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Our Hearts Sprinkled Clean

Hebrews 10:14-25

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Presence! On a scale of 1 through 10 how present are you here today in this time and space? Now I will confess that there are moments throughout my week when I am not truly present. Last Wednesday was just one of those times. It was early morning and I had had a good night's rest. I needed to meet 2 of my fellow Deacons in Snyder at 7:30am to travel to Syracuse for a gathering of the order of Deacon. As I was driving, I was thinking about the day, my friend whom I had not spoken with in any depth for quite some time. I was thinking about the joys and struggles that both of us had been through in our lives for nearly 30 years. About 2 blocks from her home, I realized I was not present in that moment; I was 2 blocks from the home that she had lived in about 20 years ago. Now lest you think I am having short term memory loss, I was only 4 blocks from her current home and managed to find my way there with no problem and was early!

Can you relate? Are you ever absent from the moment? I am embarrassed to tell you how often my husband asks me when we are out for dinner together, where I am. I observe the people around us, maybe thinking about the next task ahead but I am not present with him. Sorry Peter! Sometimes even standing in the grocery line as I wait for groceries to be checked and bagged, I am someplace else. When I realize it is her job is finished I often comment with a smile and laugh, I guess you want me to pay for these? We are a distracted people!

We walk into restaurants and see folks on their phones and computers. We blame technology, meant to make it easier for us to communicate, easier than ever to stay in touch and stay connected, for making us less and less present. But I think technology, as with most things, is just the tool, the tool that we can use in good ways and bad, in ways that enhance our lives and detract, in ways that magnify our impulses. And our impulse, apparently, is to *disengage* rather than engage, to isolate rather than build up relationships, to wall ourselves in, rather than break down barriers. Our technologies, I think, have just made it easier to follow through on those impulses.

So I ask again, how *present* are you today? "*As members of the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we will faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our presence.*" Not *present* like *gift* – that's later! No, we vow that part of our faithful core-strengthening discipleship comes by showing up! In some ways, this seems like the easiest one of all, doesn't it? Support the church by your presence? Well, you're here, aren't you? You've all come today to be in this time of worship when you could be doing any number of other things. You're here! You showed up! Done, checked that off the list? And I am thankful that you *are* here, that of all the things you could be doing, what you *are* doing now is gathering together with others gathered, praising God, and trying to listen for God's direction in your life. That's a part of showing up that means a *lot*. And when we make the vow to participate in the ministry of the church by our *presence*, actually showing up to worship and to ministry and mission events – that's a very serious part of what we commit to doing. But it's more than that.

Today we heard a lesson from the book of Hebrews. This book is counted as an Epistle, a letter, but it is really more of a sermon than a letter. Rev. Beth Quick comments: “Here in this section we find the author reminding us that because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we are able to draw even closer in relationship to God. We are able to come into God’s presence without a barrier, without a curtain that keeps us separated, as did the designs of the temple in Jerusalem that kept people away from the holiest place where it was thought God would dwell. Because of Jesus, we can claim the gift of being invited into God’s very presence. The author goes on to tell us *how* we ought to come into God’s presence though: by seeking to have our hearts sprinkled clean and a clear conscience, by holding fast to our faith, “provoking” one another to good deeds and loving actions – I love that language, that idea of provoking each other to do good and by meeting together, encouraging one another as we prepare our hearts and lives for God’s kingdom. Apparently, gently encouraging people not to skip out on worship and fellowship isn’t new! The author of Hebrews says we shouldn’t “neglect to meet together, *as is the habit of some*”, but rather we should encourage each other. So, we can experience God’s being full present to us, especially because of knowing Jesus, and in turn we are meant to be present and encouraging to one another, building each other up in faith, love, and good works. Being present is about our presence with God, and our presence with one another.”

Today we celebrated the sacrament of baptism with Cole Robert. Together, we professed our faith, thanked God for Cole and welcomed Cole and his family into this journey of faith. We promised to join together in the body of Christ to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church, by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and are witness that God might be glorified. We promised to proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We promised to be present with Cole in a community of love and forgiveness, so he might grow in his service to others and be a true disciple who walks in the way that leads to life. That is a lot of promising folks! That takes all of our attention and needs our presence to accomplish the vows we make!

