

Our Epistle lesson today could be broken down into two main parts. The first part, verses 11-18 focus on the theme of drawing near to God. And this is something we can do because of the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ for us on the cross. The second part, verses 19-25 encourage us to draw near to *one another*.

To draw near to God, though, is never easy. **Our** sins and the sins of other people get in the way.

In his memoir of his service as a pastor in a country church, Richard Lischer tells the story of Teri, a woman who would routinely break into the church to pray. (Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets*, New York: Doubleday, 2001, 103–115.) What kept her from coming before God was not fear of His holiness but fear of His people. Her mother had been cast aside from the church when it was discovered that she was pregnant outside of marriage and that one of the sons of a prominent family in that church had been involved. In gathering to protect their own, the Christians at this church left both mother and child outside.

Now that her mother is gone and she is grown up, Teri is having a crisis of her own: another pregnancy outside of marriage. This time, though, rather than pushed out of the church, she is pushed out of her family as her stepfather responds to the news with physical abuse. With nowhere to go, she goes to the church. Not to the **people** but to the **building**. She breaks into the building in the middle of the night, trusting that God is there even though she could not see Him.

When Pastor Lischer first discovers her in the church in the middle of the night, he sees her sitting in the sanctuary in the pastor's chair. Teri was obviously good at breaking things: social expectations, legal regulations, and even symbolic codes.

Lischer tells Teri's story to reveal how we live as broken individuals in broken communities, seeking to draw near to God. For (just) such people, , people like you and me, our reading from Hebrews offers hope.

In this section of the letter, the writer to the Hebrews offers us a vision of Jesus, seated at the right hand of God. Jesus has come to His church on earth and opened it up for the sake of broken people.

In contrast to the priests of the Old Testament who daily stand and offer sacrifices, Jesus has come and offered one sacrifice for all people for all time. Jesus has fulfilled the order of priestly temple service and sacrifice. His work has torn open the curtain that separated people from God's sacred presence and place. He is now seated in the most holy place, at the right hand of God, and hears the prayers of His people. This work of Jesus offers His people access to the holy things of God. Because of the blood of Jesus, we draw near to God with a true heart and bring our sins and our sufferings, indeed all of our lives before Him.

Teri had a lot of things wrong in her life but she got one thing *right*. There was space for her in the sanctuary of God. She could draw near to God on the basis of the sacrificial work of Christ.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us not only to draw near to God but to draw near to one another.

As Pastor Lischer tells the story of Teri, he reveals how God worked to bring Teri and her daughter into the church. At first, it was slow and secret. Members began to share resources with the pastor to share with her. Envelopes with cash were dropped off at the door. Then, it became more public. A few women of the church cared for Teri during her pregnancy and after her baby was born. Finally, Lischer tells of the day when her daughter, Asia, was baptized. After the baptism, Teri and Asia turned to face the congregation and were welcomed as part of the community in Christ's name.

This young lady who sought to draw near to God by breaking in late at night was now drawn near to God and to His people by the work of Jesus. The waters of baptism opened the door. Rather than exclude and banish one another, God's people learned to forgive.

They, and we, draw near to one another and to God on the basis of the sacrificial work of Christ. So, what exactly does that look like for us here at First Lutheran- to draw near to one another?

First and foremost we show the love of Christ to our fellow members, our brothers and sisters in Christ, by encouraging one another. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11 St. Paul exhorts us to "encourage one another and *build one another up*." One of the ways that we can build one another up

is actually by just being here for worship. Your presence here is an encouragement to your fellow believers, and a reminder that we are not alone in our walk with God, we have fellowship together. We have support. We also build one another up by showing kindness toward each other and by genuinely sharing the love of Christ that dwells within our heart as Christians. Perhaps it's some encouraging words we speak to someone who looks troubled, overwhelmed in some way, or just in need of a friend. There are many ways to encourage others and build others up, as those words 1 Thessalonians 5 instruct us.

As imperfect people, though, it can be easy to forget to do that at times. Because of our sinful nature we tend to get turned in on ourselves and on our own interests and we end up neglecting to encourage others as we ought. For this we need to repent, trust Christ for His forgiveness, and rejoice in the forgiveness and renewal He freely offers!

Going back to that true story relayed by Pastor Lischer in his book, we saw how growing up Teri was an outsider to the church. Yet, eventually she was welcomed in by those loving Christians. This story can serve to remind us of yet another opportunity we have to draw near to God and to one another: Over the next few days and weeks as we will be celebrating Thanksgiving and then Advent, and then Christmas. During those services we may see some people here in the Sanctuary we haven't seen in a while, or maybe haven *never* seen before. Are there ways we can make them feel like *they* too, belong here? Maybe through your kind words and a welcoming smile they will be encouraged to keep coming here to draw near to God who draws near to us based on Christ's sacrificial love. Let them know of the Savior who loves them, who through His Word and Sacraments does draw near to them, offers to forgive them, and provide for them a community that cares for them, as we journey together on earth to our eternal home in heaven.

One other opportunity we have to witness to others of our Savior's love is through the Thanksgiving food collection going on now through this coming Wednesday. Two Sunday's ago it was wonderful to see the Fellowship Center full of members of all ages, from Sunday school children to Senior Citizens and every age in-between, working together to

assemble thanksgiving blessing bags to give to those in our community who are less fortunate. Now with the Thanksgiving food collection sponsored by our Altar guild we can again share the love of Christ in deed, as well as in word, with people in need, and give a wonderful witness of Christ's love for all.

The reason we give generously and freely to others is because Christ has generously and freely given everything for us, even His very life. And now we draw near to one another because God draws near to us on the basis of the sacrificial work of Christ. And every Sunday, God keeps inviting us here into His holy presence, gathering us together around His Word. Yes, we draw near to Christ and we draw near to one another to build one another up and to let *all* know here there *is* a place and a hope for all people because of Christ's redeeming love. Amen.