

“Just Provocation”—Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 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 approaching.

Have you ever been provoked?

I have—plenty of times.

Have you ever provoked someone else?

I have—plenty of times.

Now, the dictionary tells us that one definition of the word “provoke” is “to anger, irritate, or annoy.” I suspect that’s the definition we’re most familiar with. Someone says something we find hurtful or offensive, and we react negatively—after all we’ve been provoked! Someone *does* something we find hurtful or offensive, and we react negatively—after all, we’ve been provoked! I’ve told you before that one of my favorite television series of all time is *M*A*S*H*, a comedy about the personnel of a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital during the Korean War. In one of my favorite episodes, entitled “Souvenirs,” the head nurse, Major Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan, asks her former lover, Major Frank Burns, to return a family heirloom she had given him. He denies he has it—so, at night, Margaret starts rummaging through Frank’s belongings to find it. Thinking the person in his tent is a thief, he jumps on her, they wrestle, and she slugs him. Later on, in the Officers Club, after a few drinks, Margaret punches a helicopter pilot who’s been selling war souvenirs, many of which had been collected by Korean children who were sometimes injured. The next morning Colonel Potter, the commanding officer, tries to talk to Major Houlihan about settling matters without resorting to violence. Margaret replies that, in both instances, she was justifiably provoked, and that she would do the same thing again in similar circumstances.

That kind of sums up our response to what we see as “provocation,” doesn’t it? When “provoked,” we’ll respond negatively, and we justify ourselves by saying, “Well, I was provoked!”

But then this Letter to the Hebrews tells us that we in the church are *supposed* to provoke one another—but not in the way we’re used to! To be sure, people in the church can provoke us to react negatively—after all, the Church is a

human institution, which doesn't make it right; it's wrong for people to provoke us, but it's also wrong for us to react negatively, and, in my moral calculus, two wrongs don't make a right. Mr. Webster reminds us that there's another, more positive definition of "provoke," and that is "to excite to some action or feeling." And I'm sure that's what the writer of Hebrews means when he says, "Let us consider how to *provoke* one another to love and good deeds . . . encouraging one another . . ." Part of our business as the Church is to excite one another into loving Jesus and each other more and to show that love through our good works. That's just provocation!

But how? How are we going to provoke one another to love and good deeds? How are we going to encourage—that is, "put courage into"—one another? Let me offer a few suggestions.

First, let me suggest that we provoke one another to love and good works by acting in loving ways toward others and undertaking good works ourselves, keeping in mind our Second General Rule: "Do all the good you can."

The ongoing clean-up following the devastation of Hurricane Michael serves as an example to us of what it means to act in loving ways and undertaking good works. In these days and weeks following the hurricane, we've seen neighbors responding to the needs of their neighbors; we've seen groups from outside of our county coming in to help with cleaning up and beginning the rebuilding process; and we've seen supplies roll in from other parts of our state and from outside Georgia to help us in the midst of this disaster. I personally have been blessed to see our United Methodist "Connection" at work as we received supplies from a United Methodist church in Chickamauga, Georgia, and from two churches in Tallahassee, supplies that we personally didn't need but that we could pass on to others. I've been blessed by the groups beyond our Annual Conference who have come in to help. And I've been blessed by our being able to help our Hispanic sisters and brothers as they had to abandon the mobile homes in which many of them live to shelter in La Casa de Vida y Paz, truly "The House of Life and Peace."

The clean-up and rebuilding process will go on for months if not years, so there will continue to be opportunities in that regard for some time to come. But here's the question that continues to nag at me: What are we going to do about the needs and concerns that were at hand before the hurricane and that will still be there when we get back to "normal," whatever that is? Jesus reminds us that if we do good just to those who can do good to us, we haven't really done anything. It's when we act in loving ways and do the good works that touch the lives of those who can offer us only a word of thanks and blessing, or who might not bless us or thank us at all, that we've embraced doing all the good we can to people's "souls

and bodies,” as Wesley would urge us. We can provoke one another to love and good works by acting in loving ways and doing the works that touch people’s lives.

