The Letter to the Hebrews is addressed to the fledgling church – Jews who were following Jesus and trying to figure out their identity in a confusing world. Were they still Jews? What did coming of Jesus mean? How were they to live now? It also was a time when they faced possible persecution from the Romans and ostracism from their Jewish community.

The section we read today is toward the end of the letter. Up until now the letter has talked much about theology and practice, history and identity – who Jesus is and who they are. Now the writer of the letter gives them some practical advice about living in Christian community. He begins with “Let mutual love continue.” or in the New International Version, “Keep loving each other.”

This is a good place to begin. “Keep loving each other.” Everything else follows from that. In the Gospels we are told the two most important commandments are to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. All of the law and prophets – all other teaching and commandments follow from those two.

So… we need to love…. love God… and love neighbor. But what does it mean to love? Well, this may be old news to you but I think it bears repeating. Love is not a warm feeling that we have in our heart. Love is an action. It is good to feel affection for one another. We may feel warmly about another person but it doesn’t really matter if we don’t actively support and help that person. Also, we may love others and not have those warm and cuddly feelings about them. Love is not sentimental. Love is real. Love is where the rubber meets the road.
So this letter starts out with the writer urging the congregation to keep loving each other. I think sometimes it’s easier to love someone across the world than it is to love someone across the pew. Living and loving in community is hard work. We have treasured memories together and a beautiful history. We also have old resentments and new hurts. We are asked to continue to lay those aside and love each other – in word and in deed.

We are also called to love those outside our community. Show hospitality to strangers because you might be, like Abraham and Sarah, entertaining angels without even knowing it! I heard a beautiful story about hospitality this week on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition. In South Africa Independence Day is a somber holiday. The end of apartheid is recalled and those who suffered and died are remembered. As the story’s reporter explained it’s sort of a “never again” rather than “please pass the ketchup” event like our own national holiday.

A South African man named Jan Scannell dreamed of having a holiday that would bring all South Africans together. In a country where the people are of many different origins and eleven languages are spoken this is no small feat. Scannell found it in Braai, traditional South African barbeque. You see, Braai is a tradition that they all have in common. Everyone eats Braai in South Africa and it has to be cooked over a wood fire. So the people who share the Braai have to stand around a wood fire for a long time while it cooks, and while they stand around the fire they chat with one another. Scannell said he wanted to take the unity that Mandela inspired in them out from behind the podium and onto the front porch. Unity through preparing a shared meal. That sounds to me like something Jesus would do.

Speaking of which – this is kind of getting back to loving each other, but in the Church of the Brethren we have this very precious tradition called the Love Feast, in which we celebrate our unity through preparing and celebrating a shared meal. I started thinking about Braai Day
and wondered if perhaps the cooking of the meal might possibly become as sacred a time as the serving and eating of the meal. What a blessing, a privilege, to have a day set aside to lovingly prepare a meal for others. We have something else planned for the preparation of the fall Love Feast but next spring, on Maundy Thursday, I plan to be in the kitchen with anyone who would like to join me for a day of prayerful intention in our Highland Avenue kitchen – preparing a meal with others as a spiritual practice.

But back to our Letter to the Hebrews. Next the author tells them to remember those in prison as if they were in prison themselves. And remember those who are being tortured as if you were actually in their body. This is deep, deep empathy – full solidarity. A few weeks ago we sang the anthem Lift Every Voice and Sing. It’s also known as the African-American National Anthem. Although it’s an amazing, inspirational piece of music and I really love to belt that anthem out, I always cringe a little singing the second verse. Here are the lyrics:

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered;
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered;
Out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

I think to myself, “Oh my goodness. How can I, as a white person, dare to sing this?” But when I realize that those who suffered and died under slavery were my brothers and sisters, when I remember that I am asked to feel their pain as if it were my own, I do sing. I humbly sing in memory of them and in solidarity with their descendants. We are one people. Our history is one. Our future is one. Our God is one. There is a beautiful quote from an aboriginal activist group in Queensboro, Australia from the 70’s that says, “If you have come here to help me, you are
wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Continuing his discussion of loving one another, the author of the letter to the Hebrews warns them not to love money – to be content with what they have. Interestingly, he connects the love of money with a lack of trust in God and a fear of abandonment. We can let go of our money because God is trustworthy and will take care of us in all circumstances. One of the commentaries I read this week said, “Jesus takes us by one hand, which enables us to loosen our grip on our money with the other.”

