

Dearly Beloved of God,

Eight years ago this week, Patsy and I drove a U-Haul truck from Ontario to Edmonton. Part of that trip was through a blizzard. As we entered it, about 4:00 on a Friday afternoon, I asked a trucker at a gas station in Minot, North Dakota, "If you were heading to the border, would you go now or would you wait till tomorrow?" He said, "I'd go now. You might not get out of here tomorrow!"

As we headed into a storm, we drove in faith, simply following the tail lights of a big truck in front of us. If he drove into the ditch, I would probably have driven in right behind him. It was a nail-bitter for an hour or two. But by God's grace, we made it safely across the border and settled into a hotel in Estevan for the night. The next day we pushed on to Saskatoon through snow-covered roads. But it was bright and sunny. We spent Saturday night with a niece of mine.

On Sunday morning we were prepared to spend a day with her family and go to their church. Then we discovered that the church was closed due to the bad weather. I said to Patsy, "Well, if we aren't going to church because the weather is so bad here, we better get out of here in the light. We will have people waiting at our house in Edmonton on Monday at 1pm." Whether that was a necessary call or not, I don't know. But we said good-bye, jumped into the U-Haul, once again asked God to guide us and we hit the road. The first half hour was brutal, busting through snowdrifts as we made our way back to the Yellowhead from my niece's farm. It was a little crazy but also kind of fun! Well, Patsy didn't think so but I did.

It seemed strange but once we got to the highway, the road was really good. We drove about two hours and found a church in North Battleford where we stopped and worshipped. Bear with me a moment as I share some details about this church. It was a Presbyterian Church with a sanctuary as large as this one but only about 30 people were there. The worship and sermon were good. We were glad we stopped.

When it was over, the people were really friendly and invited us to celebrate "Robbie Burns Day" with them. Since we were out of the bad weather zone, we were in no hurry. We hadn't planned to travel on Sunday anyway, so now we were free to enjoy these people and their tradition.

Presbyterians have Scottish roots much like most reformed churches have Dutch roots. Well, Robbie Burns was born on January 25, which is now considered "Robbie Burns Day." Well, it was Sunday, January 24 but the church was celebrating Scotland's most famous poet a day early. His most popular work is arguably Auld Lang Syne, which is sung at New Year's Eve celebrations in Scotland—as well as many other places.

Now, a Robbie Burns Day tradition involves eating Haggis (pic). Haggis is a Scottish treat—a type of sausage prepared in a sheep's stomach. It is minced sheep heart, liver and lungs mixed with onion, oatmeal, fat, spices, and salt. I decided that Haggis is an acquired taste.

But it was a bit of an ordeal before we even got to try it. In Scottish tradition, the congregation stood at their lunch tables while a bagpiper marched in playing his pipes. And behind

him came someone carrying the Haggis on a platter. After cheers, a speech and prayer, we were invited to eat.

It was a worthwhile stop for worship, fellowship and some new foods. After lunch, we found a hotel, knowing we were within striking distance of Edmonton for Monday afternoon.

I tell you all this because that's the ridiculous lengths I'd go to come and serve this church 😊. And, seriously, I've never regretted it.

While I've joked about the extremes I went through to get here, our Scripture reading does encourage us to do what some would call extreme things when it comes to loving others. Remember, Hebrews 13 starts out with the words, "Keep loving each other as brothers and sisters in Christ." That's what grows out of getting God's first commandment right.

### **God's Love is the Basis**

Hebrews 13 focuses on how the church ought to love others. But you can't miss that our love for others grows out of God's love for us. If you think about it, the first commandment to love God is actually based on God's love. God's love empowers us to love others.

