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Outside the Camp, Hebrews 13:1-18

Ben Ries

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’ So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them. We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.

Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

Well . . . it’s nice to know that the writer of Hebrews doesn’t have a problem leaving us with a few things to work on, isn’t it? There’s nothing like ending your letter with a quick to-do list that seems to cover every aspect of life. Because, you know, it’s not like the last twelve chapters haven’t already given us enough to think about. It’s not like we’ll leave this place with nothing to chew on. “Hey, while you’re chewing on that whole death anxiety stuff and the many implications it has for life and faith, why don’t you also be sure to let mutual love continue.” Oh . . . okay . . . because that’s pretty easy to do.

“And I know you’re still sorting out that whole Jesus as high priest thing and the cross as the fullest expression of God—but while you’re working through that, don’t neglect to show hospitality to strangers because, hey, they could be angels.” Oh . . . okay . . . let love be mutual, show hospitality to strangers . . . got it. “And also, I know you’ve got that long list of faithful witnesses that you’re trying to be like, and I realize that might be a little intimidating, but while you’re considering the faith of Abraham who was willing to

sacrifice his son, or the faith of Moses who led an entire people across the desert, or the faith of Rahab who risked her life and well-being, I really need you to remember those people in prison as if you yourself were in prison. And remember those who have been tortured, as if you yourself were tortured.”

Last-Minute To-Do Lists

“Let mutual love continue, don’t neglect to show hospitality, remember those in prison, remember those who are tortured . . . got it.” And if it only ended there! “Let marriage be held in honor. Keep your lives free from the love of money. Be content. Remember your leaders. Consider the outcome of their way of life. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Don’t be carried away by strange teachings. Don’t neglect to do good. Share what you have. Obey your leaders. Submit to them. And if you happen to be a leader, do it with joy, not with sighing.” Goodness! This all seems a little controlling, doesn’t it?

When I was a teenager, my mother had this annoying habit of shouting out last-minute instructions to me as I was headed out the door to hang out with my friends. “Have fun, sweetie. Be sure to wear your seatbelt. Don’t drive too fast. Remember that too much sugar affects your acne. True love waits, son, . . . true love waits.” I actually never heard the full list because, as she would continue shouting instructions, I would quietly inch towards the front door, slowly turn the handle, and tiptoe my way to wherever it was I was headed to, her instructions becoming a distant murmur.

If only I could get away from the writer of Hebrews as easily. In all honesty, I’m not too worried about this to-do list because most of these closing exhortations are pretty easy to ignore. Let mutual love continue, for example, is really easy to do when love remains primarily a metaphor or when I choose to surround myself with people who already look like me, think like me, act like me, and vote like me. Not too worried about that one.

And think about the whole hospitality to stranger thing and remembering prisoners and those who are tortured? We’ve figured out an easy way around that. It’s the real gift of social media, if you ask me. As long as we post articles on Facebook that speak about hospitality. As long as our tweets support those wrongly imprisoned or tortured. As long as we pass on the countless articles, blogs, and TED talks that speak to these issues then our job is essentially done and we don’t have to do the difficult work of actually extending hospitality to strangers or going to the prisons or sitting with those who have been tortured. And . . . there’s always someone who loves money more than I do, so we’re good there. And strange teachings? Hey, I’m a postmodern: teachings don’t even really exist. Obey and submit to leaders? Yeah, sure, as long as they don’t ask me to do anything I don’t want to. See, it’s not that bad after all.

Inside and Outside the Camp

But the real kicker . . . the thing that keeps me from tiptoeing out the door and heading out about my business . . . the one that is really bothering me is this, “Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” These are the words that stop me in my tracks. The convenient excuses and loopholes I use to get around all that other stuff don’t come as easily for me on this one. Because—here’s the thing—I like this camp that we’ve created for ourselves. This city that we’ve been building together all these years feels like home, doesn’t it? I don’t know about you, but I have very little interest in leaving camp.

There’s something about this camp that is predictable, safe, and certain. Here at camp, we’ve done well surrounding ourselves with people that think like us. Just pay attention to the conversations we have in the foyer. Or after worship. Or in our small groups. More times than not, they tend to be with people that think like us, don’t they? Politically. Theologically. Philosophically. Sure, we endure the occasional interaction with that card-carrying NRA member whose Instagram boasts of his recent AR-15 purchase. But those conversations tend to be limited to what we’re forced to say on that rare occasion when we pass the communion bread and have to say, “The body of Christ, broken for you.” Same thing goes with the bleeding-heart liberal that we suspect might be a socialist. (Maybe they’re just Canadian, we don’t know). Few things are as irritating as turning to them with the cup in hand and proclaiming those words, “The blood of Christ, broken for you.” There are these anomalies, sure, moments in which we interact with people who are legitimately different than

us but, by and large, our conversations (or at the very least the conversations we actually care about) are with those who don't stray too far away from what we already think about politics. Or what the Bible really means. Or what we should do with the boys of "Duck Dynasty." Because, quite frankly, it's nice to be surrounded by the same kind of people here in this camp that we've created for ourselves.

