

Heb. 5:1 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; 3 and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. 4 And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,  
“You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you”;  
6 as he says also in another place,  
“You are a priest forever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Heb. 5:7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10 having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

## PULPIT NOMINATING COMMITTEE

Have any of you been on a Pulpit Nominating Committee? That's the committee in the Presbyterian Church that is charged with selecting a new pastor when a church is without a pastor. It's not an easy job.

There are many meetings to attend, and there is a heavy sense of responsibility. Most people on that committee are haunted by these questions: Suppose we get the wrong person? Suppose the church suffers because of our bad choice?

One of the first things that a Pulpit Nominating Committee does is fill out a Church Information Form. The answers on that form are based upon a mission study that is completed by the whole congregation.

The congregation tries to talk about who they are and where they want to go as a church. In this way they develop a job description for their church. Some churches want a pastor who is a good administrator. Some churches want a pastor who is a skilled educator. Other churches want a pastor who is a stellar preacher.

The committee lists the five or six characteristics that they think are most important, and then they try to match

themselves up with ministers who are open to a call and have skills that they need.

This can be quite a long and drawn out process.

Pulpit nominating committees can look at hundreds of resumes. And there is no guarantee of success. In fact it is almost certain that no minister will live up to the expectations of everyone. A new minister told a congregation that I served in North Carolina,

“I will make all of you happy at one time or another. Some of you will be happy to see me come. Some of you will be happy while I’m here. And some of you will be happy when I leave.”

I’ve always liked that story because his comments acknowledge that no minister, no matter how qualified can do it all. There will always be something that he or she cannot do well and someone that he or she cannot please.

## A GOOD PRIEST

We have great expectations for those who lead in the church. But, what does the Bible say about good leadership? How can we evaluate the qualifications of those who would represent us before God?

In our lesson for today we learn the characteristics that make a good priest.

First a priest is chosen to do the task by God. A priest does not take this honor upon himself. God decides who represents the people before God.

So, in the final analysis priests are chosen and not made. No matter how careful we are in training and selecting our leaders, we need to remember that the most important step is being open, truly open to the call of God.

When I work with Pulpit Nominating Committees I always try to emphasize this point. I say,

“Though you have work to do in selecting a new pastor, remember that ultimately what you’re trying to do is get your will in sync with God’s will. God is calling a person to your church, but that person might be quite different from the one you’re seeking.”

This is always the difficult part of discerning God’s will. What we want and what God knows we need are often two different things. When it comes to Christian leadership there must be a sense of trust and openness to the call of God.

So, if it is God who chooses the priest, the one who represents us before God what kind of person does God choose?

Does God choose the best and the brightest? Does God choose priests who are perfect or at least nearly so?

Actually, it is quite the opposite. God does not always choose the best and brightest. God does not choose the most courageous.

God chooses the ordinary. God chooses the weak and the foolish. God chooses people who understand what it means to lose.

In other words the most effective priest is not the one who is a cut above everyone else.

The most effective priest is the priest who knows weakness and pain. The most effective priest has compassion for his people because he or she has also experienced failure. The most effective priest knows what it means to come up short in life.

And so when that priest prays for the people in worship, that priest always includes himself or herself in that prayer. When that priest makes sacrifices it is not only for

the sins of the people but also for his or her own sins as well.

Ministry is often done best by those who lead not with their strength but with their weakness. The most effective healers are often wounded healers.

## PETER

I wonder if that is why Jesus seemed to put Peter in charge of the disciples. Peter certainly wasn't the brightest or the most courageous of the disciples. In fact more often than not he said the wrong thing and did the wrong thing. He denied knowing Jesus at the crucial moment.

But, it was Peter who was restored by the risen Jesus on the seashore, and it was Peter who was given the task to care for and feed Jesus' sheep in the days to come.

Peter didn't qualify for that task because he was strong and faithful. Peter qualified for that job because he knew what it meant to be a failure.

I think that Peter is a good model for ministry.

A good minister, a good priest is able to see his or her own weakness in the weakness of others. A good minister identifies with the people he or she serves.

A good minister is above all a compassionate person who is able to deal gently with those who are “ignorant and wayward” because the minister recognizes some of that same ignorance and waywardness in his or her own life. (Hebrews 5:2)

## THE HIGH PRIEST

The ultimate model for ministry is of course is Jesus himself.

Jesus is called the high priest by the writer of Hebrews. Jesus is not just any priest; Jesus is the one chosen by God to be a minister to the people. Jesus is God’s own Son, a priest forever.

The ministry of Jesus is unique compared to the ministry of those priests who came before him. Jesus was without sin. Jesus was the perfect priest, the perfect mediator between God and humanity.

But, this doesn’t mean that Jesus did not feel the pain of his people. On the contrary Jesus understood suffering and temptation very well.

In Hebrews 4:15 we read,

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are ... yet was without sin.”

Our lesson for today spells out what this means in more detail in a reference to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus offered up prayers with loud cries and tears as he came struggled with the looming crucifixion.

And there were other instances in the Gospel when Jesus is presented as a Savior who is moved to tears, not by his own needs but by the needs of others.

I think of the time when he weeps over the death of his friend, Lazarus and those that were grieving over his death. I think of the time when Jesus was deeply moved by the needs of the crowd who were (as he put it) like “sheep without a shepherd.”

