

September 1, 2019; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Intro to reading of the text: Today's sermon title ("A Catechism for Disciples") may evoke some good or not-so-good memories for some of you, depending on whether your **Catechism Class** growing up was a positive or terrifying experience (and trust me, I've heard stories!), but I'm happy to announce that our youth (and adults) will be offered a **Confirmation Class** experience this Fall that will be life-changing, earth-shattering, mind-bending, spirit-filled (and I'm all out of superlatives, here!)--but something no one will wanna miss, young and old alike. **Minister Darelle** and **Pastor Jia** have promised this is so, so consider that a hearty endorsement! (Read text & pray...)

One of the books I read this summer was by Doris Kearns Goodwin, the Pulitzer Prize winning presidential historian. This was "Wait 'Til Next Year," a memoir of her childhood growing up on Long Island in New York and what it was like to be a diehard Brooklyn Dodgers fan. It's also the account of her Roman Catholic upbringing, and I loved her account of her First Confession, when she was seven years old. She writes:

"I opened the curtain--entered the confessional--this dark wooden booth built into the side-wall of the church. As I knelt on the bench, the panel slid open on my side and the priest said, "Yes, my child?" Doris said, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my First Confession." "Yes, my child, and what sins have you committed?" "I talked in church twenty times, I disobeyed my mother five times, I wished harm to others several times, I told a fib three times, I talked back to my teacher twice." She held her breath. "And to whom did you wish harm?"

"Oh, no! He'd picked out the one sin that troubled me most. So, speaking as softly as I could, I made my admission. 'I wished harm to Allie Reynolds.'" "The Yankee pitcher?" he asked, surprise and concern in his voice. "And how did you wish to

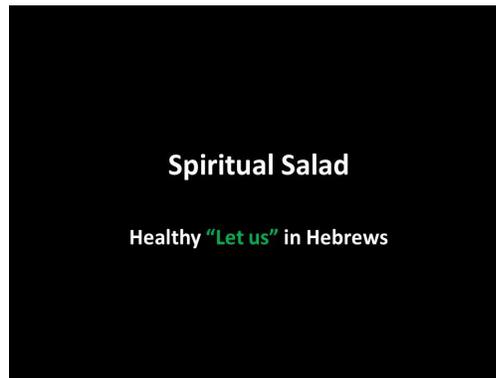
harm him?" "I wanted him to break his arm." "And how often did you make this wish?" "Every night," I admitted, "in my prayers, before going to bed." "And were there others?" "Oh, yes," I admitted. "I wished Robin Roberts of the Phillies would fall down the steps, and that Richie Ashburn would break his hand." "Is there anything else?" "Yes, I wished Enos Slaughter of the Cardinals would break his ankle, and that Phil Rizzuto of the Yankees would fracture a rib, and that Alvin Dark of the Giants would hurt his knee." But, I hastened to add, "I wished all these injuries would go away once the baseball season ended." "Are there any other sins, my child?" "No, Father." "Then for your penance, say two Hail Mary's, three Our Fathers, and," he added with a chuckle, "say a special prayer for the Dodgers."

— Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Wait Till Next Year*

But she also writes about--how as a second-grader--she was making ready for her First Communion--taking the year-long Catechism Class, where she learned the doctrines of her Catholic faith--how her mother would drill her on the questions the catechism asked, in preparation for when the priest would ask them of her, that she might pass the test and "make" her First Communion. (Is that bringing back any memories? A stressful milestone in the lives of children, right there...). A catechism is a distillation of what the followers of Christ believe--what one believes about who God is and what our response is to be to God's sacrificial love for us. I didn't grow up with that instruction in my Christian education--at least not in so many words--but I've come to think of it as a good thing--helping children know the ABCs of our faith--knowledge we hope they will grow into later...

Some people have suggested that the words we just read--what forms the end of the Epistle to the Hebrews--forms a kind of catechism for the Christian life. It's a

summary of everything the writer has been talking about in the preceding 12 chapters--what we might call a “let us” list...



...of what to remember and what guard against as we seek to be faithful disciples of Jesus; here’s the list--I count six ingredients in this eight-verse salad:

- **Ingredient #1: “Let mutual love continue” (v. 1).**

Mutual love is love shown for those with whom we share community--it’s love for each other in the church (according to the context of what precedes this admonition). Mutual love means wanting what’s best for those around us; it’s “doing” for others as much as it is “feeling” for others; it’s showing up--being present with one another. There’s a reciprocity in mutual love; one person doesn’t do all the heavy lifting. (And if you’ve ever been in a relationship that has lacked mutuality, you know how draining that can be, right? It’s what my sociologist friends call the “principle of least interest”--the fact that the person with the least interest in the relationship controls the relationship. But among the followers of Jesus, this must not be so, because our relationships are not about being in control; they’re about seeking the best for the ones we love, and there’s a vast difference between the two!) So, let mutual love continue...

- **Ingredient #2: “Don’t neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (v.2).**

Several years ago I was invited to speak at an inservice--one for faculty and staff in the Northfield Schools--the topic of respecting and valuing diversity as educators. With me on the program was a Filipino woman--Elsa Batiga--who told the story of first coming to this country...



