

Approach and Provoke
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 31:31-34
Reading from the New Testament: Hebrews 10:11-25

Perhaps we haven't met. I'm Matt Brown and I have a normal temperature. Isn't that something? You know how I know this? Well, I've had my temperature taken around ten times in the last week. Enter a building, go to the reception desk, get sent to the wall, line up your forehead with the target. Ding! Normal Temperature. That's what the voice said, so it must be right. I passed. I haven't had this much fun since my first-grade teacher made me stick my nose against the wall ... a miscarriage of justice, no doubt.

But my temperature is normal. I can proceed to my destination. I don't have a problem with it. I'm entering a senior community where every resident can ill afford an infection. Playing pin the forehead on the blue dot seems the least I can do for my neighbor's well-being, not to mention my parents. Heck, sniff my armpits if it would help. I don't have a problem with it, or the mask either. If it keeps you and me out of the ICU until this thing settles down, we can deal with a bit of fog on our glasses and a little discomfort, right?

You see, living with one another requires a modicum of effort, a dash of consideration. I know we have the capacity for it: take turns when merging; help others to get their carry-on in the overhead bin; be patient with the store clerk in training; smile at the server; thank the cop; strap a governor to your temper and an abort button on your tongue. When it's in your power to give someone a break, do it. If flexibility is essential for the health of your muscles, just imagine how transformational it can be to your spirit. Oh, and here's a novel idea, one you wouldn't think would be the #1 malady I've seen plaguing families through the years: Stop treating those who love you the most, the worst.

The author of Hebrews implores his audience, "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." Provoke. That's a dangerous word these days. The original Greek, παροξυσμός, makes it sound even worse, its meaning implying incitement or irritation. I'm not sure how you feel, but to my mind the last five or six years have seen more than enough incitement, provocation, and irritation to last a lifetime. Shouting, ranting, bellowing, blustering, blaming, fulminating, I hate to sound like your old dorm counselor, but you need to turn the

noise down out there. Let me put it this way, if your opinions, convictions, and beliefs are formed from a guy whose voice sounds like a coach late in the fourth quarter or an aunt who smoked a cargo ship of Camels, those opinions are probably not based on rational thought, and you may want to look for another shepherd, expert, or influencer, because the louder the provocateur, the less likely the provocation leads to a good deed. Provoke one another? Don't a good percentage of those encounters end up in a courtroom?

I find myself drawn to *The Message* translation which puts it this way: "Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out." Listen, I know you're busy, probably stressed and stretched, feeling like it took the last bit of your energy just to show up today, whether in person or online. After all, you've heard me say repeatedly that 50% is just showing up. Yet, do you truly perceive what is available here in a community of faith? Do you know what those people in the pews around you may become for you in the throes of a crisis? Have you paid attention to the creative, even transformative, opportunities to act on your gratitude for life, to flip the script on your self-involved lifestyle or mindset that is currently leaving you exhausted **and** empty? Do you

actually want your children to see one another and the world around them through the eyes of Jesus? Has your cynicism become a yolk too heavy to bear? Would you like to spend more time healing and less time wallowing? More time laughing than lashing out? More time growing together than shrinking toward loneliness?

The author of Hebrews cheers us on (again from the Message translation): "So let's do it - full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching."

We have to stop seeing church as a check-the-box endeavor so that we can experience it as a life-infusing, neighbor-healing, spirit stretching, call-finding, world-shaping instrument of God's peace. How is this possible? A ripped curtain, a decorator's disaster, a parent's love, a Son's offering.

In the moment of Christ's death, the gospels report that the curtain guarding the holy of holies in the midst of the Temple was torn in two. The writers aren't reporting this for the benefit of the property committee charged with Temple repairs. Rather, the reason for their report is more theological than for the purpose of the Session minutes.

The ark of the covenant, placed inside the holy of holies, held the mercy seat upon which God's presence would abide, making the holy of holies more exclusive than Elon Musk's space capsule. Nobody was getting in there but the High Priest, and he could only get past the bouncers once a year. Yet with Christ's death, the tearing of the curtain made it clear that God had no intention of living apart from us. Whereas Oz implored Dorothy to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain, Jesus tore that curtain down, in essence telling us to come on in and make ourselves at home with him.

And so, the author of Hebrews encourages us. "Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain ... let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith..."

In Romans, Paul echoes what we hear in Hebrews, "since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.

Access. Isn't it ironic that we spend all our lives chasing that elusive word, fighting tooth and nail to hold it in our hand, blaming others when they withhold it, resenting those who we judge unworthy of it; elbowing others we fear may get there before us; pretending we own it when we don't even know what it is; falling exhausted and empty without even realizing we've had it all along. Access: There's no litmus test, background check, or friends in high places; no resume padding, portfolio stuffing, or disguise wearing. We're in for no other reason than that we ... are ... loved.

And you know, one thing I have come to understand is that when you know you are loved, understand that you are embraced, you can put up with a whole heap of mess, a mountain of sorrow, a barrel of insults, and a string of humiliations. If at the end of the day, you know you are loved, you can tolerate a ton of troubles, a slew of rejections, a sledgehammer of pain. Even the religious cynic Nietzsche understood

that when he said, "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*."

It is difficult for us to comprehend the depth of suffering in the Nazi concentration camps. Victor Frankl remembers waking one night, roused by the groans of a fellow prisoner, who threw himself about in his sleep, obviously having a horrible nightmare. Frankl reached to wake him from this torture, but then drew his hand back. He says, "at that moment I became intensely conscious of the fact that no dream, no matter how horrible, could be as bad as the reality of the camp which surrounded us, and to which I was about to recall him."

And yet, Frankl notes that the religious interest of the prisoners was the most sincere imaginable, the improvised prayers or services in the corner of a hut or in the darkness of the locked cattle trucks. In the winter darkness before dawn the prisoners, exhausted and in ill-health, would be brutally marched for miles to a work site. Stumbling along, slipping on icy spots, Frankl recalls, "Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading, and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a bank of dark clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her

answering me, saw her smile, her frank and engaging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise." He says, "Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved."

Frankl's wife was killed at Bergen Belson concentration camp. Yet, painfully trudging forward that morning, Frankl says, "I didn't even know if she were still alive. I knew only one thing – which I have learned well by now: Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved ... Whether or not [that person] is actually present, whether or not [that person] is still alive at all, ceases somehow to be of importance ... Nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved." (Viktor Frankl, *The Search For Meaning*)

John said, "Those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them ... Perfect love casts out fear." Such is the love of Christ, a boundless love to which we have gained access, in which we stand, by

which we are sustained, and through which we are provoked to good deeds. A hymn that has sustained me in tough days says it well:

Your sure provisions gracious God

attend me all my days;

oh, may your house be my abode,

and all my work be praise.

Here would I find a settled rest,

while others go and come;

no more a stranger, nor a guest,

but like a child at home.

My Shepherd Will Supply My Need #803