Then, we can provoke one another to love and good works by inviting people to join us in these services, these ministries we undertake. And when I say “invite,” I mean asking others *personally* to join in ministry. Too often we send out these “cattle calls” for people to join in ministry, and, far too often, we get no response at all. (I’m as guilty of this as anyone.) Sometimes it’s because people don’t understand what we’re asking of them, and they’re too afraid or too embarrassed to ask for some clarification. And sometimes it’s because, as the old saying goes, “*Everybody* thought *somebody* was going to do it, so *nobody* did it.”

But if some ministry, some service, is a blessing to us, wouldn’t we want others to share in that blessing? Now, I’ll grant you that someone might answer the invitation positively, get involved, and then find that he or she is just not suited for that service—it doesn’t fall within the realm of his or her spiritual gifts, talents, or interests. So we graciously allow him or her to move on to something else.

But what if we invite someone who gets involved and finds that ministry, that service, to be a real blessing to him or her while he or she is a blessing to others? We’ve then truly provoked someone to love and good works. And what if that person invites others to join in, and they, too, become excited about that ministry? Then we’ve provoked others to love and good works, just as the writer of Hebrews urges us to do.

So we provoke one another to love and good works by taking them up ourselves; we provoke one another to love and good works by inviting others to join us in these ministries; and we provoke one another to love and good works by encouraging one another in them, by expressing gratitude and appreciation for what others are doing in service to God by service to others.

Victor Hugo once said, “We live on affirmation more than bread.” Praise reminds us that we are important; it’s nourishment for a healthy self-esteem. Of course, we don’t serve Jesus and others to earn praise for what we do—but when someone says, “Thank you,” or “You did a good job,” it touches something within it that lets us know we’re not taken for granted. We’re appreciated; and we’re moved to try a little harder and do an even better job next time. As a pastor, I’ve always tried to express my appreciation for those who serve—I’m not as consistent as I like to be with it, but I am grateful. Throughout my ministry, I’ve run into people who say, “You don’t have to thank me”—but I do, because I want them to know they are appreciated. I was surprised in one appointment I served at the response I received as I made it a point to express my gratitude for the service people would render. “Preacher,” they would say, “no one’s ever done this for us before!” That seemed a little strange to me—it just seemed natural to me that any pastor would express his gratitude for the people who served. But to these folks, it

was a novel and wonderful thing. Yet it seemed to me that those people tried a little harder and did a little better, because someone appreciated them.

Somebody said, “A word of encouragement will go miles further than a handful of negative warnings.” When we express our thanks and offer our encouragement, people will go a little further, try a little harder, and do a little better. We can provoke one another to love and good works as we encourage one another with words of affirmation and gratitude.

Now, we always have to keep in mind that we act in loving ways and do good works, not to get God to love us—I believe that God already loves us as much as he’s going to—but as a *response* to the love that God the Father has shown us in Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let’s never forget that!

So I hope I’ve provoked you this morning to think about how you might provoke someone else to love and good works. You see, it’s not that difficult to provoke one another to love and good deeds, if we’ve got the heart for it—that is, the heart that’s been transformed by Jesus; the heart that has been washed clean by the blood of Jesus shed for you and for me; the heart that’s been purged of our sinful nature and the selfishness, the self-centeredness that is the root of our sin. When our hearts, our minds, our very lives have been transformed by Jesus, we’re new creatures, and we look at others in a new way. No longer do we see them as people to be dominated or controlled—now they’re sisters and brothers, children of the heavenly Father, just like us, and fellow-pilgrims upon the pathway who need a hand, just like we do, as we seek to serve Jesus and his Church in this life. Through the Holy Spirit we’re taught to put the needs of others before our own, and through that same Holy Spirit we’re taught to be sensitive and responsive to those needs. When Jesus has really transformed our lives—when Jesus has really changed our lives—it’s easy to provoke others: to provoke them, that is, to love and good works. It’s easy to encourage them, because the love of God is in our hearts and we want to make that real to others.

So let’s offer just provocation to others. No, let’s not anger, irritate, or annoy them. Rather, let’s excite one another and encourage one another to love and good works—for as we do so we help each other to become more and more what God would have us be. And there’s no better reason for provoking someone than that! Thanks be to God!