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Saint John's Episcopal Church
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The sermon for today is taken from the Epistle, the letter of Hebrews chapter 13, verses 1-8.

O God, we come together because we need you, we need one another, and we need to hear your word. And if we hear it here, let us become so possessed by it that we become servants of it out in your world.

What would be your response today if I could give you the formula by which you could be guaranteed a winning life? I think the lesson for today from Hebrews 13 gives us such a formula - it is a simple formula, but it simply cannot fail. Follow it and not only will you be successful as a follower of Jesus, but you will be successful as a parent, as a spouse, as a friend, as a member of the community. In other words, you will be successful as a human being.

I'm making an extravagant claim, I know, but I've seen this formula work time and time again. Here is the first part of the formula: Keep on loving. Now, you may ask, "Love whom?" And the answer is, of course, everybody. Love people you go to church with, people you live with, people you work with, but also love people you don't even know. More than that, love people you normally wouldn't even associate with. The writer of Hebrews says in this passage, "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 in prison as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured." There are people like that in this world who follow the words of Hebrews as a matter of course. They are a real people, and they embody the kind of life that the writer of Hebrews is commending. Keep on loving. Love everybody - family members, friends, coworkers - everybody.

In the most famous portion of today's lesson from Hebrews the writer says: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." The phrase "entertaining angels"

refers to that memorable scene in Genesis when Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent. And legend has it that the flaps of Abraham's tent were lifted on all four sides so that he might discern the approach of any strangers and hasten to meet them. On this particular day he saw three men apparently needing help. This was not unusual. There were not motels and not fancy restaurants, no places where weary travelers could turn for hospitality. So people in the Middle East prided themselves on their hospitality, and Abraham did not turn away those in need of help. So at the appearance of these three strangers he sprang to his feet, called to Sarah for help, and the two of them quickly ministered to these men. It was fortunate that they did. Abraham discovered that he was host to three messengers of God in disguise, and when he was the gracious host, God was an even more gracious God. God blessed Abraham and Sarah with a child.

The message of Hebrews, I think, is clear. Love everybody - those you know and those you don't. In fact, make a special attempt to be kind to strangers. That is the first part of this formula for a successful life - keep on loving. And the second is - keep on living by God's law. The writer continues... "Marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." How many lives have been shattered by failure to follow this one simple rule?

Several years ago a man wrote a newspaper advice column. "I'm having an affair with two women," he wrote. "I can't marry them both. What should I do? And don't give me any of that morality stuff." The columnist answered him, "What distinguishes us from animals is morality. Please write a veterinarian for advice."

Ted Koppel was host of ABC's Night Line for a number of years, and he shocked many people a few years ago when he stated his feelings about the moral slide in our society. "We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us," he said. "Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle; or enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish, but protect yourself." "No," he continued, "the answer is NO, not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might wind up in jail or dying in the aids ward, but because it's wrong."

Most of us can relate to Ted Koppel's words. We believe a strong sense of right and wrong is essential to a well-functioning society; but not everybody feels that way. Well, there are many good people in the world, and they

come in every race and creed, but we're drifting.

I have to admit that I'm concerned about the future. There have been many studies of America's young adults, or what is often called "Generation X." Our young people today have many virtues. They are more tolerant toward others unlike themselves, and they generally have a passion for protecting the environment; but I think there are some warning signs. For example, according to recent studies young adults are dramatically more likely as a group to value happiness above integrity...more committed to live for today rather than prepare for tomorrow, and much more likely to live by the dictum "eat, drink and be merry." Significantly, they are much more likely to say that they had cheated on a test or plagiarized in school, having lied to a partner about a romantic or sexual involvement with another person, and have lied to their employers about being sick or unable to work. Perhaps members of Generation X are just being more honest in reporting on their values than their elders, and I hope that's true, but there is reason for concern.