The prayers of Jesus illustrate the depth of his identification with us. His prayers were not offered in a serene sanctuary isolated from human need and pain. The prayers of Jesus were offered in the middle of the storm.



They were fervent and passionate cries accompanied with tears.

Jesus is a high priest who stands in solidarity with us in our weakness and mortality. Like us Jesus cries out to God for help.

Why is this important? Why does salvation depend upon a high priest who is subject to weakness?

Why is it necessary to have a high priest who prays in crisis and is a part of the human experience? Why does Jesus' service as high priest require his identification with us?

## THE MAN AND THE BIRDS

In a story entitled "The Man and the Birds" Louis Cassels told of a man who refused to attend a Christmas Eve service with his family because he did not believe in the incarnation, the idea that God Himself became one of us in the birth of Jesus.

So the man remained at home, where it began to snow.

Minutes later, he heard what he thought was someone throwing snowballs against his window. Going outside to

investigate, he found a flock of birds trying to fly through his window as they sought refuge from the storm.

He thought that they might find shelter in his barn, and he made his way there. He opened the doors and turned on the light, but the birds stayed outside.

He created a trail of bread crumbs for them to follow into the barn, but that didn't work either. He tried to shoo them into the barn, but that effort also proved unsuccessful.

“If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety.”

At that moment, the church bells began to ring, and the man sank to his knees in the snow.

“Now I understand,” he whispered. “Now I see why you had to do it.”

So we see that a good priest is one who identifies with us in every way. A good priest is one who shares our joys and sorrows. A good priest can communicate the love of God because he or she speaks our language.

And Jesus is our role model when it comes to the priesthood.

## PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

But, don't think that the job of priest is limited to Jesus and some people like me whom we hire to be our spokesmen before God.

In the Protestant church we have a doctrine called "The Priesthood of All Believers." This is the belief that we all have direct access to God through Christ. All believers can approach the throne of God's grace with confidence in the name of Jesus.

But, with this great privilege there also comes a great responsibility. Our call is like the call of Peter. Jesus calls us to feed his sheep.

All believers are also called to be priests. We are called to mediate the love of God to those who need it most. We are called to stand with those who suffer in the tradition of our great high priest, Jesus.

Remember that Jesus told his disciples many times that they too must take up a cross and follow him. Redemptive suffering was to be a part of their lives as well.

And those of us who have been called to be disciples of Jesus today have also received this same charge.

The ministry of compassion, suffering for and with the people of God is not just the job of Jesus or those specially called like a priest or minister. The ministry of compassion is the job that each of us is called to do.

Jesus once said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

This is the great paradox of the Christian faith. It is only by losing ourselves that we find new life. When we bury our ambition and selfish aims then we are of real use to God.

## NO EARLY RETIREMENT

A New England school teacher took early retirement because of health problems. One day she was visited by a divinity student who asked her for help. He told her he felt inadequate for the task before him.

The task was visiting women who were prisoners in jail. The retired school teacher, Dorthea Dix, agreed to help.

While visiting these prisoners Dorthea saw things she did not know existed. All the women were mixed together ... those who were insane and those who were murderers living right alongside of those guilty of only misdemeanors.

Dorthea was so moved by what she saw that she dedicated the rest of her life to helping these women.

For forty years despite poor health and a weak body, she labored for others. When she died, thirty mental hospitals had been established as a result of her work.

Apparently, in losing her life in the suffering of others, Dorthea Dix found her life.

## FLY INTO THE STORM

Missionary E. Stanley Jones wrote,  
“Once I watched an eagle in the Himalayan mountains face a storm.

It was a heavy storm brewing on the edge of the valley. I wondered what the eagle would do as the storm rushed through that narrow valley.

Would it fly above the fury of the storm? Would it be dashed to pieces on the rocks below?

No, it set its wings in such a way that the air currents sent him above the storm by their very fury.

It didn't bear the storm; it used it to reach greater heights. It obeyed the laws of nature and endured the storm."

We can be like that eagle when we are confronted with the storms of life. Like our perfect priest, Jesus, we can set our wings directly into that storm of pain and suffering and trust our God to deliver us to higher ground.

## WITH US TO THE END

Despite his busy schedule during the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln often visited the hospitals to cheer the wounded. On one occasion he saw a young fellow who was near death.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" the president asked. "Please write a letter to my mother," the young boy replied.

Unrecognized by the soldier the Chief Executive sat down and wrote as the youth told him what to say. The letter read,

“My dearest mother, I was badly hurt while doing my duty, and I won’t recover. Don’t sorrow too much for me. May God bless you and Father. Kiss Mary and John for me.”

The young man was too weak to go on, so Lincoln signed the letter for him and then added this postscript: “Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln.”

Asking to see the note the young man was astonished.

“Are you really our president?”

“Yes. Now is there anything else I can do?”

The young man said, “Will you please hold my hand? I think it would help to see me through to the end.”

The tall, gaunt man granted his request, offering warm words of encouragement until death stole in with the dawn. This young man was better able to endure those last hours because someone important was by his side.

How much more will we be able to endure our time of trial when we realize that by our side is the high priest who brings us life eternal?

Let us set our wings into the teeth of the storm and proclaim the good news far and wide.

God is with us in thick and thin. God loves us. And God will lead us home.

Amen.