

“Inspire One Another”

Hebrews 10: 19-25

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Reformation Sunday

Inspire One Another!

The New Testament book of Hebrews says: Inspire one another. Inspire one another to love and good works. In fact, some translations say: “Brothers and sisters, Provoke one another...”

I read that, and I think of my brother and me provoking one another. It was in the back seat of the car when we were young. We’d draw an imaginary line down the middle which we were not supposed to cross over. Then one of us would take our index finger and poke the other person. The other would say, ‘You touch me once, I touch you twice.’ The reply: ‘You touch me twice, I touch you three times.’ Then the reply, ‘You touch me three times, I touch you a million-billion times!’ We were good at provoking one another!

Hebrews says, Brothers and sisters, provoke one another to love and good works! That is what the history of the church shows. On this Reformation Sunday, it’s a good day to remember some of our history. And just a very few of the inspiring people who have come before us.

In the 4th Century, there was an early Christian teacher, named Macrina. This woman was the oldest of 8 children, so she became the teacher to her younger siblings. Three became great bishops in the early church. All of them gave her the credit because she taught them love of the bible and philosophy.

One brother, Gregory, the most scholarly of the three, nevertheless angered a church leader and was exiled to this little known outpost, Nyssa. He was devastated.

But Macrina counseled him: Quit worrying about how important the position is, and focus on how important the work is that God would give him. That was Gregory of Nyssa a major contributor to the Nicene Creed. It’s in the front of your hymnal. It’s a guiding Confession of Christians around the world.

Macrina gave up all her goods, to found a hospital and a convent that educated both men and women. When she died, Gregory discovered she did not have one bit of fitting clothing to be buried in. She had given everything to the poor. So Gregory purchased for her, a beautiful wedding gown. And she was buried as the bride of Christ.

Inspire one another. Saint Macrina is a good place to start.

A century later, in the 5th century, a Roman noble woman named Paula came to faith after the death of her husband. Her conversion caused a radical change in her life. Although she had been a noble in the past, she came to see her call from God as caring for the poor and supporting the church.

She slept on mats of goat's hair on the ground. But she established 3 convents and a monastery in Bethlehem. She bought supplies, manuscripts and paid expenses for a Bible scholar, named Jerome, who was translating the Bible into Latin. His translation today is called The Vulgate bible. It's part of why the Bible survived in dark time. Scholars still depend on his work.

Thank you Paula. For your faithful, generous spirit. You inspire Christians still today.

Inspire one another. 478 years ago, in the 16th Century there was this lawyer who happened to be traveling through Switzerland. He had a reputation as being cold, reticent, intellectual and unapproachable. So the church asked him to become their pastor. The first recorded mention of him doesn't even call him by name. They just refer to him as, "that Frenchman."

But he was profound and passionate in reading and interpreting scriptures. The people of the city, Geneva, were not all that inspired about the Reformation. The church convinced this lawyer to become their pastor. He pushed through a lot of changes in the church and in the city, and finally, the people of Geneva had had enough. And they unceremoniously kicked John Calvin out the door. April, 1538. Right in the middle of the lectionary year.

But over the next three years, what the city discovered in his absence was the city and the church went into decline. They found Calvin and begged him to come back. Begged? Guilted him into coming back, with threats to his eternal soul. Which he finally did.

On the first Sunday back in Geneva, the great gothic cathedral, Saint Peter's, was crammed with curious Genevans, who expected to hear an exultant Calvin lambaste the opponents who had driven him out 3 years earlier. Instead Calvin opened the Bible and said, "Let us pick up the gospel story where we last left off." Thank you John Calvin. You inspire us with your forgiveness, your grace, and your leadership. You changed the church and changed the world.

Today Presbyterians are proud to say the watchword of the Reformation was "Reformed and always reforming." Probably so, but maybe a little too optimistic for their main motto. Calvin's watchword was much more bracing. Their motto came from the book of Job: "Out of darkness, light!"

Thank you John Calvin, for the light.

The prophet Jeremiah says: God is the potter. We are the clay. If we become misshapen, the good news is, God can start over again with us. It may be a big redo. It may be fixing some part that has gotten out of tune. God will keep working with us, until we are what we are destined to be. God is the potter. We are the clay.

Exactly what shape our lives will take. That is the interesting discovery. There is a lot we have to discover. What we do know, is that God wants to us with a sense of shalom. Peace... but more than peace. Wholeness. A whole, happy, fulfilled, joyful life.

Our call is to work with God. To listen, to learn, to allow God to shape us. No, God does not do it all. It is up to us to learn from God and to shape ourselves.

We shape a sense of God's joy when we nurture our sense of wonder. Awe and wonder at God's love for us. Wonder that we are alive, wonder that we live and breathe. Wonder at the goodness of God's creation. Taking time to wonder at things like autumn leaves.

Someone said they wanted to spend time studying the biology of why the leaves turn. To them, I say, if that helps you experience a sense of wonder, go for it! As for me, I just want to take more time to look at all those astounding leaves.

What is it that brings you a sense of wonder? Those pictures from the Hubble telescope: with the incomprehensible immensity of the cosmos? Or is it holding a loved one's face in your hands, taking in with wonder the face of another human being. The depth in another person's eyes. We shape a whole, happy life when we take time to wonder.

