

“The Preacher”

I am going to ask you to open your minds and unclutter your hearts and lend me your imaginations for a few moments, if you will.

I am The Preacher. Now, I can see you looking at me in my robe, behind the pulpit and thinking, “Well that’s a little obvious.” But I don’t mean That Preacher. I mean THE Preacher. Yes, I am the unknown writer of the letter to the Hebrews. Numerous scholars and theologians have speculated about my identity for centuries. Finally, one of your contemporaries, I believe his name is Tom Long, decided to name me “The Preacher”. Clever man. Well, now you know.

Of course, at the turn of the century – I mean from the 2nd to the 3rd century – when I first wrote the letter, I had to disguise my identity because I am a woman. In those days, although our Roman culture DID allow women to read and write, it was only if your father or other men in your household permitted it. And it was only the basics because once a young girl in my day reached the age of 12, she was considered of age to be married and her need to learn stopped.

There were a few women then who owned businesses. Lamp makers, hairdressers, midwives and the like. That was permitted by the end of the 1st century, but only if she didn’t have a husband. Women without husbands could even own and dispose of property, although it was rare. We couldn’t vote or hold any positions of power, but that CERTAINLY does not mean we didn’t have influence. Mostly over the men in our lives! I will let you decide which is more important – power or influence? Quite a riddle, don’t you think?

Of course, in public we had to play the traditional role. Subservient, obedient. Only interested in weaving and recipes. So I knew if I wanted my letter to have any influence at all, it had to be written AS IF it were penned by a man. I grew up in a fairly wealthy household and

one of men with open minds. My father and his father before him had been followers of The Way, who worshiped the risen Christ. Since Jesus had female disciples and treated women with the same respect as he did men, they have always permitted the women in the family to take part in discussions about faith and politics. Still, for their safety, we kept it under wraps. Ultimately, all members of The Way became known as Christians.

After my marriage, I was blessed to have servants who cleaned the house and watched after my children and did all of the shopping and cooking. And I became rather bored with life. Every day, when my husband came in from dealing with our family affairs, I was hungry for news of what was really happening in our world. And when he told me about a group of worn out Christians, weary and discouraged from trying to keep the faith in such difficult circumstances, my heart just went out to them.

Before I knew it, I found myself writing down phrases that I thought would encourage people who faced such hardships. I knew there had to be many – not just the ones that my husband had encountered. I can only say it was the Holy Spirit that gave me the idea to write to them. But I never dreamed anything would become of it! That it would actually be sent to people who were my brothers and sisters in Christ and READ during worship. Then I remembered that Mary, the mother of our Lord, when she heard that she would bear the Son of Man said, “Nothing is impossible with God!” That will encourage anyone in any day!

So God empowered me to write in a way that SOUNDED like a man, and no one was the wiser. For example, when I closed this letter to my struggling fellow Christians, I wanted to emphasize to them not to forget everything that we have been given through Jesus’ sacrifice. And that our gratefulness for such grace leads to certain behavior.

The first thing I needed to remind them of is our duty to show hospitality. So at first I wrote, “We must show hospitality because Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all time, the heir of all things is the great high priest who offered the perfect and lasting sacrifice and now sits in majesty at the right hand of God, therefore polish the silver and set the table for company.”

But once I had written it, I knew it was too wordy – too flowery – too overdone! A man would never write like that! So, I prayed for the Spirit to help me say it the way my Grandfather would have. He was always a man of few words. And I thought of the story of Abraham and Sarah serving dinner to the three foreigners who turned out to be messengers from God. That led me to say instead, “Do not neglect to show hospitality, for you may be entertaining angels unaware.” Much better! Straight to the point with no talk of silver or linens!

Did you know that because of what happened to Abraham and Sarah, when the church in my day got together for a meal, we always set an extra place. After all, you never know when God will send ANOTHER messenger. There was even a law by the time that my daughter was grown that instructed the bishops to continue this practice. To the point that, if a stranger showed up and no extra place was set, the bishop was to offer his own chair and eat his meal on the floor!

Yes, all communities of faith need to be welcoming and friendly to everyone who comes their way. To show the same loving spirit to God’s children that God show to us. This leads to another thought that I wanted to pass on the Hebrews. As Christians, it is important for us not to be judgmental about others. It’s just not our job – it’s Gods. After all, God knows everything that a person has been through, what is in each of our hearts, and we do not.

So I wanted to remind them to think about the circumstances that every person they meet is dealing with before they make a decision about them. All this boils down to one word.

Empathy. I told them that, rather getting discourage about their own lives, the persecution they face as Christians, they might consider these challenges as possibilities or opportunities.