The letter writer then talks about sexual fidelity and chastity. These things are not new and were as much a problem in the cultural context of those who originally read this letter as it is in our cultural context today. As Christians we are called to be counter-cultural about sex. The gift of sexuality should be part of a committed, covenanted, loving relationship. It is not to be used casually – as people are not meant to be used casually. We are to honor our marriage vows by being faithful and loving. Love, remember is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling. Love is how we act and what we do in relationship. And mutual love is the sign of the Christian community. Biblical Thomas Long notes that community can actually be destroyed by love if we are loving the wrong things (like money) or people (as in adultery).

At the heart of the Christian community is the embodiment of God’s own love, Jesus. And Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In Jesus we are assured of God’s steadfast love and presence with us. This frees us to live and to love others generously. I’d like to suggest a little practical exercise in loving to you all. Think of someone in the congregation that is hard for you to love. You know the person I’m talking about. Usually when we are having a hard time loving someone it’s more about us than them but in any case, think of
that person. I want you to pray for that person every day for several weeks. My guess is that after a while you will start to see that person differently – start to see them with God’s eyes, the eyes of love.

I want to leave you with the story of Antoinette Tuff, the school bookkeeper who kept gunman Michael Hall from shooting up a grade school. It’s a miraculous story. I was tempted to just play the audio tape of the 911 call as my sermon. And if you get a chance, go online and listen to the call. It’s an amazing example of Christian love.

Michael came in armed with 500 rounds of ammunition with the intention of shooting up the school. But instead of a terrorist, Antoinette Tuff was able to see a mentally ill young man who was suffering. Over the course of 25 minutes you can hear Antoinette helping him decide to lay his weapons down and surrender to the police. He tells her that he’s mentally ill and off his medication. He tells her that it doesn’t matter if he dies. Then he tells her that he should have just gone to the hospital instead of doing this. Antoinette shares her own story with Michael, telling him that she tried to kill herself after her husband left her and that she has a child with multiple disabilities. She gives herself as a living example of surviving difficult times.

But the two most important things that she tells Michael are “I will go with you.” And “I love you.” When she and Michael are trying to figure out how he will surrender to the police she says, “Will you go out and surrender to the police if I go with you? I will walk with you.” She repeatedly asks the 911 operator, “If I go with him, they won’t shoot him, right? He is giving up.” When Michael tells her that everyone will hate him she says, “We’re not going to hate you, baby. It’s a good thing you’re giving up so we’re not going to hate you.” At Michael’s request, she delivers his message over the intercom, “He wants me to tell everyone that he is sorry.”
Eventually Michael had Antoinette lay his weapons down on the other side of the room and he lies down on floor with his hands behind his back. As they are waiting for the police she asks them twice to hold off while Michael prepares himself and gets a drink of water. Right before the police come in she says, “It’s gonna be alright. I just want you to know that I love you and I’m proud of you. It’s going to be ok.”

In a culture where the solution to violence at home and abroad is often fear and more violence, Antoinette is an example of Christian love and her 30 minutes with Michael turned out to be an in-breaking of the sacred, a sign of hope in a fearful world. Just as Jesus said to us, “I will be with you,” and “I love you.” (Emmanuel – God With Us.), Antoinette said to Michael, “I will be with you. And I love you.” And just as it was confusing for the early church, it can be confusing for us to remember who we are, to recall our identity in a culture that encourages violence, infidelity, mistrust, and greed. May God give us the courage to be a sign of Christian love in our community, living audacious lives of love as we seek to follow Jesus, loving our God and our neighbor. Amen.