

“Wounded Healers”

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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.

PRIESTS AND POLITICIANS

In just a few weeks we will be voting for people to represent us in Tallahassee and Washington.

They will...hopefully...accurately represent our needs and our dreams in those places of power.

We elect them not because they are perfect or because they agree with us on all issues.

We elect them because they live here. They understand what it's like to be a resident of Central Florida.

That's why they are our representatives.

Maybe the worst thing you can say about a candidate for elected office is:

"They're not from around here. They come from somewhere else."

In order to be an effective representative, more than anything else, you have to be from "around here".

This week I was struggling to come up with an example of what it means to be a priest. And it occurred to me that our elected representatives are a good analogy.

Just as our politicians represent us in the place of power, so the priest represented the people before God.

The writer of Hebrews takes us back to Old Testament times.

In those days the high priest was chosen to represent the people before God. He would offer gifts and sacrifices for the sins of his people.

But, the priest not only offered sacrifices for the sins of his people. The priest also offered sacrifices *for his own sins*. The high priest was not above the people. He was one of the people.

He lived with them. He had the same problems and faults that the people had.

And that's what qualified the priest to be their representative before God.

He could deal gently with this wayward and ignorant people because he was just like them.

THE STRENGTH OF WEAKNESS

Most folks who seek to represent us in the halls of power don't talk about their weakness.

They talk about their strengths, about how they are better than their opponent.

They talk about how they are self made men or women.

They talk about how they came from a challenging childhood to achieve great things.

They worked hard and now they deserve to have our vote.

But, this is not a characteristic that necessarily makes a good priest.

Instead of bragging about his strength, the priest recognizes that he has the same faults as the people he represents.

He too is ignorant and wayward.
He too is weak.

And so once again we see the big difference between God's ways and the ways of the world.

God doesn't choose people to lead because of their strength.
God chooses people to lead because of their weakness.

A good leader in God's kingdom is willing to "own" his or her vulnerability.

God doesn't choose us because we are strong.
God chooses us because we are weak.

God doesn't choose us because we are extraordinary.
God chooses us because we are ordinary.

God chooses people who understand what it means to lose, to be afraid,
and to be overwhelmed by grief.

God chooses people who are haunted by a past that they can't change.

In other words, God chooses people just like us.

The most effective priest is not the one
who fancies himself to be a cut above everyone else.

The most effective priest is the priest who knows pain.
The most effective priest has compassion that is born out of hard experience.

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 in that prayer.

When that priest makes sacrifices,
it is not only for the sins of the people but also for his own sins as well.

WOUNDED HEALERS

That's still true.
Those who lead the congregation in the confession of sin
include themselves among those who fall short of God's glory.

We pray the prayer of confession together for a reason.
We have all sinned.

And when I declare the pardon, it is God's pardon, not mine.
The declaration of pardon is always a word from Scripture and not my own word.

We're in this together.

When I provide communion for this congregation,

I also receive the bread and the wine and the promise of forgiveness.

I always take communion with you.

Why? Because his body is broken for me,
and his blood is shed for me.

I need forgiveness and salvation just as much as anyone else.

Ministry is more effective when it is done by those
who lead not with their strength
but with their weakness.

Henri Nouwen called these broken ministers, the wounded healers.

Our lesson tells us that a good priest is above all a compassionate person.
He is able to deal gently with those who are “ignorant and wayward”.

If the priest recognizes that same ignorance and waywardness in his own
life,
if he can identify with the problems of his people,
he will be a more loving person.
(Hebrews 5:2)

THE WOUNDED HEALER

The ultimate model for ministry is of course is Jesus.
He is the ultimate Wounded Healer.

The writer of Hebrews calls Jesus the high priest.

But, Jesus is not just any priest;
He is the one chosen by God.

He is God's own Son.
He is a priest forever.

Jesus was the perfect one to bridge the gap between God and humanity.
And how did He do that?

By taking the suffering of the world upon his shoulders.

We read last week that we have a Savior who can sympathize with our weaknesses. (Hebrews 4:15)

One way that he can sympathize with our weakness is temptation.

He experienced temptation, just like us.

This week we learn that he also experienced suffering, just like us

In a reference to the Garden of Gethsemane, we read that Jesus offered up prayers with loud cries and tears. The cross was a heavy burden to bear. And this burden brought forth a prayer of such passion and force that it changed everything, forever.

The rabbis taught, “There are three kinds of prayers each loftier than the preceding

—prayer, crying, and tears.”

In the prayers of Jesus we see this progression. For Jesus, prayer was no mere formality. It was a cry that came from the depth of his soul.

And it’s important to note that Jesus’ prayers and tears in the Garden were not just for himself.

They were also for us.

We know this because the whole life of Jesus was marked by compassion for those who were weak and struggling.

Several times in the gospels Jesus is moved by the sorrow and weakness of others.

