

“Provoking Presbyterians”

Hebrews 10:24-25

Let us consider, says the writer of Hebrews, how to provoke one another to love and to good works. The word *provoke* is a strange choice, both in the Greek in which it was written, and in its English equivalent, for the primary usage in both languages has the sense of: “to excite to anger; enrage; irritate....” As in, “Johnny! Stop provoking your sister!”

We used to have a cat that liked to provoke our dog. Each morning while the dog was still sleeping, the cat would get right in the dog’s face, so close that you probably could not get a piece of paper between their noses, and would make these awful ungodly guttural noises, keeping at it until he got a reaction. That’s what I usually think of when I think of the word provoke.

But even though its usage is primarily negative, the word itself, again both in Greek and English, is actually a neutral word that can be used either way. Our English word comes from Latin roots: *pro* – forth; *vocare* (vocation) – to call, “to call forth;” to call forth something lying dormant in someone else, whether positive or negative.

Johnny knows that his little sister, sitting there so peacefully reading or drawing, has a bit of a temper. He knows, from past experience, that she has it in her to become quite angry. He has seen her get red in the face and scream at the top of her lungs, and, if pushed far enough, even begin to throw things. And there is something within Johnny that makes him want to witness all of that again. He finds it entertaining. He wants to call forth that anger lying there dormant in his little sister. And so he provokes her. And because he knows her very well, knows what buttons to push, it usually doesn’t take much -- a spit wad, a particularly odious nickname, or pointing out of some physical blemish. My but our children knew how to do that to each other. There was a time when I despaired of all three of them ever making it to adulthood.

We all know about that kind of provoking. When our son was in high school he came home one day and announced to us that he knew just how far to push his teachers without going too far. Many of us are similarly skilled. We know how to do that. We know how to get under each other’s skin. We know how to irritate one another, to push each other’s buttons.

But the writer of this ancient letter to the Hebrews is not encouraging his readers to provoke one another in that sense, to call forth anger, resentment, jealousy, or envy. Rather, the writer is asking his readers to call forth what Lincoln in his first inaugural address called “the better angels of our nature,” the vast reserves of goodness and love lying there mostly idle within each of us.

Just as we all are capable of a certain amount of nastiness, just as we all have the potential for certain less than endearing qualities within us, thankfully for the most part lying dormant, so too, the writer seems to be suggesting, we have a great deal of goodness within us, also often lying dormant.

And what he is encouraging his readers to do is to provoke one another, to push each other’s buttons until that goodness comes forth. And I’m glad that he used such a strong word – to provoke, to incite, to aggravate, to irritate – to be burr in the saddle, not to bring out the worst in one another, but to bring out the best.

ACTIVE GOODNESS

One reason why we need to do this is that so much of the goodness in good people is inert and passive. The New English Bible translates this verse this way: “We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness.”

So much of the goodness of goodhearted people like you and like me is passive. We don't go out of our way to harm anyone. Yet at the same time, we may not go out of our way to help very many either, to correct what is wrong, to make the world a better place.

Edmund Burke said in his well-known quote: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil in the world is for good men to do nothing.”

When I first came to Auburn, the Jewish congregation invited the clergy to a gathering to meet their rabbi. It was a nice gathering – we met some very nice people along with the rabbi. The president of the congregation gave a little welcoming speech, and during the speech he told about an incident with which many here are familiar. In 1993 there was to be a demonstration by a neo-Nazi group here in Auburn. When the Jewish people came to Sabbath worship on the day when the demonstration was to take place, he said, they found the property of their place of worship surrounded by people from the Friends Church, who then stood around the property the whole time that they worshipped as a kind of shield. What a great example of active goodness.

Maybe you have heard the joke about the two high-stepping worldlings who wandered into church one Sunday morning after a night on the town just in time to hear the people praying the prayer of confession:

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.

The one turned to the other and said: “We're in the right place.”

We are all in the right place. And it is especially the first part of that prayer, about those things that we have left undone that we ought to have done, that is the part that we should be concerned about. No, we cannot do everything. We cannot save the world. We cannot right every wrong, meet every need. We can drive ourselves crazy trying. But at the same time, it is appropriate to ask how much of our goodness is active goodness? It is so easy to be good without necessarily doing any good.

I heard an interview on the radio once a while back with the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury who had just won a literary award. He said that he was not an optimist but rather an opti-activist (I think that is how he said it). The idea being not to simply sit back and hope that the world will be a better place some day, to believe in a brighter future, but to help create the alternative future that we envision. Active goodness!

We need one another in that regard. When one of us has a passion for something, it needs to be shared with others. There are some good examples of that going on in Westminster already. Some travel to Louisiana and Mississippi and help rebuild; some serve meals at the Salvation Army miracle kitchen; some send cards to shut-ins; some visit some of our members who live far away; some serve on non-profit boards; some take meals to those needing a little support; some here have a ministry of hospitality, opening their homes to others. And the rest of us are prodded and provoked to find our own ways of serving.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, said: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” (You know, those Methodists are all right.) And so the writer encourages us to provoke one another – to incite one another – to active goodness.

EXCELLENCE

Something else that we could provoke in one another, even though not specifically mentioned in our text, is excellence. Provoke one another to excellence, to doing the best you can do in all that you do. Do we do what we do just to get by, or do we give the best effort we have?

What I think happens sometimes in churches is that there is a kind of unspoken conspiracy of mediocrity. It goes something like this: I won't expect too much of you if you don't expect too much of me. Pastors are often co-conspirators in this or maybe even lead conspirators. Pastors usually have a stake in keeping things on an even keel, not rocking the boat, not irritating anyone or causing a controversy. And the best way to do that is to never do much of anything. It is amazing how peaceful a church can be when nothing much is happening. We need to provoke one another to active goodness and to excellence.

LOVE

And, of course, love. Provoke one another to love, he says. I take love in the broad sense, not necessarily a feeling that we have, but how we behave. In the sense in which it is expanded and enumerated in that passage that gets read at weddings: “Love is patient and kind, it is not rude or irritable; it does not insist on its own way.” That kind of love.

I am grateful to people who have provoked me and who have helped to bring out not the worst that is in me (and there is plenty of that there, believe me), but the best. Whatever humanness and genuineness I may have, if it can be detected at all, is thanks in large part to the good people of the congregations that I have served. Whatever I lack in those and other qualities I will have to take responsibility for myself.

I am grateful to those who have challenged me to take myself less seriously, to think more deeply, to express myself more clearly, to be more patient, more understanding, less judgmental, and on and on.

Let us consider, my friends, how to provoke one another to love and to active goodness. Let us consider how to bring out the best in one another, to prod one another to do more, to do what we do with all the energy and talent we have, and to be genuine, caring, forgiving, warm-hearted, patient and loving.