

SACRED HOSPITALITY

SHERARD EDINGTON

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Every year, the Boy Scouts of Wilson County put on an event called the Good Scout Luncheon. It's primarily a fundraiser. And that's fine. At this lunch, an individual who has made a significant contribution to scouting in Wilson County is given the Good Scout award. There are recipients of this award sitting in this room.

Also at the lunch, there is normally a speaker. Last year, the speaker was a man named John Bradley. He is a Lebanon native. He now lives in Nashville. He briefly spoke about growing up in Lebanon. Our church got a shout-out when he mentioned how his scout troop met at the Presbyterian Church. After the lunch, I did go up and introduce myself as pastor. He shared a few memories about the troop and the church.

But the reason he was there that day was to talk about the foundation that he and his wife created—the Lamia Afghan Foundation. You see, John Bradley is Lt. Gen. John Bradley (retired) with the US Air Force. Gen. Bradley never served in Afghanistan, but he did make five official visits there.

He returned from one trip in 2006 and told his wife about seeing fellow soldiers using their off-duty time to give clothing, toys, and school supplies to the Afghan women and children who visited Bagram Air Base coming there for medical care.

In response, Jan Bradley collected more than 40,000 pounds of blankets, clothing, shoes, boots, and school supplies for her husband to take with him on another trip the next year. While handing out the donations in an Afghan village, the general came face-to-face with 9-year-old Lamia, who asked him for boots like his to help her through the cold winter. A year later, the Bradleys delivered boots and more to her family, and the Lamia Afghan Foundation was born. Over the years, they have delivered millions of pounds of goods to Afghanistan. They have also provided prosthetics for children injured in war.

Another focus of the foundation is education, especially for girls. In that country's conservative culture, educating girls has never been a priority. Under Taliban rule, girls' education is forbidden. The Bradleys have built seven schools for girls in Afghanistan. The seventh one was designed to accommodate 1,100 girls. Sadly, it has not yet opened.

I heard Gen. Bradley speak in April. In August, the US pulled its troops out of Afghanistan. We all watched in horror as the nation fell to the Taliban almost overnight. No one expected it to fall that quickly. But it did. We watched as tens of

thousands of Afghans converged at the airport desperate to escape the approaching Taliban.

And then, in December, after the August fall of Afghanistan, that my wife and daughter and I became acquainted with a young woman who had been among those thousands at the Kabul airport. Miraculously, all alone, she got out. She made her way onto a US military plane and was taken to Qatar where she stayed for several days. From there, she was flown to Germany for a week and then to Washington DC. From DC, she was taken to Indiana where she lived for three months in a refugee camp on a military base. Although she requested to be sent to Virginia where she had a cousin, there was a bureaucratic foul-up and she was sent to Nashville where she was placed in a dreary extended-stay hotel near the airport with no money for food. She had been there a month when we learned about her situation, and with two other families we started helping her get food and other necessities. We brought her to our home for Christmas. She went to Virginia for two months but the refugee agencies in that area were overwhelmed that she could not get any assistance. In March, we invited her to return to Tennessee and stay with us until she could get on her feet.

I'm going to call this young woman Susan. That, of course, is not her name. However, since this sermon will be posted to the internet, I think it best not to use her name. I'm not being overly dramatic. The Taliban is actively searching for her. They have visited the homes of her family and neighbors seeking her whereabouts. I have no doubt that if she were to return to Afghanistan that they would kill her.

A year ago, with our daughter having just graduated from college and taken a job and moved out of the house, if you had told me that we would be taking another young woman into our care, I would have told you that you were crazy. We were proud empty-nesters. We had dogs.

But when we got to know Susan, we knew what we had to do. We knew it was the right thing to do. It was also an expression of our faith.

And I know on my part, that a seed had been planted when I heard John Bradley talk about the work that he and his wife were doing. When I read up on their foundation, I discovered that the Bradleys themselves were acting out of a response to their own Christian beliefs.

Susan is a bright, resourceful young woman with a strong, independent spirit. But taking her in wasn't easy. The first months were rough. We struggled to be sensitive to the extraordinary trauma that she had endured. She, herself, was trying to find her way in this new land while still holding on to her Afghan identity. She is a devout Muslim and Ramadan started just two weeks after she moved in with us. Ramadan means that she was fasting from sunup to sundown—no food or drink of any kind during the day for a month. Trust me when I tell you that this

was stressful for us. My wife worried constantly for her. We were also finding out what foods were acceptable in her faith. What foods she liked to eat. Our American Muslim friends were extraordinarily helpful and supportive at this point.

I am also thankful to the folk at Catholic Charities. They are the refugee agency handling Susan's case and helping her get settled. They have been wonderful and are truly living out the ministry of Christ in all that they do.