Another great thing about this city we've built is that it's predictable. We know where the boundaries, the city walls, are. We have a clear sense who is in and who is out. We know the difference between us and them, the church and the world, members and non-members, believers and pre-believers. We know what worship is and what it is not. We know what the Bible says and what it does not. We've chosen this camp because it fits our personal preferences and past experiences. We know that decisions about this city of ours will be made based on what will offend the least amount of people. And this predictability . . . this reliability is so nice to have in a world that seems to always be shifting. It's nice to have this in a world that is always on the move. So while the world changes at an unbelievable, unpredictable rate, it's nice to know that our life together in camp isn't going to change.

And isn't it nice to know that this camp provides a measure of safety? Not just safety from the outside world, as we make sure that everything happens on our terms and our turf with the weight of responsibility on others having to come to us, having to conform to us. I'm also talking about the safety that comes from never having to reveal our true selves. We have our songs, prayers, sermons, ministries, and small groups—all of them scratching the itch of authenticity. We share just enough about ourselves to convey that we're not perfect—but never enough to convey the fact that most of us are scared to death of dying. We're scared to death of being alone and that we are paralyzed by a deep, unrelenting sense of shame. We use words like *brokenness*, *weakness*, and *sin*, but for the most part we walk around camp with addictions that are buried. And lies that we can't get away from. And greed and pride that remained masked. But...the sense of safety that comes with these realities never truly being revealed creates a pretty comfortable world in which we choose to live.

It might seem strange, but these are the great things about this camp that we've constructed for ourselves. This city called *church*. We get to be with people that are like us; we get to enjoy the predictability that comes with our certainty; we get to sleep peacefully knowing that the illusion of our false selves will never be revealed.

And if I'm honest, when I look out there, I really don't like what I see. Beyond the walls of this camp that we've created, beyond the gates of this city that we defend with our very lives is a world that is so incredibly frightening, filled with all those people that are different than we are. All these people who don't think like us. All these people who have needs. I look out beyond this comfortable camp and see a world that suffers; I see people that are alone; I see communities that are in pain. And I have very little interest to go out there.

Because out there, beyond these cities gates, standing by the copier in the teacher's workroom at a local elementary school is a fifth-grade teacher named Beverly, who is barely holding things together. Her mother is in a coma and only has a couple of days to live—her mother, who up until this past weekend, Beverly hadn't spoken a word to for over two years. And she wonders, as the copies roll out of this machine that is oblivious to her pain, she wonders if the words she whispered into her mother's ears just a few nights ago—the words, "I'm so sorry. I love you."—she wonders if her mother heard them. And there she stands, having absolutely no one to walk with her. No one. And I see her standing there beyond the city gates and I don't want to go there. I don't want to step into her suffering because the safety and predictability and certainty of this camp that we've built together haven't prepared me for a moment like this. I'd rather just stay here in camp.

I don't want to go out there beyond the city gates to a group of men gathered outside the Home Depot. A group of men waiting and praying for the chance that someone will give them work for the day. Because I see Mr. Gonzalez, who stands there in fear that the US border patrol will roll by and ask to see documentation. He stands there with the reality that it is the middle of December and his electricity has been shut off for over a month now and the money he makes that day won't be enough to even make a dent in the long-overdue electricity bill. And I don't want to go there. I don't want to go there because there are rules we've made for life together in this camp. Rules that say, "We'd love to help Mr. Gonzalez, but we don't have enough, our

budget is pretty tight, so we must be careful how much we give.” Rules that say, “We don’t want to be taken advantage of. We need to be careful who we give to because, you know, ‘wise as serpents . . . harmless as doves.’” Rules that say, “Oooo . . . he might be undocumented? Immigration is a sticky issue and we have people here in camp that fall on different sides of the issue. Let’s not do something that forces us to actually talk about the issue.” No, thank you . . . I don’t want to go outside the city gates, I’d rather just stay in camp.

Staying in camp helps me avoid Jim and Thomas, two men who were once close friends but are now estranged. A business deal went south and now they both live with so much anger, hate, and vitriol that they can barely be in the same room with one another, so how they’ve managed to remain a part of the same Christian community, no one knows. They have hurt one another; both have been victims; both are at fault. And you know what? I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to go to there because I’m tired of their conflict. And on an even deeper level, I don’t want to go there because it might make me deal with my own fragmented relationships. I don’t want to go there because I might have to confess all the ways I’ve failed. No, thank you . . . I’ll take the comfort of camp and the safety and predictability of this city.

