



May 13, 2012
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Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Re-Member: Why Sunday? Hebrews 10: 19-25

(Pastor walks in wearing boots & spurs and carrying a head of lettuce.)

We are in the exciting process of transitioning into a new denomination. Nearly 1,000 of our members have registered to make that transition. If you haven't yet, your card is in the foyer waiting for you. And we thought we'd use this season to talk about the meaning of membership. Why does it matter? What do we expect of our members? If you are guests, we have no expectations of you. You're our guests. But if you decide to membership vows... that's different, isn't it? It's saying, "This is my church. I'm all in!"

Chapel Hill has one core requirement... and four expectations of our members. Expectation number two comes right out of this morning's text. See if you can find it. And I'll give you a hint. *(Hold up lettuce.)*

How many "let us" heads did you find? Five! Let's start at verse 25: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..." Those words, "give up," are very powerful in the Greek. They mean "forsake" or "abandon." Do you remember when Jesus cried out to God on the cross, "Why have you forsaken me?" This is the same, painful word. The writer says, "Please, don't forsake one another." But what is he talking about?

After the first Easter, Christians changed their Sabbath. They began to gather on the first day of the week to celebrate the most incredible moment in the history of the world: the bodily resurrection of Jesus. They gathered on Sundays to worship, fellowship, learn, eat, give. They reoriented their entire lives around this weekly family reunion. It became a holy habit.

But after a while, habits change. ²⁵ "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing..." Do you see that last line? Some got out of the habit of meeting together every week, probably because they got into the habit of doing other things. Sleeping in. Working. Traveling. Playing. Sipping coffee in their morning togas and reading the Jerusalem Times. We aren't told what their new habits were...just that other things squeezed out the priority of weekly church family reunion. Once that had been important to them; now not so much. Of course, none of us ever struggle with competing habits on Sunday mornings, do we?

One expectation of our members is simply this: When you are in town, you are in church. It is a priority. Every Sunday we are right here... singing, worshipping, praying, laughing, studying, fellowshiping. Every Sunday we have a family reunion. We have guests who join us and they are always welcome but we expect nothing from them. But we do expect that if you are a member of this family, our Sunday reunion will become your habit. It's important enough that it takes priority over work, or gardening, or sleeping in or playing sports or taking your kids to play sports. We realize that many people don't agree with this priority. That's probably one of the reasons they don't choose to join our church. But if you do join, we want to be together. Not in a legalistic "there's never an exception" kind of way, but in a faithful "you can count on us" kind of way.

But when we say that, we are swimming against the cultural tide, aren't we? How many of you saw the recent article that said Washington State is 45th in church attendance in the nation? Out of the 50 states, only four of them have lower church attendance than we do: Maine, Oregon, Vermont and New Hampshire—all hotbeds of spiritual vitality. And actually, this is an improvement! Ten years ago, we were number 49. Twenty years ago, we were dead last. Fiftieth! Progress! Still, a huge majority of our population thinks that churchgoing is a waste of time. Maybe some of you do! And even Christians—even church members—treat worship as optional. If nothing better comes along—nothing more interesting—maybe I'll wander in and see what's going on at church.

So, why not? Why should it be a priority? Because you can't be a Christian if you don't go to church? No. Because not going to church makes you bad, and God will get even with you? No! Because going to church is good for business or good for appearances? No! But there are some great, life-giving reasons for not abandoning each other. Lettuce. Five times the writer uses the imperative, "Let us." It's an imperative. It's not a suggestion; it's a command. We've already seen one "let us"... "Let us not give up meeting together." But why? What difference will it make?

Look at 24: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." I'm wearing my boots and spurs this morning to make a point! This is one of the reasons we meet together. We need a little spurring. You know what spurs are for, right? To "coax" horses to do what they ought to be doing but might be reluctant to do. I had a horse growing up named Monty. His lower lip always quivered so we called him, "M...m...m...Monty." Monty was a lazy, old range pony. If I wanted Monty to move faster than a walk, he needed a little coaxing... a little spurring. But when I spurred him on, that horse could still fly.

Every one of us needs a little coaxing. Spur one another on to love. Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart, soul mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. He said, "By this the world will know that you are my disciples; if you love one another." He said, "Love your

enemies." The great verb of the Christian faith is love: love God, love neighbor, love each other... even love your enemies. Wow, that's a lot of loving! So does that come easily for all of you? Do you ever need any help remembering to love... remembering how to love?

Every time we come together, it spurs us to love. When we sit in a pew near someone that irks us, when we feel the rake of the spurs against our flank reminding us to skootch over, say "hi" and make things right. When we see children that are not our own; when we see people whose skin color or social status or background is different... people we might not ordinarily hang with... we feel that spur saying, "Go ahead. Love them!" If you aren't here, we won't see each other... out of sight, out of mind. And it is easy to get flabby in the love department to ignore or avoid those that just "aren't our type." But every Sunday, if we are faithfully here, we spur each other on to be better lovers. Isn't that a good thing? For you? For your kids? To love better?

