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Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, 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 since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Good morning, Church!

I want to start by looking back on the Jewish and Christian religious architecture, and reflect on its structure as it relates to belonging and community connection to the Divine. Stick with me… I hope this will all make sense in a bit.

The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible speaks of the Israelite Tabernacle of Moses' time (SLIDE). It was a portable religious tent for nomadic peoples. An outer courtyard could be accessed by devout followers, as a space for ritual sacrifice. The central tent was sacred and reserved just for the priesthood, and within it a smaller Holy of Holies which contained the Arc of the Covenant. Only the high priest could enter this space, and even then just once a year.

During the time of King Solomon, Israel established a more permanent home for their God when the Great Temple of Jerusalem was built. (SLIDE) Just as with the tabernacle, physical access to certain places within the Temple was strictly regulated and defined by concentric circles of holiness, or access to the Divine. At the outermost perimeter, the Court of the Gentiles allowed non-Jews to gather. The next level of access was the Court of Women, where purified Jewish women could be present. Jewish men were permitted one step further into the Court of Israel, and beyond that lay the Court of the Priests, exclusively reserved for the Levites and priests. At the absolute center, again, was the Holy of Holies and the Arc, entirely off-limits except to the High Priest.

After the destruction of Solomon's Temple by Babylon in 586 BCE, it took some time for the temple to be reconstructed in Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus,

(SLIDE) Herod's temple no longer contained the Ark of the Covenant, so the Holy of Holies was a quiet empty room. Separation of the various levels was also defined by curtains rather than walls and solid doors.

This tiered structure, separated by walls and doors, reinforced a clear boundary between the ordinary world and sacred space, highlighting how access to God was defined through specific lineage, purity rituals, and priestly authority across generations. Community and belonging in this tradition had layers and levels of exclusivity. And just a quick aside, when we read about Jesus flipping the tables, we note that his protest demonstration took place in the exterior courtyard, perhaps a precursor to Jesus shaking up the entire system.

Many modern synagogues (SLIDE) maintain a connection to ancient Temple architecture through elements like a symbolic Holy Ark up front, which houses Torah scrolls, and the Parochet; a decorative curtain drawn in front of it reminiscent of the temple's sacred veil. Synagogues orient prayer toward Jerusalem, keeping the central focus on the site of the ancient Temple and continuing the tradition of spaces and levels of proximity to the Divine.

Whew, okay, that's a lot. But it's an important context for when Christians tell the story of Jesus. Jesus shows up at a moment in time where God was not accessible to everyone. Matthew, Mark, and Luke, *all* include the story of the temple curtain tearing in two when Jesus breathed his last breath on the cross. (SLIDE)

For early Christians, the tearing of the temple curtain was a profound symbol of radical religious transformation. The physical barrier that had long separated the people from the presence of God - and restricted access to only a select few through strict purity rituals and priestly lineage - was suddenly removed. And unlike the disappointment of that moment in the Wizard of Oz (SLIDE), something quite miraculous felt like it was taking place when that barrier was removed.
The early church held on to this moment as a reminder that divine intimacy was no longer confined to a single, exclusive inner sanctuary. Instead, the sacred was opened up to *all* people, offering everyone direct access to God and reshaping how believers understood worship, community, and sacred space.

But before we get too high on our inclusive horses, assuming that Christians righteously pivoted in that moment never to look back, we should also pause to remember the twists and turns of our Christian history in the time since Christ.

The early Christian church, in its grassroots beginnings and inspired by the Last Supper, started the practice of communion as an inclusive, shared, full meal, known as the Agape feast. (SLIDE) Initially, believers gathered in house churches to share food together while remembering the Last Supper and celebrating their unity in Christ. However, as Christian communities grew and structure developed and was imposed, church leaders in various traditions began separating the sacred ritual of bread and cup from the common meal. By the time of the second and third centuries, communion evolved into a standardized liturgical act central to regular worship, shifting the focus from a communal meal to a solemn, sacred sacrament administered only by designated clergy.

It became even more exclusive during midaeval Catholicism, (SLIDE) where the bread was shared, but the cup was reserved only for priests, for fear of the common folk spilling the sacred cup.

We start to see this separation in Church architecture too, where the front starts to include special space reserved for priests and ordained workers, (SLIDE) and dividing lines such as altar rails are placed to remind those gathered that there are tiers of connection. Confession, which had historically been done in community, first shifts as something the individual does with the priest as an intermediary, and then to private confessional booths (SLIDE).

