

**"PROVOKING ONE ANOTHER?"**

Hebrews 10:19-25

When you hear the word "provoke" what comes to mind? I have to be honest that when I hear that word without any more information given I think of the worst- I think of causing a person to become angry, irritated, annoyed. I guess the words of Ephesians 6:4 seem to, first, come to my mind which elicits the more negative connotation because I know I have failed more times than I care to remember, for the Apostle Paul says in this passage, "And fathers, do not [and here is our word] provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

And yet when you go to *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* it not only has the definition that I have just described but it says, "to call forth: evoke; to stir up purposely: induce; to provide the needed stimulus for." So it does not always have to be seen in a negative light, it would depend on the purpose and frame of mind of the person or persons who are doing the provoking. It can, in fact, be a positive thing.

Our passage from Hebrews uses the word “provoke” in a positive light. And what this “provoking” focuses on is worship; worship. As we begin summer with kids and teachers getting out of school and some people, if they are fortunate enough to do so, taking day trips or vacations or people maybe having the mental conversation with themselves, “you know, I put in a hard week at work or I worked hard yesterday (Saturday) around the yard or house so I think I’ll be good to myself and just sleep in on Sunday.” And so I want to begin the summer and “provoke” us all, in a good way, as it says in verses 24-25, “to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”

Let me ask you a question- have you been to any good parties lately? In this season of graduation parties and weddings, having just celebrated a national holiday last weekend with Memorial Day, when was the last time you attended a really good party?

Probably the most extravagant party my wife Margaret and I attended was several years ago when we were invited to the wedding of a young man who was in the first church I served in Titusville, PA. His name is Jack. We were in Butler, PA at the time when the invitation came our way. Jack had met up with a positively wonderful young Christian woman from Pittsburgh and we were invited to attend the wedding. The reception was a memorable occasion and was held at the historic Pennsylvanian Union Train Station. The station features a masonry exterior, marble floors, ornate terra cotta and plaster work, a central atrium covered by a large skylight and a spectacular entry rotunda.

Well, Jack's wedding reception was held on the first floor of this grand building and the elegant decorations and the meal and the reception was spectacular. We were ever so glad we went to the wedding to see our young friend's marriage; we were ever so glad to attend their reception, for it was a party I will never forget.

And then there was the “wake” at my parents’ house after my Grandmother’s funeral. It really was a party. The family and friends ate, told stories about Grandma and the family, gathered around the piano and sang some of the old songs, and basically celebrated her 83 years of life. My wife, Margaret, still talks about that party.

It as if the writer of Hebrews has prepared the great hall and pulled out the finest decorations and the invitations have gone out inviting people to come to the party because there is something to celebrate. “But what?” you might ask.

The previous chapters of Hebrews have been lifting up Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who is our high priest, the great high priest, the mediator of the new covenant that God had established, who was and is the ultimate sacrifice for us. And so the writer of Hebrews, after explaining all of this and more about Jesus is saying to you and to me, he is saying to the world, “Let’s come to worship!”

For it is because of the high priestly ministry of Jesus that it is now possible to genuinely worship God and we do not have to just sit in the pew and go through the motions. For now we can have access to the Holy Place and we can come into communion with the wonderful, merciful God of all the Ages.

Think of it this way. Prior to Jesus, in the time of the former covenant, the high priest in Judaism was the only one who could enter the Temple, part the curtain and enter the section known as the "Holy of Holies." But now, the great high priest, Jesus Christ, as a result of His death, has opened up a "new and living way" into the true sanctuary and He calls us to come in with Him. That is what the writer of Hebrews is saying in Hebrews 10:19-20 when he writes, "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 so we are encouraged, we are invited to come in, to encounter Jesus and worship. But this worship is not just any worship and it is not to be done with any old

state of mind. And so verse 22 is truly a gem of a verse for it tells us 4 things about the condition we should seek to be in as we gather together.

First, **we should have a true heart.** This points back to a passage from the Old Testament where we read in Jeremiah 31:33 where God says to His people, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Friends, because of the new covenant through Jesus Christ we are invited to come in to the sanctuary and worship and it needs to begin with a heart that is changed, a heart that has been broken and open to Christ. And we can be what we were created to be, truly human, changed from the inside out all because it begins with the heart and works outward into our attitudes, into our thinking, into our personalities, into our behavior and on and on.