The New York Times a few weeks ago carried a report about a New Jersey high school class in which students were asked their opinion on the conduct of a young woman who found one thousand dollars in the street. Quite remarkably she turned it in rather than keeping it herself. All fifteen of the students said that she was a fool. A reporter asked why the student guidance counselor didn't offer his opinion. He explained, "If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong, then I'm not their counselor." For heaven's sake! What kind of counselor is that?

I've asked the question before, but it's still important. Would you really want to live in a society of cheaters? Would you want to live in a society where you can't trust your doctor, or your contractor who built the bridge that you cross every day, or the electrician who wired your house, or your spouse, or your parents, or your children? Living on the straight and narrow really is a big deal. Keep on loving. Keep on living according to God's laws.

And one thing more...keep on trusting. Listen as the writer of Hebrews continues, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have because God has said, 'Never will I leave you. Never will I forsake you.' So say with confidence, God is my helper; I will not be afraid."

Successful living is a package and you cannot pick and choose among those core principles. You cannot live a successful life without these first two principles: Keep on loving and keep on living according to God's law. And the reason we are able to fulfill these two demanding challenges is that we trust God. It's not easy to love people who do not love us. It's not easy to always try to do the right thing. There are all kinds of influences that will try to take us off the course, but as long as we know deep in our hearts that God is with us, He can make it.

I'm sure most of you are familiar with the story of Robinson Crusoe. Robinson Crusoe was the chief character in a novel by Daniel Defoe. Crusoe was shipwrecked and stranded on an island for twenty-eight years when he encountered cannibals and captives and mutineers before being rescued. And some of you may remember Crusoe for his man Friday. Friday escaped from the cannibals and was befriended by Crusoe who named him after the day of the week he appeared. Crusoe then teaches Friday English and converts him to Christianity. What you may not remember is that Crusoe himself was not particularly religious until being shipwrecked without hardly anything to read except the Bible which washed up with him.

And here are the words that Daniel Defoe has Crusoe write in his autobiography: "One morning being very sad, I opened the Bible upon these words: 'I will never, never leave thee nor forsake thee.' Immediately it occurred that these words were written to me. Why else should they be directed in such a manner? Just at the moment I was mourning over my condition as one forsaken of God and man, 'Well then,' said I, 'if God does not forsake me, what matters it, though the world should all forsake me?' From this moment I began to conclude in my mind that it was possible for me to be more happy in this forsaken, solitary condition than it was probable that I should have been in any other state in the world; and with this thought I was going to give thanks to God for bringing me to this place."

And this, I think, is the kind of peace of mind that the writer of Hebrews is writing. "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have," he writes, "because God has said never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." You and I can lose everything else as long as we can believe that God is with us. We can cope, and we can conquer. Nothing else in this world can provide that kind of security.

About a month ago I was walking with Marion on the breakwaters out in Provincetown. If you've ever been out there, there are these granite pieces of rock that go out one point two miles into the ocean, and then they join up at the very end of Cape Cod. It was a beautiful day; it was a wonderful walk. We walked all the way out, and we started walking back from there. There were two men in back of us, and as we were walking along...I don't know what happened exactly...but I slipped and I fell, and I was headed for this huge piece of granite. Somehow, my arm went underneath, and it cushioned my fall, and it really saved me from serious injury.

Faith in Jesus is our cushion, our Savior. It allows us to live triumphantly in a world that would beat us down. It allows us to love with great compassion. It allows us to live according to our best values, whether or not our way of living finds favor with our peers. And when all is said and done, we discover this is living at its best. And how do we know that's true? Some of us are fortunate enough to see it lived out in those who were role models for us, our parents.

I went to Bruce Greenhalgh's father's funeral the other day in New Bedford. Bruce and his brother talked about his father and how he had lead them on their way. But other role models are leaders in our community, friends, Sunday school teachers, perhaps even employers who live successfully because they followed these principles.

The writer of Hebrews closes today's epistle with these words: "Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever. That's what we want to know, isn't it? Our cushion, our Savior is secure. Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever. Keep on loving, keep on living by God's commands; and remember in every circumstance God says to you: "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." Such an approach to life is a winner every time.

Amen

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs

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