Seeing Jesus Outside the Camp

But . . . as I look around at this camp, as I take inventory of this city with its comfort, certainty, predictability, and safety, you know what I have a really hard time seeing? I have a hard time seeing Jesus. Because, unfortunately, he’s in the very place I don’t want to go. . . . He’s out there . . . outside this camp . . . beyond the city gates. He’s sitting at a dinner table of a known sinner named Zacchaeus. A sinner whose list of people that he’s wronged is matched only by the list of people that won’t forgive him. And though no else will forgive him, there is Jesus Christ—with no fear, only love—looking Zacchaeus in the eye and saying, “You are forgiven.” And I see him standing at a well, speaking to a woman whose sin is apparently so bad she doesn’t even get a name. And there at that well he gives to her the dignity that every human being deserved. And though they have literally nothing in common—without fear, only love—Jesus looks her in the eye and says, “You are God’s beloved child!” And he’s standing among a bunch of lepers. Lepers that no one will touch. Lepers that no cares about. Lepers that are alone. And even though they were kicked out of camp long ago, there he is—with no fear, only love—holding their hands and saying, “You are not alone.”

And seeing Jesus outside the camp in this leper colony, at that well, and at that table reminds me that I’ve seen him before. I really have. I saw him at worship not long ago as the bread was being passed. And it came to Jim and, for whatever reason, he stood up and walked across the sanctuary. . . . He walked across the sanctuary and knelt before Thomas and said, “I am sorry.” And Thomas replied, “No, I am sorry.” And there, with the body of Christ in hand, the words were spoken, “You are forgiven.”

And I saw him last winter as a small group of people from the neighborhood, having heard about the lack of electricity at the Gonzalezes house, they pulled together money that covered the outstanding bill (and then some) and delivered it to them. And with this small gift of money and a couple bags full of groceries, they looked the Gonzalezes in the eye and said words they hadn’t heard in a very long time, words that every human being deserves to hear. “You are worthy. You are God’s beloved children.”

And I saw him in the teacher’s workroom of that elementary school as Terri and Jen opened a basket of gifts for Beverly. A throw blanket to hold on sleepless nights, a bottle of wine if it gets too sleepless, a book, and some other stuff. But the real gift—the moment I’m sure I saw the risen Lord—was when they held this weeping, grieving shell of women and whispered over and over and over again, “You are not alone. . . . You are not alone. . . . You are not alone.”

And it’s in seeing all of this happen that I look around at this camp that we’ve built for ourselves that is predicated on our comfort and security, our success and relevance, our certainty and predictability. I look at this camp, and it’s in light of these moments that I realize (even if it’s just for a moment) that this thing that we’ve built, this city that we’ve worked so hard to defend is not the city that will last. But it’s there, in that moment when Jim and Thomas forgave each other. And when the Gonzalezes received the gift of love in an electricity bill and the generosity of others. And when Beverly experienced that she wasn’t alone. That’s the city that will last. That is the city we belong to!

It's Time to Leave Camp

And though we might be scared to leave this camp because what lies beyond these city gates is uncertain, uncomfortable, risky, and unpredictable, we have one who has gone before us to places of suffering, loss, alienation, and pain. One who has given us this gift of mutual love, this gift of hospitality to strangers, covenant with spouses, freedom from our love of money, contentment, leaders called and committed to the way of Jesus, the capacity to share. And with each of these gifts—if we choose to live more fully into them, no longer making the excuses or finding the loopholes around them—each of these gifts frees us from our slavery to the fear of death and opens us up to lives of hope, lives of faith, lives of love.

It's time to leave camp. It's time to find our way into teachers' workrooms and to a group of men standing outside the local Home Depot. It's time to leave camp and find our way into the fragmentation of relationships, and the fragmentation of our economic systems, and the fragmentation of our communities.

It's time to leave camp. To hold the hand of the one who is sick or dying in that hospital bed. Or nursing home. Or hospice center. It's time to leave camp and fill out the paperwork at the local prison so that we can share a word of good news to inmates even though the world might think they're not worthy, and even though they themselves aren't certain they're worthy, because everyone deserves a little balm from Gilead. It's time to leave camp and step into the suffering of those who remain under the shadow of grief from the brother or sister who passed away. Or the child that was lost shortly after birth. Or the spouse who died long before their time.

It's time to leave camp and open our eyes to a world that is full of people trapped in isolation and who desperately need to hear the words, "You are not alone!" It's time to leave camp and look our enemies in the eye and say the words that we should have said long ago, "You are forgiven!" It is time to leave camp and proclaim the good news of a crucified messiah that no matter what you have done, where you have gone, or who you think you are, first and foremost, at the core of your being, "You are God's beloved child!"

It is time to leave camp!

Now, if we do this, I am certain of at least two things. I am certain that we will meet suffering, pain, loss, and abuse that is apparently unending and unrelenting. I am certain of that. But I am also certain that there outside the camp, just beyond the city gates, we will also meet the risen Lord who says to us, "Do not fear. Only love."

Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do God's will, working among us that which is pleasing in God's sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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