

June 7 – Hebrews 6:4-12

No Second Chances?

I am going to start by telling you a story. Many years ago when I was the intern associate at Missoula First UMC the senior pastor asked me to come into his office and close the door. Before I got seated he said, “We’ve got problems.” One of our members was the treasurer for the Yellowstone Annual Conference. An audit of the conference books had just found out that more than \$100,000 was missing in church funds. When confronted with the fact he admitted that he had placed some of the church’s funds in risky stock investments. When these failed he started cooking the books, moving more and more money into riskier types of investments to try and cover his initial losses. The audit had been triggered when conference checks began to bounce in accounts that supposedly had money. He claimed that none of the lost money had gone to him personally, but there were suspicions about that as well. He was a pillar of the church. He was well respected in the annual conference. His actions led to bills not being paid, pension checks not being issued. It was a mess. Finally the bonding company made good some of the losses but they took his home, car and other assets. The question around the church was how to respond to him. He quit coming but his wife was in the choir. Do we forgive him, do we reject him? What do we do?

I raise this question because the issue of what to do with people of faith who sin has been with us for as long as there has been the church. Laurie Kern brought this passage from Hebrews to my attention asking me to share my thoughts about what is going on and how it applies to today. On the surface it seems to say that there are no second chances. That seems very harsh and not what Jesus would tell us to do. Yet we know that a too lenient, forgive-and-forget attitude would lead to the church standing for nothing. So what do we do with a passage such as this? Let’s try and figure it out together. I have to say that I would have never thought to preach from this part of Hebrews but it does raise interesting questions, so thank you, Laurie.

To begin, we need to understand a little more about faith practices in the early church. Virtually everyone had come to faith through conversion. There was no growing up in the faith. Soon after the time in Acts where people were immediately baptized

upon confessing Jesus as Lord, the practice had become one of asking new converts to spend time in prayer and study about what it meant to live the Christian life. This study time could last as long as a year. During that time they were to think seriously about what they would have to give up to be a Christian. The baptism of repentance was more than being baptized into the faith it was a time to state that you were a changed person. You understood it to mean that the past ways of living were over; you were a new person in Christ.

With this being the faith journey for almost all, you can see why the church would deal so harshly with those who went back to old ways of living. They were breaking a sacred covenant. They knew the implications for their life of being a Christian and had agreed to them before baptism. This is why they were saying it was impossible to be brought back to repentance. Also, the leaders didn't want to get into a cycle of acceptance and then rejection followed by repentance and new acceptance and then back to rejection.

Secondly, a person's falling away had serious implications and consequences for not just them but for the entire community. This was true in two ways. The first still is true, at least a bit, today. If people had gone through all of the process leading up to baptism and were known to their friends and community as being a Christian and then they acted in the old ways, the power of the church to evangelize, that also called upon people to make life changes, would be muted. It would appear that even though the church talked a good game of living in a new way it didn't really mean it.

The implications for the church when one acts contrary to the gospel is still a challenge. It was part of the dialogue that swirled around the congregation I mentioned upon hearing about the treasurer's misdeeds. If they went on as if nothing had happened what would that say to others? If they came down harshly what would it say about the message of love and forgiveness that came from Jesus? See, no easy answers. I also think of another church I served. One of the pillars of that church for many years was a man who ran a car dealership. His business practices were less than ethical. He had been dead for over ten years when I came and yet there were people who would not attend that church because they felt that a church who would let one like

him serve so publicly in leadership was not a church for them. They wanted more accountability.

The other implication that we don't deal with is that by the time of the writing of Hebrews, Christians were beginning to be persecuted. So to have someone become part of your fellowship and then fall away meant the whole group was at risk. To welcome them back, even riskier.

So with all of this, let's see what this passage says to us and, even more importantly, doesn't say to us. First of all this is not about all post baptismal sins. Preachers throughout time have trotted out this passage in Hebrews whenever they have wanted to blast some type of behavior. They would talk about how the individual doing whatever sin they disliked was not producing a useful crop but instead are a wasteland of thorns and thistles. They are in danger of being cursed and burned in the eternal fires of hell. It was used to try and scare them back into what the preacher considered right behavior.

It is never appropriate to use a few limited verses to pound on people and make them fear. It isn't even what the writer of Hebrews meant. Because, as we kept reading, he writes, "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case." It was a word of admonition. He was saying that we all know of some few who have rejected their baptismal confession, but I am not talking about you. If these harsh words of impossibility were to the listener, they are doomed, there is no hope and it is not the message of Christ. Jesus said that with God all things are possible. God can forgive all. It was a message to remind them of the seriousness of their straying. He wanted them to understand that it was a very big and important deal to reject your baptism. There might not be a way back so please don't do it. He never used it to pick a particular sin and then say repentance is impossible and you are lost. Yet this is how this passage has been applied and it has caused some to turn from the church and the words of Jesus because it seems that we, as a church, reject Jesus' calls to love and forgive.

What does it say for us today? I hear in these words first a challenge to hold people accountable. We need to be reminded that saying yes to Jesus means saying no to some of the ways of the world. Being a Christian should mean something as far as how we behave. Now, for each of us this will mean different things related to your own personal struggles. Perhaps you struggle with anger so you need others to hold yourself accountable when you blow your top. But for all of us we know that a Christian should be loving, compassionate, willing to forgive and willing to serve. When we do not see these kinds of actions in a person's life and yet they come to church, Hebrews challenges us to say something. Being reminded of our baptismal vows and how we are missing the mark is always hard to hear.

The writer also reminds us that the person challenged for rejecting their vows could always be us. That is what he was trying to get across. He wanted people to be alert to their own actions. He wanted them to examine their lives and make sure they were fertile ground for the gospel and not producing a thicket of thistles. He reminded them of all that faith had given them, they had tasted the heavenly gift, they had shared the Holy Spirit, they had tasted the goodness of the word of God. Don't let go of these!

This reminder to see the goodness of our faith, to challenge ourselves to live with meaning and purpose is always a good word. Yes there are consequences for failure but usually that is with God and not with us.

So what did that church in Montana do with the treasurer? First the pastor and I met with him and offered him our love and support. The senior pastor also asked him to resign from all leadership positions within the life of the church which he did. The pastor then let him know he was welcome to attend church while he waited for trial. He did not come back to church and when he went to jail he made it clear that he did not want any minister to visit him. His wife ultimately divorced him and remained within the congregation. When he was released he moved away. Was it a perfect response? No. But people within the church saw love, accountability and the results of rejecting the words of Jesus. It was a serious reminder to them all that our deeds have lasting consequences, sometimes irreversible on this side of death. It is this reminder that the writer of Hebrews wanted us to hear as well.