I will be the first to admit that it can get pretty discouraging and tiring to live as Christians when we live in a culture that offers so little support to do so. Evil is prevalent and persistent. This week we enter worship, after another shooting, the 4th shooting in the same number of weeks. Massive fires rage through various areas of California, a long prayer list filled with illness and death. This week I saw a post on Facebook that asked the question “Is there any value in being followers of Christ?” The writer of Hebrews wanted his readers to know for certain that what Christ has done in his death on the cross is once and for all! Christ’s sacrifice frees us not only from our debts of sin. In other words, the world today is something like Europe after the D-day invasion. The victory is sure, but there are still battles to be fought. Christ has already defeated evil, but only at the end of time will this triumph be clear and complete. Therefore we *must* encourage, strengthen and motivate one another to faithfulness. We are the body of Christ!

Since we are now able to enter God’s presence confidently, in Jesus, we find the one who is God’s presence *embodied*, God-in-the-flesh. – God’s inescapable presence. In the gospels we see Jesus demonstrate the power of being *present*. One of the most powerful things Jesus did was *spend time with people*. He spent time with all kinds of people. And in these instances, it isn’t always the *content* of the conversation between Jesus and the person. It was Jesus spending time with others that was powerful. It was Jesus eating dinner with Zacchaeus. Jesus spending time talking to women as equals. Jesus eating meals with Pharisees *and* sinners *and* prostitutes *and*

tax collectors – Jesus honored them all with his presence, with his time, with conversation, with *relationship*, and made them feel, maybe for the first time ever, worth it. His presence was powerful. And so is ours! Giving someone the gift of your presence is just that – a gift you have to offer; **fully, honestly and authentically**. You ask yourself what difference can I make in this moment, present to this person? Christ has made our hearts clean through this sacrifice that we might be present with one another. How present are you? Are you present in your own life? Are you present *here*? In your relationship with God?

Each day we need to ask ourselves that same question. Not just at the start of the day, but several times a day. On a scale of 1-10, how present am I? You can start right now, in the quiet of your mind. On a scale of 1-10, how present are you in worship right now? And then ask yourself that question all week long. How present are you at work? At school? How present are you when you're driving? When you are at the store? How present are you when you speak with your children or your parents or your spouse or your friends? How present are you at meetings? At church? When you volunteer? When you walk down the sidewalk? How present are you when you talk to God? When God is trying to talk to you? How present are you in your life? Believe and exercise your faith boldly, following the example of Christ who will be faithful to his promises.

Ask yourself that question, and see if you can figure out if you are showing up to life. What areas of your life do wish you were more present for? What things might you have to tune out so that you can focus on being present to God and neighbor? Can you start making sure that you are *really* present with your family? With friends? With those in need? In the life of this congregation? In your relationship with God? Be creative in provoking, encouraging, pushing and pulling all those in our family of faith to live in love and perform good deeds for God here. The curtain, the veil is drawn back in the work of Jesus, and God is as close to us as we will let God get. *Always* present for us. God is *always* here, and here is always wherever you are! And everything God does is an attempt to get us to show up too, to realize God's presence, to be fully present ourselves, to invite others to start showing up too. God is here. Are you? Amen.

As a priest he was so perfect, that it only took him one single offering to deal with all the imperfections of all the imperfect people who come to him wanting to be made perfect for God! The Holy Spirit can back us up on this. First she said in the scriptures:

No more writing down the rules for people to read; this time I'll write them into their hearts and minds."

Then, for good measure, she added: "I'll wipe the record of their failings and their perverse behavior; none of it will ever again even enter my mind."

So if that's done — if the slate has been wiped clean — then there is no longer any need to come offering sacrifices to try to make up for what we've done wrong.

So, my friends, now it's a whole new ball game. Now we can confidently walk straight into the sacred place because Jesus won us that right, spilling his own blood in the process. We walk in via a new route. The old way had a big curtain between us and the sacred place — on the new route the only thing between us and the sacred place is Jesus, and he invites us to become part of his own body and go in that way. Add all that to the fact that Jesus himself is now our great priest who says what goes in the house of God, and you'll understand what is now open to us. So let's go! Let's approach God with integrity and with deep trust. Let us stand before God knowing for sure that not only have our bodies been washed clean in pure water, but so to have our hearts, our minds, and our conscience.

In light of all this, let's hold on tight to the hope that we've put our hands up to. None of this on-again off-again stuff! You can't get more dependable than the one who has made these promises. So let's put on our thinking caps and come up with some good strategies for stirring one another up to greater and greater love and more and more ways to put it into action. Some people have got out of the habit of gathering together as a congregation — let's not go down that path. Gather often, support and encourage one another. The closer we get to that final day the more we'll need one another. Hebrews 10:19-25