

### One Final Checklist

How many of you are list-makers? There are of course a number of good reasons or occasions on which to make lists. Sometimes it simply helps us feel more organized when life feels overwhelming. Many of us makes lists of things we want or need to remember, for example when we go to the grocery store. Or a weekly to-do list of tasks or goals.

This morning's passage from the book of Hebrews comes at the very end of the letter, and it reads like one final summary or list of the most important things he wants his recipients to remember—a checklist, even, for them to periodically review as a way of evaluating how they are doing.

The editors of the NRSV have given these verses a helpful caption, namely "*Service Well-Pleasing to God.*" As if, in light of everything he has said in the first twelve chapters, here then is how they are to live, what they need to remember. Let's see how his checklist applies to us, and in the process, see how we're doing in our desire to live lives that are pleasing to God.

The **first** item on the list is "*Let mutual love continue.*" The Greek word for mutual love is *Philadelphia*, (yes, like the city), and the word literally means "brotherly love" (in the case of the city in Pennsylvania, it's "the city of brotherly love." And as expected, different versions of the Bible give us some different translations. Alongside the NRSV's "Let mutual love continue," the *KJV* gives us "*Let brotherly love continue.*" The *NIV* has "*Keep on loving each other as brothers.*" The "new" *NIV* has "*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters,*" bringing out the absolute all-inclusiveness of the phrase "brotherly love."

In other words, we here in this church, everyone who is here today, are brothers and sisters to one another. We are family. And we are to love each other like family. Which means . . . what? Sharing with one another. Caring for one another. Checking in with one another. This is of course why we here at First Mennonite have a "Care Committee." It has four members, and their job is to make sure mutual love or brotherly love is happening. But that doesn't mean it's only their job. Mutual love is all of our jobs. So how are we doing?

The verb in this verse, here translated as the imperative, "*let continue,*" implies that it was already happening, just as it is already happening here, and part of what the writer wanted to say is, "good job." But he also wanted to remind them of its "top-of-the-list" importance. As if to say, here is where we start, but don't just check the box and move on. You can always do more. Maybe we should all make our own lists of the brothers and sisters we're going to try to check in with each week. We could use the directory, to make sure we don't leave anyone out. Sure, that probably seems overwhelming. But we don't have to have a long conversation with each person. We could simply send them a text or e-mail, asking them just a few questions, like "How are you doing? How is your job going? How is your family?" You might make it your goal to get through everyone on your list, say, in two or three months. However you are doing it, whatever works, whatever mutual love or "loving one another as brothers and sisters" looks like, just make sure you are doing it.

The **second** item on the writer's "final checklist" is, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.*" The importance of hospitality is mentioned or implied over and over again in the Bible. This is why here at First Mennonite we have a "Hospitality Committee." But what does it mean? My dictionary's definition for that precise term wasn't very helpful: "*hospitality:*

*hospitable treatment, reception or disposition.*” But here’s what it says for “*hospitable: given to generous and cordial reception of guests; offering a pleasant or sustaining environment.*”

Keywords in this definition are: Generous; Cordial; Pleasant; Sustaining. And of course, Guests. Other words that come to mind are: “invite; greet; make comfortable; and of course, serve food. Food? We’re good at food! This morning before Sunday School we had a lovely breakfast of eggs, English muffins, and fruit. We always rise to the occasion when there is need for a funeral luncheon or light supper. And that’s a wonderful gesture! We’re wonderful at hospitality!

Except . . .this verse says “*hospitality . . . to strangers.*” That’s a lot more difficult. For starters, we might not know everyone that comes through the line at a funeral meal. And so it’s especially important to greet those we don’t know, to welcome them, to help them feel comfortable and at home.

But speaking of home, how many of us would invite a stranger—someone we don’t know—into our own homes? Very few of us, I would guess. From childhood on we’re fed and filled with this idea of “stranger danger.” And sure, there’s some validity to that. We live in a dangerous world. But somehow I don’t think that the writer of Hebrews had that caveat or excuse or warning in mind.

