

## **“Things We Can Do in Desperate Times”**

**Hebrews 13:1–8, 15–16**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

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“Beloved ones, know what is true: this world is in haste, and it is nearing the end.” This sounds like many doomsday proclamations that have been made, but these words were spoken by Wulfstan, the Archbishop of York, in the year 1014 C.E., in a sermon known as the “Sermo Lupi” or the “Sermon of the Wolf.” It was delivered in the context of a collapsing Anglo-Saxon World, conquest by the Vikings, moral decline, and the hopelessness that goes with such realities.

In terms of the perceived external threat, the Danish warrior Cnut defeated Edmund in 1016 C.E. and became king of England. So, in a sense, the world as people knew it did end. But Wulfstan, though no otherworldly saint — he was enmeshed in political life — was more concerned with the internal threats of moral decline, which he attributed to the work of the Devil and saw as a harbinger of the Antichrist.

His argument was couched in terms that seem alien to us, but the specific maladies Wulfstan named are more recognizable. Among the problems he addressed were factionalism and injustice, which existed under King Aethelred, who was known as Aethelred the Unready; unfair taxation; the kind of poverty that forced people to sell their own family members into slavery; and perhaps worst of all, the sexual abuse of female slaves (Eleanor Parker, *The Plough*, Summer 2022, pp. 32–37).

In light of all of this, Wulfstan saw the end as inevitable, but he still called the people to repentance. Even in desperate times, there were things people could do, like caring for the poor and the vulnerable. There was personal piety to pursue as well as the community’s wellbeing. Living in the shadow of what you believed to be the end of the world didn’t mean giving up on life. It meant claiming what was precious about it.

Now, I realize this is all ancient history, over a thousand years ago. We tend to tune out anything involving end times language, especially

since the end has been predicted so many times, about as accurately as weather is predicted these days. But there is something familiar about Wulfstan's feelings of desperation — as we live with a pandemic, economic and political challenges, and a dangerous war in Ukraine along with so many global challenges. And there is something hopeful in his identification of things we can do in such a time.

Wulfstan would not advise us to ignore the political realm entirely. After the Danes conquered England, he became Cnut's advisor, just as he had been Aethelred's. He knew how critical the political realm was, the impact it had on all people. But he also knew that while we can and should have some voice in the public square, we have more say in how we live our lives which have their own impact on the world.

Nearly a thousand years before Wulfstan, the author of Hebrews expressed a similar perspective. Writing in yet another context of desperation, the threat of the Roman Empire, he counseled early believers on things they could do. Though this advice is nearly two thousand years old, it still speaks to us today. And like the counsel of Wulfstan, while it addresses matters of personal piety, it has significant implications for the wellbeing of the community.

One thing the author of Hebrews tells us is to let mutual love continue. The Greek word here is *philadelphia* which literally means brotherly love. "Mutual" is a more concise way of being inclusive than saying brotherly/sisterly love, but the latter is what we are talking about, family love really. The church saw itself as the family of God where all are brothers and sisters. The use of this language stirred mockery in the ancient Greek world. This was considered "fictive kinship" — these people weren't really family and thus could not love each other as family. But early Christians insisted they could and did.

In fact, baptismal practices underscored the belief that when we become a part of the body of Christ, our new spiritual family becomes the most important network of connections we have. In some instances, a person received a new Christian name. In others, people were baptized only by their first name. I have always used full names, because moms and dads like to hear them, but I have also always used the terms sister

and brother to underscore the new relationships we have in the body of Christ. Even when I baptized Ian and Ali, I referred to them as my brother and sister, though I did assure them I would still be their father!

But the point is the author of Hebrews is encouraging believers living in desperate times to continue loving each other as intimate family members because that is what we are in the body of Christ, that is what we need from each other, and that is what provides the best witness to the world. Before we do anything, we are a distinctive kind of community. Whether we use the brother/sister language all the time isn't as important as how we feel about and treat each other.

And without being too self-congratulatory, I would say that this is one of the greatest strengths of this church. There is a depth of genuine concern and interest in each other here that I have rarely seen. It is apparent when the worst happens and others show up. It is apparent in the way friends constantly inquire about how our children or parents are doing. It is apparent in communal times like last Sunday's Variety Show and Ice Cream Social when people found such great joy through music and fellowship, but mostly just in each other.

