

SERMON
“Barber Poles for Christ”
Hebrews 10:11-25
Sunday, November 14, 2021

A guy goes to his barber and he's all excited. He says, "I'm going to go to Rome. I'm flying Alitalia [a·luh·ta·lee·uh] and staying at the Rome Hilton, and I'm going to see the pope."

The barber says: "Ha! Alitalia is a terrible airline, the Rome Hilton is a dump, and when you see the pope, you'll probably be standing in back of 10,000 people."

So, the guy goes to Rome and comes back. His barber asks: "How was it?"

"Great," he says, "Alitalia is a wonderful airline. The hotel was great. And I got to meet the pope!"

"You *met* the pope?"

"I bent down to kiss the pope's ring."

"And what did he say?"

"He said, 'Where did you get that crummy haircut?'"

Speaking of haircuts... did you ever wonder why barber poles are red, white, and blue? The colors have nothing to do with the American flag; instead, the colors go back to the Middle Ages when people went to the barbershop for more than a haircut. They looked for barbers to perform medical procedures, including bloodletting.

Bloodletting was the procedure of choice for a range of maladies, from sore throats to the plague. In an attempt to heal the sick, barbers would simply cut open a vein and allow the blood to drain.

On the barber pole, red represents blood, white symbolizes bandages, and blue is connected to the color of veins. According to the *History* website, barbers and surgeons were part of the same trade guild until 1745. It wasn't until the 1800s that bloodletting fell out of favor with the medical community. Now, any bleeding in a barbershop is completely accidental.

People will try just about anything in the search for healing and wholeness. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in the temple of Jerusalem, people hoped that the blood of bulls and goats would take away their sins and relieve their guilty consciences. But these sacrifices didn't work. *"Every priest stands day after day at his service,"* says Hebrews 10:11, *"offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins."*

Whereas sacrifices of bulls and goats were no better for forgiveness than bloodletting was for sore throats Paul offers a better way: Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins giving his own body and blood on the cross to bring us forgiveness and new life. Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates Paul's words to the Hebrews like this: *"As a priest, Christ made a single sacrifice for sins, and that was it! It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people."*

As imperfect people, we can be perfected only by a perfect sacrifice, offered by a perfect person: Jesus. The blood of Christ is a perfect sacrifice, one that removes any need for temple sacrifices. I don't know about you, but I think that's why it is so important that we have a cross in our front yard. It's not there to remind the world, as much as it is to remind us of what God has done and is doing through Christ: *"This new plan I'm making with Israel,"* says Hebrews 10:16-17 in *The Message*, *"isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; This time 'I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts.'" That's right we are the Barber Poles of Christ. As disciples of Christ, we not only carry the message, we live the message.*

Unfortunately, many within the church are no longer getting this job done. It's not that they have stopped believing; it's that they have forgotten; as Lovett Weems of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership recently said; how to *"exemplify the love of God and love of neighbor without reservation."*

In Little Rock, Arkansas barbershops are stepping up where churches have failed. Throughout Arkansas and its surrounding states barbers are being trained to create a space where men and boys can talk freely about their feelings. And in so doing these barbers not only have become mental health advocates, they have become

living examples of loving God and loving neighbor without reservation. It's an excellent description of what the church should be doing.

When it comes to the church, I am reminded of the barber who decided he was going to share his faith with his customers. So, when the sun came up and the barber got up out of bed he said, "Today I am going to witness to the first man who walks through my door."

Soon after he opened his shop the first man came in and said, "I want a shave!" The barber went in the back and prayed a quick, desperate prayer, saying, "God, the first customer came in and I'm going to witness to him. So please give me the wisdom to know just the right thing to say to him. Amen."

Then quickly the barber came out with his razor knife in one hand and a Bible in the other while saying, "Good morning, sir. I have a question for you Are you ready to die?"

The Church should be a place where people can talk freely about their struggles, be assured of the forgiveness Christ offers, receive guidance and encouragement; all without feeling threatened. The letter to the Hebrews gives us all the encouragement we need to become that church. The Rev. Matt Chandler of the Village Church in Texas recently wrote of that encouragement: "*As we show others the same welcoming love God showed us, we reflect our Creator and model what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God.*"

The letter to the Hebrews, I believe, gives us an excellent blueprint for that welcoming love. First, it provides us with the courage to trust God, or as Hebrews 10:19-20, says, "*enter the most holy place by a new way that leads to life!*" According to the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary the church to whom Paul was writing was struggling; instead of defining itself by God's gracious act in Christ; it kept returning to the old tried and true: meeting the requirements of the Old Testament Law. Presbyterian pastor Lewis Galloway says of their plight: "*Faithful Christian living is not about trying harder. It is about trusting more.*" Hebrews assures us that we can trust the one who has made this covenant with us.

Next, Hebrews urges us in verse 24 to "provoke one another to love and good deeds." We need the support of other people to live a faithful Christian life, so Hebrews challenges us to "provoke" one another. Normally, we use the word provoke in a negative way, describing actions that cause anger or resentment. But it can also mean to stir a person to action, and this is why Hebrews asks us to "provoke one another to love and good deeds." Like the barbers of the Little Rock, we should provoke each other to get regular checkups. Provoke each other to seek counseling when troubles arise. Provoke each other to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. Provoke each other to welcome a stranger, mentor a teenager, or participate in a short-term mission project. There is nothing negative about provoking one another, if it is to greater love and good deeds.

And finally, we need to "*meet together*" in ways that, as verse 25 implies, involves us in "*encouraging one another.*" Zan Wesley Homes, in his book Encountering Jesus, recalls hearing the late Bishop Paul Martin tell of the time when he appointed to a church early in his career. He writes: "*The congregation planned a reception for him on his first Sunday. During the reception, everyone came around to greet him except for one man who lingered in the rear of the room. After everyone else had greeted him, this man came forward and simply stood there. The future bishop asked him, 'What do you do here?'* The layman said, '*I look for the preacher's weaknesses.*' And he added, '*I'm good at it! But when I find them, that's where I get beneath him, and then I lift him up.*'"

Remember how discouraging it was to be quarantined at home during the pandemic, unable to attend worship services or gatherings of any kind? A church that fails to trust, provoke and encourage acts a lot like that church in quarantine. In order for the church to be the Church we must be a place where not only people can talk freely about their struggles but be assured of the forgiveness Christ offers. It's time church to proudly put on display our red, white and blue and become the barber poles we were created to be.