

January 14, 2018
Hebrews 12:1-4, 12-15
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“It’s Nasty Out”

Good morning! I was driving into work here at the church the other day and had the radio on. The commentator said, “It’s nasty out.” I thought the story was going to be about the slippery mix of ice and snow on the roads. But it wasn’t. Then I thought maybe the commentator would refer to our current political commentary, and the expletive which was allegedly used in a conversation about immigration. But that wasn’t it, either. Or maybe the mudslides in Santa Barbara County, CA. Nope. It turns out it was a national news story about this year’s flu season, and the fact that the current strain of the flu is particularly nasty, and the flu vaccine has not been as effective as public health officials had hoped. I know some members of our church family have experienced this personally.

This got me to thinking that whether it’s weather, news, health, or a myriad other things, it’s nasty out there. And there’s an antidote to the poison of nasty. Christians know it, even though we’re as susceptible to nasty roads and nasty conversations and nasty bugs as anyone else. I think we could all use a slice of PB&J.

I didn’t know there was a National Peanut Butter and Jelly Day, but I’ll be all over that on April 2 when I’m recovering from Easter, on April 1. I can almost taste that sweet jelly and the rich, creamy peanut butter now. But if you’ve been around Creekside for a while, you know that peanut butter and jelly is not the kind of PB&J I’m talking about. At Creekside, and possibly nowhere else, PB&J stand for Praise, Blessing, and Joy. I couldn’t find one single image that captures Praise, Blessing, and Joy which is a good thing -- because praise, blessing and joy can take a lot of different forms.

Let me give you a little history of how Creekside first came to experience PB&J. Before I was on the pastoral staff here, I was meeting with the Worship Team and Pastor David Bibbee in early 2009. If you can remember all the way back to 2009, it was a pretty bleak time for the economy and for Elkhart County in particular: newly elected President Barack Obama had just visited Elkhart because it was the epicenter of economic woe, with an unemployment rate of over 10%. It was nasty out. That recession had affected members of Creekside personally, and had left our community struggling and disheartened. I remember sitting in that Worship meeting and saying “We are the church; how can we share a message of hope?” And Sue Noffsinger said, “How about spreading PB&J? Spreading Praise, Blessing, and Joy?” And the rest is history -- maybe even legend. I still get emails from Sue where she signs off “PB&J!” and I know just what she means. In December, when Sue was supposed to be getting down to business and writing monologues for the Advent season, she sent me original lyrics to a PB&J song instead. We’re going to sing it after the benediction today.

It’s no secret that I love this theme: it’s catchy and easy to remember, has great potential for visuals and for dramatic dialogue, and you can make a lot of snacks and desserts with PB&J, too. But even more than peanut butter and jelly, praise, blessing and joy is something that human beings need. It is something the Bible shows us, it is something with God gives us, and it is something we are encouraged to share with one another.

We don’t know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, but we do have a pretty good idea when it was written and what was going on for those to whom it was written. Authorship was sometime between AD 60 -- about the time of Paul’s earliest letters to the Thessalonians, and AD 95. It isn’t a letter to a specific community, rather it’s an extended sermon (it would take more than an hour to read; I’m not going to do that) . The first people to read or hear it would have been second-generation Christians: the children of parents whose lives would have overlapped with Jesus’ life and ministry. Some of these Christians had grown weary, and were falling away from the faith -- tired or disillusioned that Christ had not yet returned. They had a lot of encouragement to abandon their faith: the Roman empire was actively persecuting Christians; sometimes by marginalizing them

economically and keeping them from having community influence, by seizing or destroying their property, and in some cases killing them show what happens if you didn't offer sacrifice and pledge allegiance to the Roman emperor. It was nasty out. Not just icy, but discouraging and soul crushing and life threatening. The author of Hebrews is trying to encourage Christians to follow Christ's example and to remain faithful, hopeful, loving and patient.

In Hebrews chapter 11, we're reminded of heroes of the Old Testament: those men and women who walked by faith and not by sight; who lived in the assurance of a promise that would happen after their death. *They* are the great cloud of witnesses the author refers to in Chapter 12 verse 1. We are part of the generations since the life and ministry of Jesus Christ who need to remember that our joy is bigger than the nasty things around us. We are the folks the author is referring to at the beginning of chapter 12 when he (or she) writes: "therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." I'm skipping verses 3-11; it's good stuff which I encourage you to read on your own, but I want to highlight verses 12-15, because I think they are especially important for us to hear when things get nasty: "Therefore, lift your drooping hands and straighten your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with everyone, and holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

The Church of the Brethren has not, at least in my experience, been a tradition which uses the language of personal holiness, and the importance of being holy. Maybe it seems too close to the self-righteousness of being holier than thou. But the author of Hebrews is saying that if we don't pursue peace with everyone, and take responsibility for our own actions, other people -- the text says *no one* -- will see the Lord. For me, this is place where Hebrews meets PB&J.

Praise, blessing and joy is first something which Christians give to God. One way we do this is by looking to Jesus, God's Son and the

pioneer and perfecter of our faith. There is nothing that we will have to endure that Christ has not already gone through: Christ has gone through the nastiest stuff the world has to offer, physical suffering, public shame and death, in order to experience the joy of faithfulness which nothing in the world can take away. The life and example of Jesus Christ is why he deserves our praise: it is the assurance of our own blessing and joy. But it is not enough to keep that joy to ourselves. The joy and blessing in our lives is what allows other people to see God; the more other people see God and find that joy in their own lives, the less nastiness there is. The more PB&J we give away, the more there is to go around.

So I have a modest proposal. Some of you have heard it before, but if you're like me, it doesn't hurt to review. My proposal has three parts - I know some of you already do all three of these; if you do, please take this as affirmation and encouragement. I can't guarantee that if you do these things it will make the roads better or keep you from getting the flu, or change the national conversation, but I do believe that these things can change us, and transform the ways we interact with others people and our attitudes about nasty things out there. I challenge you to try it for one day. If you're successful, do it again the next day. If you fail, try again the next day. Are you ready?

1. Don't talk smack about other people. This is the first and lowest bar to clear in pursuing peace with everyone. We can disagree with people, even dislike their positions and how they present them, but personal attacks behind their backs or on social media or in the Creekside parking lot, or wherever folks gather to be unhappy and to complain, is not going to reveal Christ to anyone.

2. Share blessing with others. This is the step to take after you've practiced "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." Maybe you can't get there with everyone immediately; that's OK. Start simply with the people who are easiest for you: say "Be careful, it's nasty out. Have a good day. God bless you. I will pray for you." You don't even have to say it with words: maybe you can scrape off someone's windshield, give them your arm on an icy parking lot, or smile at them. There are many, many ways to bless people. In my experience, I

often feel most blessed when I have tried to bless someone else -- even when I do it reluctantly or imperfectly. There are incredibly gracious people in this congregation and beyond from whom I have learned a lot about my shortcomings and about God's grace.

3. Acknowledge and share that Jesus Christ is our source of blessing and joy. You may have to remind yourself of this truth, especially on days when it's really nasty out, on days when you're tempted to get dragged into the mud. But if we can keep our eyes on Jesus, it will change the way we treat ourselves and others. We may even be bold enough to share this good news with someone else, so that they can see Jesus and obtain the grace of God, too.

Don't talk negatively about people. Share blessing with others. Keep your eyes on Jesus as the source of blessing and joy. Every day is PB&J Day. We can all spread praise, blessing and joy. Amen.