

Hebrews 5:1-10

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.”

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 seeking a new 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. And most churches want it all!

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. After all it takes a long time to find a Messiah!

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.

This past week I had the privilege of preaching at my former church in Burlington, NC. It was great to see old friends and remember good times.

That church was what I call a story telling church. They had a story for every situation. And when I first arrived as their pastor they told me this story about what one of their former ministers said when he first arrived on the scene,

“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.”

That story was a great gift to a new minister. They knew I wanted to do a good job and was excited to start work. But, through that story they were gently reminding me that I was just a human being.

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 something like this,

“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, and 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.

These past few weeks the nominating committee has been asking people in the church if they were consider serving as an elder, people who will represent us before God. This is always an exciting and important time in the life of any church. The right leader at the right time makes all the difference.

But, there is one thing that I insist upon in this

process. I ask that those under consideration should not say yes or no to this call right away. Instead, I ask that they pray about it for a day or two.

Why do I insist upon this? It's based upon my conviction that the most important part of this process is the call of God. It is God who calls us to service in his Kingdom. How can we know if we are being called if we do not take time to pray about it?

Many stories in the Bible suggest that the call of God is surprising.

God called Moses. Moses was a tongue-tied shepherd who was trying to run away from his past. God called Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a very young man without credentials or experience who felt inadequate for the job. God called Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who was overwhelmed with a sense of his own sin and the sin of his people.

Do you see the pattern? God doesn't call the best and the brightest. God doesn't call prophets and priests who are perfect or even near perfect. Actually, it is quite the opposite.

God chooses (as the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians) the foolish.

God chooses the ordinary. God chooses the weak. 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 the 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)

This was why Peter was able to feed the sheep. And this is why we can do ministry as well. We don't do it out of a sense of strength. We do it out of a sense of weakness.

THE HIGH PRIEST

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

The writer of Hebrews calls Jesus the high priest. 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 what he had to face.

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.

The prayers of Jesus 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 cried out to God for help.

A PRIEST FOREVER

It won't be long before we will be into the season of Advent and will be deep into the mystery of the

incarnation. John tells us, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That’s what Hebrews is talking about as well. The Divine becomes a part of the Human. Eternity becomes a part of the world when Jesus comes upon the scene.

Today’s Scripture tells us that this human, passionate Jesus who knows what it means to be tempted, who knows what it means to be mortal, who knows what it is to grieve, this same Jesus is also a priest forever. Verse 10 tells us Jesus is “designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Now who in the world is Melchizedek, and why is he so important? I’m glad you asked.

Long ago Abraham was called by God to go where God would lead him. Abraham followed our pattern of God’s surprising choice. In this case God called Abraham and Sarah to pull up roots and move to a new place.

More than that, he called them to have children. Abraham, he said, would be the father of many through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. There was only one problem with that.

Abraham and Sarah were very old. In fact the Bible

said they were so old that they were as good as dead! But, Abraham was a righteous man. He trusted God. And he wandered through the wilderness for many years. Finally he settled by the Oaks at Mamre. But, his life was anything but settled

He and his wife still had no children. More than that, they ran into trouble. Abraham had a disagreement with his nephew, Lot. And, subsequently Abraham found himself in the middle of a war, a war among many kings in order to save his nephew.

No doubt Abraham must have wondered many times if it was all a big mistake. Did God really call him? But, Abraham won the war, and the kings that Abraham defeated paid tribute as they met in the valley.

And it's at this point in the story that we get a glimpse of the mysterious Melchizedek that is mentioned in our lesson for today. Melchizedek literally means "King of Righteousness." He's also identified as "The King of Salem." Salem means peace. Another title given his is "El Elyon" which means "God Most High."

Melchizedek comes into the valley with the others kings, and he offers bread and wine. And he blesses

Abraham. Except for being mentioned in Psalm 110 that is quoted in our lesson for today, this is the last time we hear about Melchizedek. The rabbis were always puzzled by figure. Who was this guy? Why did father Abraham show such deference toward him?

There were some who suspected that he was a messianic figure. And they were right. The King of Righteousness, the King of Peace, the High Priest of the God Most High comes among the kings. He offers a blessing and a meal of bread and wine.

Does any of that sound familiar to you? Does this priest sound like someone you know?

When Abraham is at his lowest and his life is spinning out of control this priest-king comes into his life with a sacramental meal. Abraham didn't ask for him. He just came.

And so, centuries later in the wake of the death and resurrection of Jesus, those first Christians remembered this story. And they identified this priestly king. It was Jesus.

Jesus wasn't born yesterday. He was always there ministering to God's people in the Old Testament,

bringing the same meal and the same righteousness and the same peace.

Jesus is the High Priest in the Order of Melchizedek. Jesus is like Melchizedek. When we need him he comes into our life. He comes with peace and righteousness and blessing and a sacred meal. Jesus comes into our life when we need him most. Jesus rides into our valley and brings us exactly what we need.

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

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 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 is a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, and we are baptized into that same order. We too show up in the valley and give people what the people need the most during a time of trial. We too show up and bring a word of peace. We too show up with a righteous word in the middle of a chaotic and destructive world.

We come into the world in the name of Jesus and bring a sacrament of hope. We bring the bread of eternal life and the wine of forgiveness. And the Spirit of Jesus is right there with us in that valley.

And when Jesus comes into the valley, nothing is ever the same again. Amen.