Practicing joy gives us a sense of God's shalom. The ancient blessing that the choir often sings, goes back to Moses and Aaron,

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you,
The Lord lift his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

What does it mean for God to lift up God's countenance upon you? It means may the Lord smile at you. You wonder, why don't more artist's paint pictures of God smiling?

The first child of faith, born to Abraham and Sarah is named Isaac: Laughter. That makes us the great great grandchildren of Laughter. Laughter is one of our core family values.

We are singing one of the hymns from Calvin's church today, and in the first verse it says of God, "him serve with mirth." Even Calvin knew, faith was about laughter. There are 23 different words used to express joy in the Bible. The first public act of Jesus is to turn some vats of water into 180 gallons of wine. That's a lot of wine. The Bible says, it was the good stuff. The first miracle of Jesus is that he brought so much joy and laughter to that wedding!

It's a message to us: life in the presence of Jesus is a party. A celebration. God is smiling at us. We embrace that reality when we smile back. When we practice being children of Laughter.

A sense of God's shalom-filled, whole happy life comes to us when we experience the power God gives to us. We have some control over our life and destiny. A whole lot of people feel as if they can not make a difference in their life or in the world. They feel as if the decisions that shape the world Are always made somewhere else by someone else. They feel powerless. Powerless people soon stop caring. They become apathetic.

So God invites us to rediscover the power we have in our lives. God inspired the church: A place where we discover constructive, creative ways to recover power to share our lives and shape the destiny of the world.

The book of Hebrews says: Inspire one another.

I had a friend. Everybody who knew her enjoyed her. She was smart, beautiful, warm, wonderful and alcoholic. She was delightful. But we all learned how devastatingly sad life can be when someone does not get the help they need. When you have a disease, life is hard.

We need other people. House of Hope is home to the largest Alcoholic Anonymous meeting in the state. It happens here every Monday night. Why do they gather? To inspire one another.

Alcoholics Anonymous knows we need other people. To listen to us. Talk with us. Walk with us. To guide us. To inspire us.

They meet in the Great Hall downstairs to start with for a large group meeting, then they spread out across the church, in just about every room for smaller discussions. Who are these people? I have no idea, they are anonymous! They insist on paying us a little rent every month. But you know who really covers the cost of housing these 250 brothers and sisters? You do. Because you pledge. You inspire me with this generosity. Inspire one another. Remember your mentors. Remember to treat yourself the way your mentors have treated you: constructively, helpfully and patiently. They inspired you.

So who are you mentoring now? Who are you inspiring? Someone helped you grow, help someone else grow.

God shapes us in lots of ways.

God comes to us directly.

God comes to us in Jesus Christ.

God comes to us through inspiring people,

who help us discover who we are,

who give guidance for our lives.

Giving people who coach us, encourage us, inspire us.

When we sense the presence of people who inspire us, our lives have a sense of assurance. We are more at peace. We have confidence in the wisdom of our choices. People who inspire us enrich our lives.

One of my favorite ethics books has the title *Improvisational Ethics*. Think of life is like Improv Theater. We pick up on cues, and make it up as we go along, following the prompts of God.

Improvisation: Tina Fey (can we call her a theologian?) talks about what makes a good improv partner. You know you have a good partner when you say something, and they do more than say, "Yes." They say, "Yes, and...." and take your idea even farther! You play off of each other. You inspire one another.

Inspire someone. Say yes, and!

The Stewardship Committee is an amazing group. How could they not be, with Sherwood leading them? The Stewardship Committee has challenged all the officers in the church to inspire the church by getting their pledge in before Stewardship Sunday. To inspire you.

I realized this meant me too, so I said, "Yes!" And was about to fill out my pledge card. But then I realized God could call me someplace else anytime and I might not be around to pay my pledge. So this week, I paid the whole pledge for next year in advance. Just in case. That's my "Yes, and" to the Stewardship Committee and to you as a congregation.

It's like that old story:

For years, this banker passes a beggar on the same street corner, and gives a beggar two kroners every week. Then one week, the banker gives him just one kroner and says, "Sorry, it's been a bad week." To which the beggar replies, "Just because you have a bad week, I should suffer?"

My pledge is not that much when it comes to the whole church, but I want to do my part, and to let you know where ever I am, I am on your side. I believe in the great good future of the House of Hope. I believe in the amazing acts of faith, hope and love that happen inside this church, and in your mission to the world. I know it only works because of the inspirational giving that happens here among the whole membership.

You'll get a love letter from Sherwood and me this week with a pledge card inside. We invite you: Inspire someone.

Kierkegaard said, Hope is a passion for the possible. Pledge to the House of Hope because of what God makes possible through the people here.

We know that People in the church are not perfect. But that does not matter, as long as we work together like brothers and sisters. Poking and provoking one another to love and good works. The church is, as one sage said:

We are like angels with only one wing.
We can fly but only if we embrace each other.

I'm in favor of embracing all the one-winged angels in the church and seeing how high we can fly. So I invite you to pledge and pledge generously. Inspire one another. When we inspire one another:

Life's goodness is expanded;
People's spirits are lifted;
our strength is energized;
our negatives are eliminated;
our faults are forgotten;
and God's Spirit becomes embodied, in us.

Inspire one another. Provoke one another to outrageous acts of love and good works. Inspire someone. Show the world the children of laughter are more resilient than the children of gloom.

The Reformers said, Out of darkness, light.
We are the people of light.
Let your light shine in the darkness!

Amen.