

Welcome back, everyone. It is *good* to see you. No, truly, it is genuinely *good* to see each and everyone of you here today.

As always, we have come to share in Christ, to be partakers of all He is and all He has won for us.

We have come to hear His voice, to be reminded of the stark demands which the Law of God sets forth for us and also the pure freedom and wonderful gifts that He has bestowed upon us by His lived Gospel.

We have come to receive the most tangible of these gifts, that of His body and His blood, where we are confronted with the consequences of both our sin and Christ's love for us, where we may taste and see He who has won the victory and sustains us in each of the day's battles.

We have come to share in the responsibility of His body to respond in prayer and praise. As we receive what He gives, we turn to Him in faithfulness and thanks, communicating both specific praise, maybe for a surgery well-done or a new life given in baptism, and general praise, for absolutely all the magnificent gifts we are given, too many to name.

And we have come to be His hands and feet here in this building, loving one another, and we have come to go, caring for the world around us throughout the week until we return once again.

It is good that you are here, in Church.

It is good that you are here *today*, when we read this lesson from Hebrews, where we are confronted with the reality that just because we are here today, and we have been coming to church for as many days as we have had *today's*, we are warned of the ever-present threat of losing our "*today's when you hear His voice*."

Each week, we assume that we will be here next week (or whenever our schedule allows it); we assume that we will all be together again; we assume that, since we've come to church for so long, this will continue on. We will continue having faith and returning here, at least on a semi-regular basis.

But, you see, the Israelites left us a great and terrible example—those who witnessed God’s remarkable work time after time after time, and heard His Law booming from the top of Sinai and witnessed His great and direct care *for them* in the form of manna and quail and water and pillars of fire and cloud, it was these who became bitter with God and these whom God was disgusted by and, because they were faithless, did not enter the promised land. Those who witnessed with irrefutable evidence the reality of God, and His care for them directly, turned away from Him after years of following Him, and essentially lost it all.

So the warning rings loud and clear. “Today, if you hear His voice do not harden your hearts.” Do not simply presume that you will keep your faith and soft heart—watch out for heart-petrification.

That warning is for you, here and now as we read this text but also every day, from the moment when you have believed until the moment your eyes close the last time, whenever you hear the Word of God, do not harden your hearts, lest you follow in the footsteps of those who perished in the wilderness, dying in the desert on the outside of the promised land, the place of rest.

You see, because we remain sinners, the deceitfulness of sin lingers as a danger. It entices us to believe that sin isn’t that bad, so you either call yourself self-righteous or God a liar, or it cause us to believe that sin can provide needs where God fails to do so. Our sin entices us to trust in other things, to create idols of money or relationships, work or even family, and then to turn to them, away from the living God, developing an evil heart due to unbelief.

But do not fear, for while an evil heart of unbelief is always a risk for as long as we are sinners, you have been given a pure heart because belief, belief in what Christ has done for your sake.

It is in this gift of righteousness that we remain as we constantly come to receive, just as you have today; as you come to hear His voice and receive with it all that He gives; as you come to receive His body and His blood along with the magnificent wonders that these bestows upon us.

Christ, the one who was entirely faithful, not turning His eyes from God for a second allowed Himself to be cut off and marked as unfaithful, as an idolater, dying outside of the promised land and enduring an eternity of death in the desert upon that cross so that we could be both brought in and kept in, among the remnant of faithful ones, God's people, those who will enter the promised Land; and He keeps us here even when our sinful self tries to steal us away from Him back to our idols.

The example of the Israelites is truly terrifying, though, because God was looking after them too. If they who had literally followed a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, who saw nations crumble before them and even heard the voice of God, if they turned to idols and refused to repent, what is keeping us here, what is keeping us faithful?

It is a little thing called grace, and it instills in us a trust, given to us week by week, moment by moment, by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, the Word preached and proclaimed in the sermon and in the absolution, the Word bodied and blooded in Holy Communion, and the Word recalled from the day of our baptism. This grace keeps our hearts softened, because on our own we harden up faster than playdough in an oven.

To be softened isn't necessarily to feel the feelings of church more, to express more sorrow over your sins or to sing louder and more joyfully in a song; having a heart soft isn't necessarily something we can even recognize—it means to have faith. But to be hardened is to begin despising the simple work that is done here by the unassuming gifts that don't present us with any obvious benefits or create explicit change. Or if not to despise these simple workings of God, it can be to ignore what is being done here, not receiving them through faith, or to neglect them, skipping out on church because "it doesn't really matter."

The reality of it is, we cannot do anything to make sure that our hearts are softened—just as it was by the grace of God that we were made into His Children, it is by His grace and His working that we are kept as His children. But we can harden our hearts by making choices that seek out sin and ignore

His call to be nourished here by Him. And the author of the Hebrews is asking, begging, imploring that you not make these choices but instead come, gather, and receive. And in the midst of that, knowing that the threat of faithlessness is ever present isn't to make us work harder but to realize just how much we need to, and *can*, trust God to do. In response to this need, by partaking, and by recognizing what we are partaking of, your hearts will be kept through every storm, held close by the one who was cut off for your sake. This is His promise to each and every person which He has made into His son or daughter, but it is also His promise to the Church as a whole.

We know Christ's promise that His Church will endure to the end, regardless if we are faithful or not, but in today's reading we are invited to care for one another, making sure that each person abides in Christ until the end. It the responsibility of the other believers in the community, to watch out for each other lest their hearts be hardened, preventing that by encouraging each and everyone of your neighbours in the pews to continue steadfast in the receiving of the Gospel. This means we are called to be the hands and feet of Christ, living in the community of the Church.

Now, this act of Christian community isn't particularly difficult—you don't need a degree or diploma. You don't even need to review instructions daily—although reading your bible is a great help in this task as it is in the rest of the Christian life. But to be a Christian community, you simply need to be present.

You can do this by prayer, interceding on their behalf, present with them even when you are not there with them. If you know something is up, pray for them. If you have no clue what's going on, pray for them. Please, as brothers and sisters in Christ, do no forsake each other but instead, honour and cherish each other by caring for them in prayer. And another way to do this is by checking in on them when things seem off. By allowing them—not forcing them— to open up, you give the chance to share their burdens so to carry the weight of life with them. And you can hear their confession, reminding them that God has forgiven them and that their sin does not need to lead them away

We do this by also by simply being present with them, so we can exist as a body. As relationships grow we will learn how to communicate and cooperate and even work through conflict together, and as these basic relational skills develop, we will be better prepared to support each other when life isn't going so well, and then through highs and lows, we will continue to come, for as long as it is called today to receive these gifts of Christ and Him crucified, so all our hearts may be softened by His grace so we may hold fast this gift of faith until the end.

Amen