But there's something else we spur each other to do. What? Good deeds! Don't get this wrong; we don't do good deeds because it will make God like us better. Or balance out our bad stuff. God already loves you and only Jesus can balance out the bad stuff. No, we do good deeds because the Jesus opens our eyes to see the need and compels us to do something about it! And every good deed we perform brings glory to God and allows us to participate in his mission to the world. Every Sunday reunion is a chance for the Holy Spirit to use each of us to spur one another to do the good things that witness for Christ and bring mercy and justice to his world.

Next week 40 men are going to Mexico to build houses for the poor. How many of you have taken a mission trip of some sort with your church? Now maybe some of you would have done that on your own. But I'll bet, for most of us, it helped that your church family was spurring you on, saying, "Let's do this together! Let's do this good thing for the sake of Jesus." A few of you have rung the Salvation Army bell at Christmas on your own. Hundreds of you did it this year because we spurred each other on. A few of you care about Burma or Guatemala or Swaziland by yourself, but hundreds of us do because we spur each other on. A few of you give some money to help the poor, but because our Deacons spur us on to share with those in need we gave more than \$100,000 away last year, mostly to people who aren't even in this church. Are you really such a kind person that you don't need any more help, any reminders? If you want to be a more compassionate servant of the world... if you want your children or grandchildren to learn to care about others, this is the place to be every Sunday. We spur one another on to love and good deeds.

But there's another "let us." Did you see it? I'll give you a hint! (*Pull out pom poms.*) ²⁵ "...let us encourage one another." Don't you love that word "encourage?" It means, to inject courage, to fortify, to give hope and reassurance. Sometimes, we need cheerleaders, don't we? People who will pump us up, prop us

up, lift us up. Could any of you use a little encouraging this morning? I have a special team just for that purpose. (*Upward cheer team comes out and leads cheer; pastor joins in!*)

See; don't you feel en-couraged! Sometimes, we need a little kick in our blessed assurance... a little spurring on because we've become lazy lovers and lazy doers. But sometimes, the last thing we need is to be kicked or spurred. All week long, we've been kicked and spurred. On the job, at school, at home... life is pounding away and the last thing we need is any more pounding. Great, then "let us encourage one another." Let us sit together every Sunday and sing and pray and worship. Let us shake hands and hug. Let us grab a cup of coffee and some breakfast and catch up and commiserate and inject a little courage to help you face your week or your failure or your heartbreak. If you are here for our weekly family reunion, people will remember you and know you and notice when you are down and help hold you up. But when you forsake us, you face discouraging times alone.

This week I watched a group of men support their friend as his mom died yesterday; watched as folks gathered around a guy whose big brother has two months to live; watched as folks rallied to help a family make a difficult move; watched as a tutor encouraged a fourth grader who thinks he is dumb; watched as folks rallied around a woman who discovered she has cancer. It happens every week. People who, that week, need some extra courage receive it from those who happen to have a little extra courage to give. And it won't happen if we are not together.

Let us spur one another on to love and good deeds, let us encourage one another... these are reasons enough to be here, aren't they? Who doesn't need this stuff? But if we stop here, we turn church into just a big, therapeutic service organization. Did you notice the other two "let us" heads? "...let us draw near to God...²³ ...let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess..." What we do here every Sunday is not just about us... about meeting our needs, about spurring us on to do better, about encouraging. In fact, it's not even mostly about those things. Our weekly family reunions are mostly about drawing near to God!

The amazing message of the Bible is this: God, the creator of the universe, loves us and wants a relationship with us! And we, who were created with a God-shaped hole in our hearts, long to know and be known by God. God is everywhere, of course. But the Bible says that God "inhabits the praises of his people." When we gather on Sundays to love and worship and sing and pray to God, He leans down from heaven to listen. He fills this place. He laughs with and mourns with and draws close to us with His love and is encouragement.

I hear people say all the time, "I don't need to go to church to worship God; I worship Him in my own way." You know what? That is usually rubbish. Usually, we don't worship God on our own, because we are too preoccupied with worshipping

ourselves—focusing on our lives, our wishes and our activities—to even give God a nod. But when we pause, on the first day of the week, and gather with His people in His house, God meets us! Whose week wouldn't be better if it started with a God-sighting?

The truth is, hope is slippery. Faith is slippery. It is easy enough to lose our grip—to lose sight, to lose ground, to lose hope—when we are surrounded by people who love us and are spurring and encouraging and pulling for us. It is downright dangerous when we try to do it on our own. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess...” One of the ways we hold on to hope—hold on to God in this crazy, frantic world—is to meet with Him and His people every Sunday, faithfully, for our family reunion.

Lettuce. It's good for you! Let us draw near to God... let us hold unswervingly to hope... let us spur one another on to love and good deeds... let us encourage one another... let us not forsake meeting together.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **DIG DEEPER**
 1. On a scale of 1-10, how important is regular Sunday worship attendance to you? Why?
 2. The writer of Hebrews speaks of three things that happen when we come together. What are they? Which of the three do you most need right now and why?
 3. If you are not faithful in your worship attendance, what would need to change? If you are, are you experiencing the things that Hebrews promises? Why or why not?