...(turns out I'm not the only person around here Elsa hangs out with!) But she and her husband were forced to flee the Philippines during the Marcos' regime--and so came to this strange land called *America*--to Chicago's O'Hare Airport--came on a bitterly cold day. Elsa had a friend here in the states who had given her some advice--to beware of black people. "You just don't know what they'll do," she was warned.

So here's Elsa, in a major American metropolis, on a cold day, in her insensible clothing, feeling very much alone. She's all huddled in the airport lobby waiting for whatever was to happen next--people not like her, people bustling about, knowing exactly where they were going--exactly what was next for them--when she looked down and saw two feet, and then looked up to find a big, burly black man standing in front of her, a person she'd just been told to watch out for. He said, "Are you O.K.? There's a vending machine around the corner if you would like to get a cup of hot chocolate." It was to be the only kindness she would be shown in that place. And she said, "If that's who I'm supposed to watch out for, I want to meet more of him." (remove slide) We live

in a world full of strangers, people looking for some hospitable place where they can live without fear, where community can be found--a place where they can cast off their strangeness.

There's a word in the text we read--the Greek word, *philoxenia*--a word that occurs just five times in the entire New Testament. Literally, it means, "the love of strangers." Translated here, it's the word, *hospitality*. It is, quite simply, the willingness to welcome people into our homes, our apartments, our lives, who do not ordinarily belong there. And it's preceded by a verb, translated in the text as the word "show." Literally, it means to pursue--a verb that implies continuous action. In other words, hospitality is not something we pull off the shelf at Thanksgiving or Christmastime; rather, it is to be a constant attitude and practice. Our homes, our apartments, our lives are to stand in constant readiness for the practice of hospitality--ready to welcome people who do not ordinarily belong.

- **Salad Ingredient #3: "Remember those in prison/torured, as though you were in prison/tortured yourself" (v. 3).**

It's become a cliché--"There but for the grace of God go I"--but I wonder if we really understand how true that is--how readily we choose to see ourselves as the exception to the reality for too many in our world--the reality of wrongful, disproportionate imprisonment and torture--the victims of gross injustice. I've been inspired (and convicted) by the work of Bryan Stevenson, founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)--author of the book, *Just Mercy*--a widely acclaimed public interest lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, the condemned. Under Mr. Stevenson's leadership, EJI has won major

legal challenges eliminating excessive and unfair sentencing, exonerating innocent death row prisoners, confronting abuse of the incarcerated and the mentally ill, and aiding children prosecuted as adults. He and his staff have won reversals, relief, or release from prison for over 135 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row--has won relief for hundreds of others wrongly convicted or unfairly sentenced, has argued and won multiple cases at the United States Supreme Court, including a ruling just this year protecting condemned prisoners who suffer from dementia, or the ruling banning mandatory life-imprisonment-without-parole sentences for all children 17 or younger. Mr. Stevenson has initiated major new anti-poverty and anti-discrimination efforts that challenge inequality in America, and has led the creation of two highly acclaimed national landmark institutions chronicling the legacy of slavery, lynching, and racial segregation, and the connection to mass incarceration and contemporary issues of racial bias. He has lived out this verse, to remember those so often forgotten (and I've put a link to EJI¹ on our website if you'd like to learn how you can get involved and live out this verse, too).

- **Ingredients #4 & #5: “Beware of both sexual defilement and greed” (vv. 4-5).**

I was remembering a paraphrase of the Ten Commandments that the writer Barbara Brown Taylor offered one time--listen to how she articulates the 7th and 10th commandments:

¹<https://eji.org/>

Seven: *Don't mess around with your marriage vows, your own or anyone else's. Sticking with one person is the best chance you've got of growing up.*

Ten: *Don't fondle other people's things in your mind as if they were your own. You'll not only resent them for having things; you'll soon resent yourself for not having them. Learn to want what you have and pretty soon you will have what you want.²*

The catechism shows us the way to contentment--and in a world that would try and sell us otherwise, right?

- **And finally, ingredient #6: “Remember your leaders (those who spoke the word of God to you)...imitate their faith” (v. 7).**

I called my pastor (from when I was growing up) this past week--Pastor John Anderson--reminded him that he suffered my adolescent years back in the day. He was also the person who presided over my Ordination Council (some 36 years ago this month)--spoke up for me when there were more than a few raised eyebrows about this young whippersnapper. So he should be sainted... Pastor John has been here at Park visiting on occasion, presided at my father's funeral, has been a dear family friend for much of my life. He has also been a courageous leader--one willing to lead in unpopular ways, as an advocate of justice and social change. His has been an imitable faith, and it has been a joy to be able to tell him so.

And there you have it--a small catechism for living out life as a disciple of Jesus--simple ways to love, to reach out, to remember what needs remembering, to live

² See BBT, *Gospel Medicine*, Cowley Publications, 1995, pp. 51-52.

with healthy boundaries, to remember those who have been used by God in our lives and who have made a difference in shaping who we are.