In fact, in the next phrase he gives us a very good reason, and very good motive, for showing hospitality to strangers. “*For by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*”

I remember when I was little, my dad would often stop to pick up hitchhikers (or other people needing help), and sometimes even bring them home for a bite to eat. He would always say afterward, “you never know when it might be Jesus.” It may have been in part because my dad had done his share of hitchhiking when he was a young man, and so knew what it was like to be passed by, or on the other hand, to have someone stop, offer him a ride, maybe even a sandwich. But I’m pretty sure he had this verse in Hebrews in mind as well.

I’m not saying we should go out and drive around town until we find a stranger to invite to our church or our homes. But on the other hand, why not? Jesus himself told a parable in which a king’s slaves were told to go out into the streets and invite “everyone you find” to the wedding banquet for the king’s son. So at the very least, I’d say that showing hospitality to strangers is at least something we should talk about as a church.

**Third** on the list, the writer tells his readers to “*remember those who are in prison as though you were in prison with them.*” How many of us have ever so much as been in a prison or a jail? Let me rephrase that: how many of you have ever been in a prison or jail to visit someone? There is something profoundly vulnerable about people who are incarcerated, “locked up.” Sure, they broke a law of some kind. Sure, they might be cocky or crusty or tough on the outside. But what’s on the inside? What all deep inside them is incarcerated or locked up, desperate to get out, except no one seems to have a key? Why do you think Jesus said in Matthew 25:36ff. “I was in prison and you visited me?” And then go on to say, “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are the members of my family, you did it to me.’” I don’t think Jesus said this just as an illustration in a parable, or as one feel-good option among many to choose from. I think Jesus meant it. And guess what, two thousand years later we still have people in prison. Lots of them. 2.1 million of them in the U.S. alone. And any one of those might be Jesus. So yes, we need to get up and go out and find for ourselves opportunities to visit someone in prison. If you need help, you might sign up to volunteer in the M-2 Program in Newton. 316-283-2038.

The writer goes on to add we should also remember “*those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.*” We might argue that we don’t know anyone who is literally being tortured, that this isn’t done in civilized countries such as ours. And while this may technically be true, I don’t think we need to look any farther than our prisons and jails to find people who are being tortured figuratively, whether it is by a justice system that demonizes criminals, until they believe they are animals rather than people; or by their own inner demons, that just maybe could be diagnosed and then treated, medically and therapeutically, if we would just take the time to do so. But it all starts with simply visiting them.

**Fourth** (and this will be it for today) the writer completely shifts gears here and says, “*Let marriage be held in honor by all.*” Jesus held marriage in high regard. It is surely one of the most sacred commitments we make in our lifetimes, one of the most foundational building blocks of the “covenant community” God invites every single one of us to. To be sure, we are not all called or blessed with the opportunity to become married to another person during our lifetimes. But surely we are all called to make important commitments to others in our lives, commitments that are to be held in honor.

So for those of us today who are married, how are we doing? Do we honor our marriage like it is one of the most important decisions and commitments in our lives? Do we honor that commitment, even when the marriage relationship itself might be in trouble, or at least in need of help? Do we seek the help we need when we need it? Do we set aside time to spend just with our spouse, as an act that is pleasing to God, no less pleasing than worship?

Do we honor *the marriage bed*, as one of the key components of that commitment? Do we reserve our sharing of sexual intimacy and other kinds of intimacy to the one person to whom we are committed in marriage?

And for those of us who aren’t married, are we committed to others in our lives most important to us? How do we demonstrate that commitment?

As I said, that will have to be it for today. Let’s review what we’ve covered thus far. Let mutual love continue [check]; do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers [check]; remember those who are in prison [check]; let marriage be held in honor by all [check]. Next Sunday, we will pick up the writer’s “One Final Checklist” at verse 5, and the love of money. As we will see, that item will apply to everybody!

Amen.