When Lazarus died, Jesus weeps. (John 11:33-35)

He weeps because he has lost a friend.
And He weeps because he witnesses
the sorrow of Lazarus' friends and family.

I think of the time when Jesus was deeply moved
by the needs of the hapless crowd.
He literally got sick to his stomach
because of their suffering.

They were (as he put it) like "sheep without a shepherd." (ex. Matthew
9:36, Mark 6:34)

And he had compassion upon them.
The tearful prayers of Jesus
illustrate the depth of this compassion.

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, passionate cries.
His eyes were filled with tears when he prayed.

The passionate prayers of Jesus teach us that we have a high priest
who stands with us when we are weak and broken by life.

And the tears of Jesus still flow for his people.

Jesus still takes the suffering
and pain of the world to heart.

MELCHIZEDEK

Can you believe that the season of Advent is right around the corner?

If you don't believe it, just go to Home Depot.
The Christmas trees are already out!
Where did the time go? Right?

Well, this passage is like those Christmas trees at Home Depot.
It offers us a preview of the season that will be here before you know it.

It's about the mystery of the incarnation...
the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

The passage is another way of describing how the Divine has become a
part of our world.

This very 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 very special priest.

Verse 10 tells us Jesus is
“designated by God a high priest
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Now what does that mean?
Who in the world is Melchizedek,
and why is he so important?

And what do we mean when we say that Jesus is a part of his order?

The name Melchizedek literally means
“King of Righteousness.”

He's also identified in the Bible as
“The King of Salem” or the “King of Peace”,
And “God Most High.”

We first hear about him in the Old Testament.
He mysteriously shows up after Abraham rescues his nephew, Lot from
some marauding kings.

And this “priest of God most high”
brings bread and wine
to celebrate the occasion.

And he blesses Abraham.
Abraham then gives the priest
a tenth of all that he has.

The next time we hear about Melchizedek
is in the Psalms.

In Psalm 110 a king is promised that he will be:

“a priest forever according
to the order of Melchizedek.”

These brief passages are all we have about Melchizedek until we get to our
passage for today.

Melchizedek was always
a puzzling figure for the rabbis.

Except for these brief cameo appearances they don't know anything about
him.

Why did Abraham and the Psalmist
think he was so important?

There were some who suspected that maybe he was the Messiah.

A PRIEST FOREVER

In our passage for today that suspicion is confirmed.
Jesus is the one the Psalmist was talking about.

He is the Messiah.
And He is much more.

He is the human presence of the most high God.
He is the one who will be “a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

This King of Righteousness, this King of Peace, this High Priest of the Most
High God also comes among us and offers a blessing.

He serves a meal of bread and wine.
We call it the Lord's Supper.

You see, Jesus is a "priest forever".
And that means his priestly ministry continues even today.
But, how does that happen?

How does the ministry of Jesus continue forever?

PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

It continues through those
that God in Christ calls today.

There are still priests who are called
to represent the people before God.

But, exactly who is called?
Is it just ministers and other religious professionals?

We in the Reformed Tradition would say "no".

The number called to this eternal priesthood
is much greater than just the religious professionals.

We would say that all believers
are called to be priests.
"The Priesthood of All Believers" means that we all have direct access to
God through Christ.

All believers can approach
the throne of God's grace with confidence
because in Jesus Christ we are forgiven

But, with this great privilege there also comes responsibility.

FEED MY SHEEP

In the gospel of John the risen Christ
forgives Peter for denying him.

But, that forgiveness comes a charge,
a new responsibility.

Three times Jesus asks Peter,
“Do you love me?”
And three times Peter responds the same way,
“You know I love you Lord.”

And three times Jesus tells him,
“Feed my sheep.”

In other words, be a priest.
Represent the people before God.

Care for God’s people.
Make the love and forgiveness of God
a reality in the world.

Our call is like the call of Peter.
Jesus calls us to feed his sheep.

As priests we are called to mediate the love of God
to those who need it most.

We are called to stand for and with those who suffer.

In the tradition of our great high priest,
we too become wounded healers.

We not only pray for ourselves
We also pray for others.

Like Jesus we also cry out to God for justice.
And we shed tears for all those
who are broken by life.

THE CROSS OF COMPASSION

Remember that Jesus told his disciples many times
that they too must take up a cross in order to follow him.

Redemptive suffering was
to be a part of their lives.

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 for 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 show up in the valley of suffering
to bring a word of healing.

We show up in the valley of war
to bring a word of peace.

We show up in the valley of destruction
to bring a word of renewal and hope.

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.

The world often finds itself in the valley of despair.
There is chaos and fear wherever we turn.

But, we believe that
despite the evil that surrounds us,
the priesthood of Jesus is forever.

The Spirit of the living Christ
is right here with us in that valley.

The Spirit of God and the living Christ
falls afresh on us each day.

When we are like sheep without a shepherd,
he feeds us the bread of life.

When we are filled with sorrow,
he wipes away our tears and keeps watch with us.

And he charges us to do the same in his name.

Amen.