Sermon by Rev. Brian Bechtel at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights on September 1st, 2019. 
Year C, Proper 17. Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 
(Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever)

One event that I look forward to participating in every week here at St. Paul’s is the “Men’s Spirituality Group.” We actually meet over at Tommy’s on Coventry at 7:30 on Thursdays, and he opens the restaurant just for our group before any other customers can come in. And every week we have a great time talking about faith, God, the church, the sacraments, Jesus, and many other things besides! Recently I have had a couple of different people talk to me about their concerns that Christianity can be “exclusionary.” The concern is that if Jesus is THE TRUTH, THE WAY, and THE LIFE, does that not automatically mean that we are setting ourselves up to be in tension and strife with our neighbors? Of course, a couple of weeks ago Rev. Jessie reminded us about the value of engaging in healthy conflicts when necessary in her sermon on the “Smokey the Bear effect.” But setting that aside for now, and assuming that we want healthy and caring relationships with our neighbors, doesn’t worshiping Jesus Christ and claiming for him titles like KING of KINGS and LORD of LORDs set us up for needless conflict with those who see things differently?

Like many questions that come up in Christian fellowship groups, this is a deep one that can have more than one legitimate answer. I believe that our Scripture passage from the letter to the Hebrews helps to shed some light to guide our thinking on this question. Today is the last of four Sundays in our lectionary where we hear a reading from the letter to the Hebrews. Today’s passage comes
from the concluding chapter, and it contains the only direct ethical injunctions in the entire letter!

The theme of the passage is set in motion with the first line: “Let mutual love continue.” On the one hand, this “mutual love” is referring directly to the love of the Christian community. It is in line with Jesus’ teaching that his disciples should love one another, and he has loved us. But this divine love, Christian love, is not to be kept in one place; the exclusive property of “insiders.” For right after being told to let “mutual love continue,” the author reminds us not to neglect our duty to be hospitable to strangers, and that by doing so we might entertain angels without being aware of it. This is a reference to Abraham and Sarah in the book of Genesis, who show hospitality to two strangers who turn out to be messengers from God with good news! This goes against our natural inclination to be suspicious of anyone we do not know. Far from building a wall between us and our neighbors of others faiths, people we do know, our Scripture tells us rather to build bridges of relationship by showing hospitality even to those we do not know at all!

The letter continues by telling the community to REMEMBER those in prison, as if we our selves were in prison. What is more, we are told explicitly to remember the victims of torture, as if we ourselves were being tortured! The idea that we are to “remember” those in prison is not the trite notion of sending “thoughts and prayers” so common in our time. In Biblical language, “to remember” is to take action, like when the people ask God to “remember” his covenant with them, they are praying for God to take action. So here the author is asking the community of the faithful to visit and care for the needs of the most powerless and downtrodden.
We have around 1.5 million adults in prison in this country. Ironically, though the United States like to think of itself as the land of the free, the prison numbers a per capita are far greater than most other developed nations. It is a dysfunctional system on many levels, and unspeakably cruel, but I believe that one of the reasons that the problems of the system persist is that, for many of us, it is a problem that is out of sight and out of mind. So we don’t really have to think about. Thus the scripture’s injunction to “remember” as if we ourselves where there. The scripture is asking us not for a passing thought, but for empathy! The scripture asks us to put ourselves in their shoes. The scripture asks us to build a bridge and not a wall.

After a couple other reminders to stay faithful in our marriages, and to be careful to not love money more than God (both staples of Christian morality), the letter then asks the listeners to “consider the outcome of the way of life” of the church leaders and to “imitate their faith.” It is not clear if the author has in mind the Apostles here, or other Christian leaders, but either way being put in prison or being tortured for your faith was a real possibility at that time! And yet, even with that possible outcome in clear view, the hearers are asked to live like and have faith like the Apostles. And they can have the strength to do this because Jesus Christ gives them the strength that they do not have in themselves alone. The author of the letter, who by the way MIGHT have been a woman, gives us one of the most beloved lines of Christology: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” For Christians, both THEN and NOW, it is Jesus Christ who is our ultimate good, and the ground of our hope.
And so we can see how our Holy Scripture can add a completely new
dimension to the question that was brought up at the Men’s Spirituality Group
breakfast. Yes, as Christians we unabashedly worship Jesus as the King of Kings and
Lord of Lords. Jesus is our Great High Priest who makes intercession for us to the
Father. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who tenderly cares for us and seeks after us
when we are lost. Jesus is God Incarnate! BUT in worshiping Jesus as our chief good
above all others, we do so not to build walls between us and our neighbors, content
to pat ourselves on the back for having the “right view.” It is in and through our
faith in Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, that we are given
the strength to “REMEMBER” those who society would much rather forget. As
Christians we give our hearts to Jesus Christ, first for healing, but also for
strengthening, that being renewed in him we may return to the world and
“REMEMBER” the strangers and the prisoners and the downtrodden.