In desperate times, it may not seem like there is much we can do, but we can continue in our love for each other. It won't heal all national divisions nor will it stop the war in Ukraine, but it will make a difference for us and offer the world an image of what is possible.

Another thing the author of Hebrews tells us is to extend hospitality to strangers, to remember those who are in prison and those who are tortured, to do good and share what we have. In general, it is a calling to extend love to those beyond our community, but the specifics also tell us something significant.

The first calling is to extend hospitality to strangers. It is a frequent command in the Hebrew canon and a common one in the Christian Testament. The Israelites were told to welcome the stranger or alien in the land, remembering that in Egypt and in the wilderness, they had been the stranger. Our text offers the added motivation of realizing we may be entertaining angels without knowing it, as Abraham did in Genesis 18–19. And in Matthew 25, Jesus says that when we welcome

the stranger, we welcome him. There is obviously a great deal at stake when someone not from here comes to us in need.

It too is a calling this church has embraced for a long time. The clothing ministry has worked with USCIS for decades in helping immigrants and refugees, but ever since CBF relocated the Wyatts and their Welcome House Ministry to the Research Triangle, we have found more ways to help more strangers in this part of our land. CBFNC now has thirty Welcome House Ministries, one of which is managed by our own Anna and LaCount Anderson in Conetoe.

So, we have been able to extend hospitality through clothing, housing, meals, and transportation to people from Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Pakistan, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Congo, Russia, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. To return to Wulfstan, we can still engage the socio-political debates of immigration policy. In the meantime, there are flesh-and-blood human beings, children of God from other parts of the world, here. Our calling is to extend hospitality. This we can do.

In reference to love beyond the church, the author of Hebrews also talks about remembering those in prison and those being tortured. This may apply first to early believers who are suffering for their faith, but it extends to all with these challenges, in fact, all who have been rejected and cast to the margins of society. And “remember” implies more than simply not forgetting that they are there. Again, in Matthew 25, Jesus says that when we visit someone in prison, we visit him. It is a call to active love for those who are deeply burdened, those who are oppressed, and those who may be suffering the consequences of their own choices.

It is not always easy, this I know from having visited in jails and prisons, and from having had family members incarcerated, in rehab programs, and facing other challenges. But when people are hurting, the church is called to respond with compassion. It is something we can do.

The last thing the text says about extending love beyond the church is to do good and share what we have. In a world where problems like poverty, violence, and division exist on a massive scale, we may question whether we can make a dent. The author of Hebrews tells us to share what we have. We do this in many ways, today through a simple project partnering with RISE Against Hunger, this month through a

simple mission project collecting school supplies. We won't eliminate hunger, solve every educational challenge, or fix any other problem, but we can do something to make a difference, if we share what we have.

So, the author of Hebrews tells us to let mutual love continue and extend hospitality to strangers and all in need. Then, he tells us to let the marriage bed be kept undefiled and keep our lives free from the love of money. This may seem like an entirely different category of advice. The first two areas of concern involve things we can do as individuals to help not just ourselves but the people around us too. But the truth is these areas of life have a profound effect on the community's wellbeing.

New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has pointed out that there is a long tradition of treating sexual and economic behavior in tandem, as the author of Hebrews does, because they both point to excessive or disordered desires (*Hebrews*, p. 341). Excessive desires in either of these areas can have devastating effects on communal life.

But when we are unselfish with our resources and faithful in our relationships, we can help the community around us and deepen our sense of joy. Our calling is not to an arbitrary path of narrow prudism. It is to a life of faithfulness and integrity, honoring principles of mutual love in relationships and valuing people over things. We may not be able to change everything we dislike about a materialistic and escapist culture, but we can live with integrity, and thus make a difference.

In the film "The Hunt for Red October" Admiral Josh Painter responds to escalating military tensions by saying, "This business will get out of control. It will get out of control, and we'll be lucky to live through it." It is a modern way of stating what Wulfstan said long ago, but like Wulfstan, Painter and other characters in the film don't just name the threat, they do what they can, and war is avoided.

There is always something we can do, something we are called to do, like love each other, extend hospitality to the vulnerable, and live with integrity. To paraphrase what Galatians 5:23 says about the fruit of the Spirit, there is no law against such things. Indeed, there is much to argue for them.