It makes total sense given the introductory verses of Exodus 20 where the first commandment comes from. The book of Exodus was written about 3500 years ago. As the people of Israel stood in awe before Mount Sinai, they heard the very words of God introducing himself to them:

*Ex 20:2 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* That's the basis for what follows. The Ten Commandments are a list of decrees from God that form the basis of Israel's covenant relationship with him. God is saying, "Listen up people. In case you didn't figure it out yet, I love you. That's why I took you out of Egypt. And I'm calling you my own." And we heard from Pastor Michael last week what a blessing it is to belong to God. Our God wants Israel to understand that before she gets too comfortable living without Pharaoh breathing down her neck and without the whip of the slave driver cracking behind her, she should not forget that she'd still be in bondage if it weren't for him! He's saying to her, "I chose you for a purpose and I love you. And because I love you, I have ten commandments that will bless your lives if you obey them. My commandments will be a means to blessing to you. I want you to want these things because I want you to know the fullest possible life I have for you. I love you and I am always looking to bless you."

Yes, congregation, God loves us too. His covenant extends to us because Jesus came to save peoples of all nations. In any event, because he first loved us, we are called to love him above all else. Because he loves us, he wants the best for us. He wants us to stay away from things that will harm us. And false gods are the primary means of leading us into harm's way.

You can be sure that God would never tell you to pop a Tide detergent pod into your mouth and chew on it until it explodes. Have you heard about that? That's a ridiculous online craze among young people lately. The news was reporting the other day that 40 young people have been hospitalized this month across the US after getting sick when they bit into a Tide Pod. These things are full of chemicals to wash our clothes. But if we ingest them they can kill us! I know that

anyone with any common sense wouldn't do that. But sometimes peer pressure gets us to do crazy things.

And idolatry in a different way gets us to do crazy things—things that don't just harm us physically. No, the catechism says it gets us to do things that endanger our salvation (A. 94)! Idolatry puts us in eternal danger. And that's why our loving God tells us to keep him first in our heart and life. Sometimes people say, "Pick your poison." God says, every choice to worship anything other than Me is like poison. So stay away from it. Pick Me. I will bless you."

If God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and his gift of the ten commandments didn't help Israel see his love, Jesus should have. The whole book of Hebrews explains just how much God loves us. It spells out repeatedly what Jesus has done for us. But I'll just pick up on the message in chapter 13.

In line with the poison of idolatry, Hebrews 13 says,  
*Heb 13:9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them.*

The Jewish Christians were struggling with trusting Jesus alone for salvation. Our catechism talks about idolatry as having or inventing something in which one trusts in place of Christ or alongside of him (A. 95). And that was the issue for Jewish Christians here. They'd been trained in sacrifices and ceremonies.

Now the author of Hebrews is saying that's not necessary. We have in Christ something far better: the greatest sign of God's love. We're not sure why he says the things he does. It's likely that he's speaking to Jewish Christians who will be forced to flee Jerusalem when the city falls in 70AD. In any event, he wants them to know that they need grace in their heart, not a special type of food in their stomach. And he wants them to know that the earthly Jerusalem and its temple are not what will keep them close to God. We don't need that altar. We have Jesus as our once-for-all sacrifice to make us right with God. V.11 explains that Jesus has been sacrificed on the garbage dump outside of the city. And in doing so, he makes us holy in the sight of God. His blood atones for our sins. Oh, how he loves us! He gives us uninhibited access to God's throne. And we have in Christ a new, heavenly Jerusalem.

We have in Jesus all that is needed for our salvation. There is nothing else needed to save us. There is no greater sign of God's love. Do you, do we dear church, trust him fully to be our one and only God? Do we follow him as our Saviour and Lord?

It is not enough to follow the ceremonies of the Old Testament. It is not enough to simply follow the example of Old Testaments saints who are alluded to in verse 7. No, we must imitate their faith that verse says. We are saved by faith! And the object of our faith is Jesus Christ. Hence the glorious words of v.8: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever!* Past, present, and future. We recognize him as the one who has done the work of salvation for us in the past, is interceding for us in the present and holds us secure for eternity as our eternal priest. Our loving God is and always will be faithful and dependable, worthy of our wholehearted trust and love.

## Our Service is the Fruit

Hebrews 13 teaches us that if God's love is the basis of our living out the first commandment, then serving him and others is the fruit. If we love God, if we trust him, if our desire is to obey the first commandment, then it will show in how we earnestly serve God by serving others. Our gratitude for Christ's sacrifice in saving us completely will result in us offering our lives to God as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1).

