in the “there but for the grace of God, go I” sense.

Instead, those who are in prison and those who are mistreated are to be kept in mind through the full force and focus of the imagination, “as if you were together with them in prison.....as if you yourselves were suffering.”

This is not sympathy, a feeling sorry for someone; this is empathy, a feeling it with them: the fear, the isolation, the pain, the sorrow. And compassion is empathy with boots on, a feeling-it-with-them that compels us to do something to make it better.

We can't ever completely know what someone else is thinking or feeling. We don't share identical memories or experiences with other people. But it is a deeply loving, unselfish act to make a committed, humble, listening effort to try. It is as if empathy can begin to heal the isolation, the degradation, the suffering of other people. And when empathy blossoms into compassion, then we start to act in ways that are truly needed: to feed, to clothe, to visit, to listen, to understand, to amend.

Speaking again for a moment directly about our Canadian community, we are in a time of real social flux, in which the demand for recognition, to be seen and heard, is greater than ever before. If ever there was time when empathy and compassion should be a shared ethic, you'd think now would be it. Just imagine what a difference it would make for people to set their own objectives and feelings and experiences aside, for a moment, and really listen to each other and try our best to understand. Not just us listening to others, but other people listening to us, too: humbly, and without judgement or comment and with an imaginative effort made to “feel it” together. I think it would make for a very different kind of public conversation in our society.

But a couple of recent studies have revealed that compassion and empathy in North America are on the decline. The first, covering university age young adults from 1979 to 2010, showed a 49% decline in empathy, with the sharpest drop in the last ten years; the second, looking more broadly at adults of all ages, showed the exact same thing: we just don't care about one another as much as we used to.

And that's a rather chilling thought: compassion - the feeling it with them and the doing something to help - really is the glue that holds human community together, Christian or otherwise. And there is increasingly less of it in our society than ever before.

Thankfully, compassion can be learned; Jesus certainly thought so, and he encourages us to push our capacity to care to the limit. Don't just tolerate or avoid your enemies, but love them and pray for them; don't just avoid hurting someone, but do to them, treat them, the way you would want to be treated in a similar situation.

Christ's compassion is a radical compassion, beyond what we expect to encounter in other kinds of human communities. It's foundational to our faith, one of the most heavily emphasized lessons that Jesus revisits, again and again. It's extreme, because it's positive, proactive compassion, not just avoiding or tolerating one another. The sermon-writer's briefly sketched image of a life-giving, witnessing Christian community is radical, in every sense of the word: love and compassion, among other qualities, are the community's foundation, and they are also lived out to Christ-like extremes. A group of people sitting in a big room together become brothers and sisters, with all the wonder and challenge that family love entails, and they offer that same welcoming, providing family love to strangers. The suffering of others becomes our suffering as we do compassion and try to help, instead of feeling only pity, or worse, feeling nothing at all.

Any community would be well-served by founding itself on these Christ-inspired and faith-led ethics. Sometimes our human communities, our cities and nations, aspire to something similar, but we know, too, how often those communities fall short, or fail to try. But Christian community takes these radical ideas, refuses to water them down, and builds our whole life together on them.

All of these radical ideas, including the ones we didn't talk about today, are bound together and take shape through one last radical thing: worship. I suspect if someone were to look at us, all together on a Sunday morning, they would not immediately think, "there's a bunch of radicals, doing radical things." But we are.



Worship is radical because it is our foundation, the foundation of our relationship with God, where we meet and celebrate Christ, where we are filled and topped up with the Spirit. We grow in the shape the foundation beneath us.

Christian worship is also radical because it is meant to be extreme: to blow past the tidy markers of 10:30 to 11:30am on Sundays, and infuse all our life.

So in our love for each other as brothers and sisters, or for strangers, we are worshipping God. In our compassionate, active care of those who are suffering or struggling, we are worshipping God. In our faithfulness to our marriage covenants, we are worshipping God. In our sharing that reflects our trust in God rather than in our possessions and personal wealth, we are worshipping God. This is our sacrifice of praise: we embody worship as a way of life, because God's grace transforms and empowers us to do it, or at least to keep trying.

Our church community, and others like it, are living examples of what radical love and radical compassion do and say, within itself and in our society. Like every other kind of community, we don't get there every time or all the time. Although what the sermon-writer is trying to convey does indeed run deeper than a good habit, there is something for us to learn from our usual habit-forming attempts.

We've got to decide we want to do it, and keep doing it, keep living radical love and compassion...even though it'll probably take longer than 21 days to make it instinctive and to make it stick! Like trying to exercise more or drink more water or whatever habit you've made for yourself, it's a process, a repeated, perhaps daily, decision, to re-form ourselves into a new shape, the shape of a truly Christian community, a community of radical compassion, and radical love. What matters is that we keep trying, for the rest of our lives and in all of our life, together. Thanks be to God.Amen.