

¹Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember 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. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep 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." ⁶So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

¹⁵Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 NRSV

Some time ago when Pam had a "graduating ceremony" for her certification as a day care teacher, one of her teachers gave an address, and the gist of it was that while the very young children they will be caring for will probably not remember them personally, the "impressions" that the teacher leaving with the children will last a long time. So she charged the graduates of the course to leave the children with "positive pictures" for their life.

That was a very good way of putting the importance of the job a day-care teacher does.

But I would take it a step farther and say, especially in our very visual pictures can play a prominent role in communicating, teaching, and understanding in everyone's life. For example one of the things I usually do when I'm called on to preside at a funeral service is to go to the calling hours to chat with the family. Sometimes though, what is even more helpful are the pictures posted, or the collection of photos in a media presentation that someone has put together. I remember one time I think I saw one person I was doing a funeral for in a silly hat playing with their grandkids. That said everything about how much love and affection the person had for their grandkids.

Like it or not the church is a community of people who since the founding of the church as described in the book of Acts, are the visible witnesses to Jesus Christ crucified, dead and risen on this earth. We also know that Jesus meant for us to reach out and "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them "in the name of the Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit.

Now outside the proclamation of this word, which the bible tells us which becomes ours by faith alone, comes how that word is put into practice in the community of those who believe. That is why almost every letter written after the book of Acts in the New Testament has a section on how to show people around them that they are "living out" their faith. Even though there was no "photography" in ancient times it was just as important what people saw in the body of believers doing as they bore witness to their Lord Jesus Christ.

The complex letter to the Hebrews is no exception. While it gives a very involved argument for the idea that we are saved by faith in Christ alone, apart from elaborate Jewish sacrificial ritual, the writer takes time to remind them, of the "pictures" people should be seeing if they believe in Christ. First they should exude hospitality, as the writer reminds them, "You never know if you're entertaining angels ". Secondly they are to show "solidarity" to those who are going through awful times, so those who facing the tough times would know they are not alone. Thirdly they should show integrity in relationships and personal conduct, ever mindful that temptation not to do so is "just around the corner". In fact the writer calls some of this acting on their faith a "sacrifices of praise".

What positive pictures of the church, and especially of its people do you have? What negative pictures of the church do you have? What makes it worse in this day and age is that negative pictures always seem to get the most media coverage.

May we ask God to help us as a body of Christ, to make sure the positive pictures of the church outnumber the negative ones?