Second, **we need to have full assurance of faith.** Faith is something that must be worked at. You cannot just wake up one morning and think that you can have a kind of mature faith that will never bend or

break or falter. No, it is not even something that you can do all by yourself.

Faith is hard work, faith is a process that needs to be exercised just like a person needs to exercise their own body to keep it tone, to keep it fit, to keep it healthy. The letter to the Hebrews is all about Jesus and who we are all because of who He is and what He has done for us. And so if we logically and spiritually think about this, and if we hold tightly to this, we will have the full assurance of faith that verse 22 is speaking about.

Third, building on the first two points and going further, **we need to have our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience.** Friends, look with me at Hebrews 9:13-14 where we read, "For if the blood of goats and bulls, with sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified [this was under the old covenant], how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from the dead works to worship the living God!" This is the new covenant that Christ has

established. Here is reality- There is probably not a person in this sanctuary today who doesn't have something that is lying heavy on their heart- maybe it is a relationship that is wounded, maybe it something you have done or not done, said or not said, something you wish you could verbally or physically take back but cannot. Maybe it is something from the past that bothers and haunts you and if anyone else knew it, it would devastate you. That is why so many Sundays in the Morning Prayer I mention that we are ALL broken people. So here is the good news in what verse 22 is saying- isn't it great to know, if we can only accept what I am going to say, isn't it great to know that because of Jesus sacrifice on the cross and the sprinkled blood that came about because of His crucifixion, that Christ's blood has the power, if we will but accept it in trust and faith, His blood has the power to wash away every stain from our conscience so that we can approach God without any break in our relationship with God? The key for us is trusting and accepting this truth through faith.

And fourth, **the writer of Hebrews writes in verse 22 that our bodies are washed with pure water.** This is a reference to our baptisms that is mentioned in Hebrews 6:2. For baptism is the outward visible sign of the person entering into the fellowship as God's renewed, redeemed person.

And so we are invited by the One who gave up His life for us to come together and worship Him. And Yes, we can and should certainly worship God in private, but what we read in our passage is the need, the importance of coming together in public, with other believers, to worship Him. And that was obviously an issue when Hebrews was written because verse 25 encourages the readers to, in a positive way, to provoke one another to meet together. Why? Well, because there was obviously a danger back at the time this was written where there were Christians who thought they could be Christians all by themselves and the writer is warning them against this. Maybe those early believers hadn't realized that Christianity is a corporate thing, that we need to be together, that we need the community

of believers because we not only belong to Jesus but to each other. Friends, we need each other, we need the encouragement of each other, not just for the time we are at a worship service, but it says we need to provoke one another to love and good deeds. We need to encourage each other to live day-in-and-day-out because life is tough, life is difficult enough and to not have the fellowship of the believers, to not have each other can be even more devastating in the difficult times. The bottom line is we need each other and, as a friend told me this week, "Friends double our joy, and divide our sorrow." So go ahead, look around who is not here today, think about the person that you know and love and who needs to be a part of the worshiping community and nicely, gently, lovingly provoke them. Because, Friends, the party is all prepared. The invitations have all been sent. The place has been made ready and the One who is hosting the party is waiting at the door. His name is Jesus and He waits. Are we ready to accept His invitation and come in? Amen.

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Introduction: When you hear the word "provoke" what comes to mind?

Our passage from Hebrews uses the word "provoke" in a ...

A question- Been to any good parties lately?

It is as if the writer of Hebrews has sent out the invitations inviting people to come to the party because there is something to celebrate, but what?

Vs. 22 tells us 4 things about the condition we should seek to be in as we gather together

First, **we should have a \_\_\_\_\_ heart**  
Jeremiah 31:33

Second, **we need to have full assurance of \_\_\_\_\_**

Third, **we need to have our hearts sprinkled clean from an \_\_\_\_\_ conscience**

Hebrews 9:13-14

The key for us is trusting and accepting this truth

Fourth, **the writer of Hebrews writes in vs.22 that our bodies are washed with \_\_\_\_\_ water**

Hebrews 6:2 and the reference to baptism

The importance of private and public worship

The danger back then as well as today

Conclusion: The party is all prepared. The invitations have all been sent. The place has been made ready and the One who is hosting the party is waiting at the door. Are we ready to accept His invitation and come in?