In many traditions, systems of exclusion also formed, based on a variety of factors including gender, wealth, and ethnicity. What began with the tearing down of a curtain of separation, eventually gets right back to creating and putting up our own separation curtains - both literal and metaphysical.

The Reformation of the 1500s, and our own Anabaptist Mennonite forebearers, did the work again of trying to tear a different kind of curtain in two. Communion, baptism, and church leadership were re-claimed by the people, (SLIDE) rather than an exclusive clergy or ruling class. Certainly, we've also had our own bumps in the road - some of you possibly grew up at churches that would not ordain

women, or had women and men sit on different sides of the sanctuary. (SLIDE) And while there have been a variety of moments in time when Mennonites have tried to institute bishop structures and limitations on who can participate in church life, we often return back to a belief that holistic and egalitarian church community is of greater importance than church hierarchy and structure.

So what does that mean for us today? How do we be people of faith who tear down curtains rather than putting them up as ways to define who is in, and who is out? (SLIDE) What practices do we incorporate that widen the circle of who can experience the Divine, and what do we do - sometimes unknowingly - that prevents certain people from access.

Perhaps this is why it is important to continue to listen to each other, to discern together, and to remember the torn-curtain-tradition from which we come, and our own trauma and memories of when people in faith spaces have tried to divide or separate. We can point back to the moment when the temple was transformed, and note that this early church letter to the Hebrews that we read from this morning reminds us that the early Christians put their faith in a symbolic breaking of division and separation. We can remember our Anabaptist impulse to take control back from state-run institutions, and the moments in time when even our tradition has been more focused on restriction rather than community and belonging.

(SLIDE) We can also return to deeper truths of our own faith, such as the belief that we follow a God of love and inclusion, rather than a God who desires division and separation. This morning's passage from Hebrews reminds us to be connected to each other, meeting together and holding fast to a deeper kind of hope.

As we reflect on this expansive love and access, we are reminded that our community is continually enriched and renewed as new people step into our shared journey. One of the gifts of meeting with so many of you during my first few months is hearing the stories of what brought you to this place. Some of you were brought in the doors in a bassinet, but many of us came from somewhere else. Sometimes you stumbled in the door not knowing what to expect. Sometimes you were nudged by a family member or Mennonite congregation in

another place. Sometimes it was Penn State that brought you here - the church was something extra that allowed you to feel more rooted. Some of you arrived here as one last-ditch attempt to reclaim your faith before it fell away completely.

As a church in a college town, we have more than 60 years of saying hello and goodbye to the people who have called this place home. We have had moments where we have welcomed in, and moments where we have been tempted to put up our own curtains defining who is in and who is out.

Today, we have the joy of expanding our circle once again as we welcome 10 new members officially into the life and ministry of our congregation.

This morning should also make us pause and reflect again on church membership as a construct, and perhaps ask questions of its importance and value. As you look through the list of folks joining us today, perhaps you've noted that we have people joining who have been with us for several months, some for more than a decade. It's worth reminding us again this morning that our congregation has folks who have been here for decades who have never officially joined, as well as those who joined, but haven't been here for years.

We have people in this morning's new members who were here decades ago and have found their way back. We have people requesting to hold membership in more than one tradition, and folks fully embracing new ones. I'd like to also note the asterix in that new member list. When we reached out to James Street Mennonite Church (SLIDE) in Lancaster to transfer Dot and Bill's membership, they informed us that while they were in good standing, James Street no longer does traditional church membership, and therefore Dot and Bill had no membership to transfer.

James Street, a larger congregation than UMC, noticed several years ago that their membership roster included many folks who no longer attended, while many new attendees were cautious or nervous about officially joining a church institution. James Street decided membership had become a curtain or barrier that needed to be torn down. They realized that absent members had more voice than regular non-members. They also had fears that elders and pastoral staff might be tempted to prioritize members - even ones who no longer attended - rather than those non-members who were frequently present.

Instead James Street has joined a growing list of Mennonite congregations who do an annual covenant or recommitment service, intentionally joining each other in a commitment to another year of life together. Perhaps one day that will be our practice here at UMC as well, or perhaps some other kind of innovative curtain-tearing kind of membership that has not yet been thought up.

There is much for us to hold this morning, especially as we continue to imagine what it means to belong, and as we reflect on what it means to meaningfully pursue community and belonging as spiritual disciplines.

(SLIDE) The letter to the Hebrews includes this line, *"Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another, all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

UMC, may we be drawn to this message from Hebrews, offering our encouragement, support, and friendship. Together, as a body united in faith and grace, let us celebrate these new beginnings and commit to walking alongside each other in love.