Again, to be sure that I sounded more like a man, I had previously written about doctrine and theology. But before I closed I wanted to be sure that the Hebrews understood the PRACTICAL nature of living our theology, so I gave them some specific examples.

Frist, I told them to remember prisoners. After all, were we all not prisoners at one time or another? Slaves in Egypt. Living in Exile in Babylon. Ruled by the pompous Romans. And I am sure you have known your OWN prisons. Have you not at some time been a slave to someone else's thought, opinions, expectations or actions? Have you ever held on to a resentment because your family favored the other child or didn't distribute wealth evenly? Have you ever had a dream you held on to tightly but could not pursue because your age, gender, education, or status held you back? Have you never lived with deep grief or doubts? Yes, I suspect we have all been in prison.

But rather than think about all the problems of prisoners or their own imprisonment, I wanted the Hebrews to look at it with a different twist. And you too! Perhaps you can think of the people that reached out to you in times when you felt imprisoned – when someone spoke a word of truth just when you needed to hear it. People that helped you trust again or gave you the courage to stand up for yourself or spoke *for* you when you could not do it on your own. People who prayed for you while you were grieving or doubting. THOSE were the angels that God sent into your life, into your prison, to rescue you. Why not think about ways to pay that forward, as I believe you say here in the 21st Century. It will take your mind off of your own troubles!

Now, when I reread the next words in my letter about sex and marriage and money, I was afraid some people would think that I had gone from preaching to meddling. But I wanted the

tired Christians to stay away from things that are grounded in hate – infidelity, greed, judgment, torture. We all know that when we are worn out or discouraged or our hopes have been compromised in any way, we are more apt to make a bad decision. Remember that scoundrel King David. As brave and accomplished as he was, he often chose poorly when he was at his wit's end, as we all do! Yet in wisdom he wrote, "With the Lord on my side I do not fear!" THAT's what we need to remember when temptation comes our way.

In fact, here in the letter, I really wanted to quote our brother, The Apostle Paul, when he wrote to the church at Philippi: "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

However, I SURELY didn't want anyone to think Paul himself had written my letter! He has enough to say in your writings! But his words are wise, and he did suffer so for our Lord. Honestly, it is hard not to admire him. Even with some of his questionable sayings about women in church!

I just want everyone to remember what our Lord has taught us and what he has DONE for us. Coming to earth and living among us. When he could have stayed in the beauty of Heaven. How much God must love you and me to make a personal visit instead of just sending angels like he did to Abraham and Sarah.

What a beautiful sacrifice – after all, since God is all-knowing and ever-present God understands all of life. He didn't need to come to earth to experience it. But in Jesus, God **SHOWED** us that He knows in a way that we will always remember. And how clever God was to come in disguise! If God had come in all of his glory, we would have been too afraid to

approach him! So he came as the most vulnerable among us – a mere baby of poor earthly parents. Of course, Jesus knew almost immediately what a mess we had made of things here. Even God's priests were not all they should be.

That's when Jesus became our High Priest. I am pretty sure that point is clear in my letter. That Jesus goes straight to God with our needs, our joys, our concerns. Well, it almost breaks my heart to think of all the people who may not know about God's love and God's forgiving ways. Part of the reason I wrote to the Hebrews was to take their focus off of their own roadblocks and turn their thinking outward – to the rest of the Kingdom.

Therefore, I ended with the reminder that ONLY God knows our hearts. And God is literally everywhere, helping us stay on the right path. Not just for our own sake but for others who wonder what it looks like to belong to God. After all, if we don't show them, how will they ever know?

I also wanted the Hebrews to remember that they can only spread the Good News when they show others what discipleship means. Therefore, if your faith is firmly rooted in the knowledge of God's grace, then none of the things I have spoken about in this letter should offend you.

So as I leave you today, remember the sacrifice that Jesus made to become our High Priest. Remember that God gives the gift of faith to people we might never think of sharing it with, not just those who look and act and think like we do. Every person we meet is made in God's image.

The bottom line is this, if we can just get the big picture right, the truth that Jesus came to save us from sin, then all of the other things – hospitality, empathy, imitating Jesus's

righteousness, sharing the Good News will just fall into place for us! And we too will have the conviction of things not seen.

Now I have one favor to ask before I leave you. I have chosen to reveal my identity to **you** because I have heard that this community of faith is quite interested in learning the truth. But remember, the truth can be not only hard to swallow. It can even be dangerous where I come from. It might serve you best just to say that you have heard from The Preacher! Shalom!

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Nazareth Presbyterian, Aug. 25, 2019

With thanks to Tom Long for his commentary and for naming The Preacher,
Interpretation: Hebrews; John Knox Press, 1997.