

Twenty-Sixth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/B): "1st Things & Final Things and 2 Wolves"  
Hebrews 10:11-25, Mark 13:1-8  
November 16-17, 2024  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Provoke": How does that word make you feel? Do you have a positive or negative reaction to it? Why? How would you define it?

- Stimulate or give rise to (a reaction or emotion, typically a strong or **unwelcome** one) in someone
- Stimulate or incite (someone) to do or feel something, especially by **arousing** anger in them
- Deliberately make (someone) annoyed or angry<sup>1</sup>

So why does this weekend's lesson from Hebrews say, "*Let us consider how to **provoke** one another to love and good deeds....*" (Hebrews 10:24)??

Maybe it's another way of saying, "For Heaven's sake, be of some earthly good!" Not because "You'd better, or else," as in, "Get busy climbing that ladder to Heaven," because we don't believe we **can** get to Heaven on our own merits. We don't believe we **have** to, either, because Jesus has already done **for** us the saving work we can't do for ourselves. We simply say, "For Heaven's sake, be of some earthly good!" because the world and our brothers and sisters are in such great need of our love and compassion. That's the reminder I get every time I look at my Lutheran World Relief mug that says, "Till your love reaches every neighbor," one of the best tag lines I've ever seen.

In the month of November, the close-out of the church year, we can always count on hearing grave, truth-be-told kinda depressing Scripture readings about the end times, the last days before Jesus' return. In today's Gospel Jesus predicts:

*"Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. [Heaven knows there's no shortage of false Messiahs, still.] When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end*

*is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines."*

And then comes the good news/bad news, depending on how you take it:

*"This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."* (Mark 13:6-8)

The bad news is, "*This is but the beginning...*" "What? That's not **all**? There's **more** disaster on top of all that??" But the **good** news is: "*This is... the beginning of **the birth pangs**.*" Life will follow all that death. Something new will come after all that destruction. So as we heard on All Saints Weekend, whatever suffering we endure or witness around us, it is part of the **first** things, not the **final** things. Whatever we see now is not the final word; it's just a chapter in a longer story with a hope-filled, redemptive ending.

Here's how the author of the letter to the Hebrews put it:

*... when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet."* (Hebrews 10:12-13)

When our Savior's enemies, when humankind's enemies, become a footstool for our Lord's feet, **that** will be "the final thing," the glad stepping off point for the rest of eternity. Luther described our enemies as "sin, death and the devil," everything that deals death, undermines faith, kills hope, strangles love, foils and frustrates God's desire for us to "have life and have it abundantly": greed, lies, murder, adultery, war, selfishness, hypocrisy, vengeance, apathy.

Some days we're sitting ducks, easy prey to the temptation of giving our lives over to one or another of those sins or others. Factors we have no control over like disease or unemployment or depression can also push us toward despair. No doubt we need the **courage**-ment of the Word of God! We need the life-preserver of the Gospel! We need the medicine of Holy Communion! We need the saving embrace of community!

This is why today's epistle ends with this challenge:

*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day [of the Lord] approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25)*

So, for Heaven's sake, be of some earthly good, and for Heaven's sake, don't absent yourself from worship! Because when you are not present, the puzzle is not complete. The Holy Spirit calls each of us here to sing and pray our hearts out, together. *"Wherever 2 or more of you gather in my name, I am there in your midst."* (Matthew 18:20) Our job is to intercede, to pray for the world, and your voice strengthens our prayers. Our privilege is to hear the Word and receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, and your presence in the assembly of believers helps me do that more joyfully.

The reality is, living out our faith isn't easy. If it seems easy to you, maybe you've only scratched the surface and are being invited to delve deeper. I just finished this book *The Grey Wolf* by Louise Penny, the latest in the Three Pines series about Chief Inspector of Homicide Armand Gamache. He tells the story of a monk who lives at a remote monastery in the middle of a forest in the wilds of Quebec. It's called "Saint-Gilbert-Entre-les-Loups," which Gamache thought translated as "Saint Gilbert Among the Wolves." But the abbot tells him it actually means "Saint Gilbert Between the Wolves." The abbot heard the story from an elder of the Cree nation which had taught the original monks how to survive in the wilderness.

The man who was now an elder himself heard the story in his childhood from his grandfather. Here's what I read:

His grandfather, the Chief at the time, told the boy that he had two wolves at war inside him, tearing at his insides. One of them, a grey wolf, wanted the

old man to be strong and compassionate. Wise and courageous enough to be forgiving. The other, a black wolf, wanted him to be vengeful. To forget no wrong. To forgive no slight. To attack first. To be cruel and cunning and brutal to friends and enemies alike. To spare no one. Hearing this from his grandfather terrified the child. He ran away. It took a few days before he approached the old man again. When he did, he asked his grandfather, 'Which wolf will win, the grey or the black?' ... His grandfather said, 'The one that I feed.'"<sup>2</sup>

Gamache tells his second-in-command, "We all have them [both wolves], inside. Best to acknowledge that. Only then can we choose which one we feed."<sup>3</sup> When we worship, when we dwell in God's Word, when we dine at God's table, when we are present among the faithful in the community of faith, we choose to feed the grey wolf, who "provokes us to love and good deeds." Love and good deeds are the blessed first things that will pave the way for the glorious final things, when Jesus' enemies and ours are crushed, a mere stepstool beneath His feet. Amen

<sup>1</sup>On-line *Oxford Language*.

<sup>2</sup>Louise Penny, *The Grey Wolf* (NY: Minotaur Books, 2024), p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

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