You see, friends, the question in the Bible is not "Is God real?" The question is "Which God will you serve?" Today, too, that's the question. Some people say they don't believe in God but all they are saying is that they don't believe the God of the Bible is real. They don't believe in Allah or any other religion's god. They don't follow any god or do what she, he or it says. But every single person follows something as god. People are religious beings. A so-called atheist may not believe in God, but for them science or pleasure or something else is god. It's like I read, "The reality of life is that many, many things compete for God's rightful place in our lives—things like pleasure, sex, food, occupational or social positions, recreation, alcohol, club memberships, money, cars, houses, boats, power, sports, other people, video games, web sites, drugs, family. Innumerable things carry with them the potential to crowd God off the throne of our heart." And that's why in this first commandment God not only challenges us to look at our perception of who he is, but God also challenges us to look at where we've placed our relationship with him in our list of priorities. What's the greatest commandment of all? Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength." (Mark 12:30). So what place does God have your life? Your God is who or what you trust. It's what you choose to believe, even if that belief doesn't include any kind of worship rituals. What you believe in shapes what you do with your life.

In closing, then, we look back to Hebrews 13, and we see all sorts of practical advice on living the Christian life—in the first century but also in the 21<sup>st</sup>. The writer encourages God's people to do a whole list of things that flow from trusting Jesus as our unchanging and ever-faithful Saviour, Lord and High Priest, the same, yesterday, today and forever.

Love your neighbour. Open your arms and your doors to give hospitality to strangers. Reach out in love to the hurting in our world. I know that can sound rather frightening to many of us. This is the way that our loving Lord stretches us at times and grows our faith as he calls us to do things that, at first, might seem extreme. Step out in faith. Don't be afraid. You can try something and if you find that it is not enriching, you can move on to something else. When you find what excites you, you will become passionate about it and stick with it.

So, find something that touches your heart and help out there. For example, I was impressed by the "Freezing Father Fundraiser" this past week. This man lost his three-year-old daughter to some mysterious illness that took her life very quickly. But he was so impressed with the care at the Stollery Hospital that he's been doing this sleeping outside fundraiser for the past 10 years in honour of his daughter and to raise funds for the Stollery. He's passionate about that.

Some of us are passionate about helping the Mosaic Centre—volunteering to cook or do crafts with the clientele there, hanging out, cutting nails or hair, sorting clothes and much more.

Others love to serve the elderly in nursing home by coming in to sing with them. Some do pet therapy, knowing that something as small as a kitten can make life much richer for those who feel alone. Others just come to sit and chat.

Some people get stoked up when working with young children; others with older children or young people. There are all kinds of ways to love our neighbours. Do what excites you!

Hebrews 13 also talks about keeping the marriage bed pure. That too is as real an issue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it must have been in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. When we trust God first of all, then we seek to honour his will for marriage. We work hard at keeping our marriages strong. We fight against temptations like pornography and, of course, adultery. But we recognize that Jesus said that a man commits adultery in his mind when he looks at a woman lustfully. So that has implications for seeking sexual purity both before and after marriage. And, again, it's what loving others as yourself looks like as followers of Jesus.

The chapter also mentions keeping our lives free from the love of money. That too is a means of loving our neighbour. You see, so much of our society is willing to trample on a neighbour if it means they can make a few bucks. That's when you know that money is more of a god in your life than it should be. If you won't give to help someone else because it means you have to sacrifice something of your own comforts, then you've probably been bitten by greed, which is a servant of the god of self.

Our service to others shows that our heart is on the things that are on the heart of God. Rather than being concerned about myself only and wanting everything to serve me and make me happy, I'm instead concerned about how my life can bless others as God has blessed me. Our love for God bears the fruit of loving our neighbour. In fact, if we get the first commandment right, the rest will follow naturally.

So, friends, let's set our hearts on loving God above all else. Focus our life on trusting our unchanging Lord Jesus—who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Let people see in you that Jesus is your all. Love what he loves. Value what he values. Let us live selflessly for his kingdom here on earth because we know that he is promising us an enduring city forever. Yes, let us rest in the care and serve in the confidence of belonging to our one true and trustworthy God.



Haggis picture