As I said, Courtney and I were guided by our faith in the decision to take Susan into our home. Throughout the Old and New Testament, people of faith are called to care for those in need—the widow, the orphan, the alien, the stranger, the imprisoned, the sick, the outcast, and more. One place we find this expressed so clearly is in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Our scripture reading for today is from this book. Honestly, we don't know a lot about Hebrews. Tradition tells us that it was written by the Apostle Paul. But that is unlikely. We simply do not have a name for its author. As the early Christian theologian and scholar Origen of Alexandria said about the authorship of Hebrews, "Only God knows."

We also don't know the church that is being addressed although the best guess is that the congregation was located in Rome. The reason for the name Hebrews is that the members of this congregation appear to be Jewish converts to Christianity. That would make them the "Hebrew" congregation.

The purpose of this book was to address a certain malaise within this "Hebrew" congregation. Many of the members had grown disaffected with Christ and were drifting away from the church. From the clues scattered through the book, it appears that the group had been a rather successful new mission startup. In the early days, they had received the gospel message with excitement, and it was clear that the work of the Holy Spirit was with them (2:3-4). Over time, there were some obstacles and setbacks, until finally, apathy set in and some drifted away. The congregation began in the glorious, excited promise of Christ, but when life in the Christian community seemed to fall short of their expectations, then the church suffered and withered.

It is this situation that the writer of Hebrews addresses—the situation that Christ had fallen short of the people's expectations. The author of Hebrews makes it clear that it is not Jesus who has fallen short; it is the people's understanding of Jesus that has fallen short. Jesus had been undersold to the people. The people had not been offered the full measure of their Christ. The Jesus they had been given was ultimately trifling and un-nourishing. Because of this, their interest in him rapidly waned.

Our reading for today comes from the thirteenth and final chapter of this book. After many eloquent arguments for Christ, the author offers us something different here—exhortations. After telling us what the church should believe, he flat out tells them how they are supposed to live if they are to call themselves a church of Jesus Christ.

So, in our reading from chapter 13, he offers a list of exhortations—commands on how to embody being a church. One scholar describes these as “a template for ethics, a picture of how this community might live ...” These are not commands for individuals, they are intended for the congregation as a whole. They are to be used by the congregation to build up the community.

The first of these commands says *Let mutual love continue*. This is the foundation for the rest of the commands. By mutual love, he means among the community of faith. Love one another.

But love also has an external dimension. As we demonstrate our love for our sisters and brothers in Christ, we are also commanded *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers*. The benefit of showing hospitality is that we may *entertain angels without even knowing it*. The angels reference is, of course, a call-back to the story of Abraham who showed hospitality one day to three men who turned out to be messengers from God. I see this every day in the way that Courtney and I have been challenged and blessed by the presence of Susan in our home.

The second command that we find in Hebrews is to *remember those in prison, as if we were in prison with those who are being tortured and being tortured ourselves*. For Courtney and I, it has been necessary to show empathy to Susan by striving to understand her situation. Although Susan is not in any literal prison, she does find herself deprived of her old life and forced to live in a place she did not chose. Coming to the US was not on her list of things to do. Until August, she had a fulfilling life in Afghanistan with family and friends and a career. And, although not tortured, as she was trying to get to the Kabul airport, she was captured and beaten by the Taliban. Those memories haunt her today.

Another command in Hebrews tells the people to *Remember their leaders*. By leaders, he means *those who spoke the word of God to you*. And then the writer adds, *Imitate their faith*. You might assume that he is talking about their religious leaders. But I think it can be broader than that. For me, one leader was John Bradley who spoke of his work of faith. Those words inspired me. And when the time came, I chose to imitate his faith.

Faith does not waiver. The writer reminds us that *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*. And so, the writer tells his people, *Let us, through Christ, continually confess God's name*. Confessing God's name is, as we've discussed the past couple of weeks, worship. When we confess God's name, we

worship. When we live with these commands in our lives, we worship. When we show love and compassion, we worship. Our lives should be lives of worship. As we read in Hebrews, *Do not neglect to do good and share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.* Do good, share, please God. That is our command.

In closing, I mentioned Susan to you earlier this year. I don't want to sound like I'm bragging about what we've done. Many of you, I know, have over the years taken people into your homes. I could talk for hours about our experience with this remarkable young woman. One day, when her English is good enough, I hope you will hear her story from her. But I tell you about Susan now in the hopes that it will inspire you as I was inspired by John Bradley.

Finally, I am pleased report that this week, Susan started college. She enrolled down the street at Cumberland in their nursing program. She was in college in Kabul but we decided that she needed to start over and earn an American degree. She jokes that she feels like a grandmother in classes filled with 18-year-olds. Now, exactly a year after fleeing her country, I think we've got her on a path for a new life. And I'm proud of that. I feel like we've done good.