

HEBREWS 5:1-10 and LUKE 18:9-14, July 16, 2017

“Jesus, Our High Priest” Rev. Patricia Weatherwax

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. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

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”;

as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,  
According to the order of Melchizedek.”

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. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. HEBREWS 5:1-10

Holy word, holy wisdom, thanks be to GOD!

## INTRODUCTION

What didn't we do this morning that we usually include? What did we skip in our liturgy- our work to prepare our hearts for receiving the Word? Our prayer of confession!. The verses at the end of Hebrews 4, are the ones that encourage us to “approach God's throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Hear these words of confession that have been used for centuries. Pray with me, seriously considering these words:

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you  
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength.

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are,  
and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will  
and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.

Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

What comes after the prayer of confession? The assurance of pardon- words that say “Believe this! if you confess, God forgives”. There are many biblical ways to say that. One comes from a bit later in Hebrews:

“We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. ... (The Holy Spirit testifies:) Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.” (Hebrews 10:10, 17-18 NIV)

And then we usually murmur: “Thanks be to God!” Let’s affirm that. “We *are* forgiven, **Thanks be to God!**”

#### ABOUT PASTORS AND PRIESTS

We also believe in the Biblical concept- the “priesthood of *all* believers”- which is that we can come to God through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, without the assistance of a holy person. Jesus is the mediator, the intermediary, now.

Most protestants don’t call their ministers “priests”. The reformers put that job title change into effect with the “Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession” in 1561, declaring that now Christ is the only priest! We confess and are assured of our forgiveness without the need for someone to pronounce it to us.

Here’s one of my little stories, with a Christianity trivia question. When I was a hospice chaplain I went to visit a woman who was dying from a brain tumor. It had robbed her of her hearing and she was very frail. I’d been told that she and her son, who was her primary caregiver, were Christian but not currently church-affiliated. He was eager to welcome me into her home, and asked me to pray for and with her, even though she wouldn’t be able to hear. He took a piece of paper and wrote a note to her in bold letters:

**“Mom, this is Pat. She is a priest!”**

Now I had never been introduced *that* way before. So, what was my logical conclusion? What Christian tradition had they been part of? He applied affirmatively, when I asked: “Are you Episcopalian?”

Do you know how I knew that? The Episcopal Church ordains both men and women and all their clergy are all called priests, without regard to gender. I think they are the only ones who have both women and priests. So, that introduction would have made the easiest for his mom to understand. Somewhat surprisingly, to me but not to God, in my car’s traveling ministerial supply box was an Episcopalian “Book of Common Prayer”. A seminary friend with an Episcopal background had gifted it to me at my ordination, for just such an occasion. I retrieved it and she visibly relaxed when she saw the small familiar book. Although she could not hear, I prayerfully read:

*A Prayer for a Person near Death (462)*

Almighty God, look on this your servant, lying in great weakness, and comfort *her* with the promise of Life everlasting, given in the resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Even though I wasn't of her faith tradition I served as her conduit to God. I was for her, a priest. That's part of my pastoral identity, helping to carry communication between people and their God. The first four verses of Hebrews 5 speak about priestly or pastoral identity:

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. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

This text reminds you, 'cause I already know, pastors aren't perfect. We are: "subject to weakness." So, cut us a little slack, be gracious because --we also know you aren't perfect either. While our lead pastor Jeff Carlson, all my other pastor peers and I are "subject to weakness", we are concurrently called to "deal gently", the preacher to the Hebrews, says of the people, for they are "ignorant and wayward."

Have you seen the new First Pres' website? There's a quote? "Nobody's perfect here and everybody's welcome!" Let's live like that, weak pastors and ignorant and wayward parishioners! We are called to be gracious to each other, as God is gracious to us! We are the family of God, the body of Christ.

Remember, Hebrews was written shortly after the time of Jesus' life on earth. Christian doctrine was only initially being defined when this sermon manuscript was written. People were just starting to realize that they could *not* follow all the rules and laws of the Old Covenant, perfectly, but because of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension we know grace. Living under the law was much harder than living IN grace.

Christianity continued to have priests until at least the reformation in the 1500s. The Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican/Episcopal and some Lutherans still call their clergy "priests". And to clarify- we reformed Christians aren't really so far removed because "priest" comes from the same Greek and Latin word- *presbyteros*, which obviously is part of our name too.

But regarding identity and authority, an Episcopal Priest peer in my chaplaincy training program explained that *priests* do the ABCs: absolve, bless and consecrate. I don't feel comfortable saying I do any of those. Only our triune God can absolve you (remove your sin), bless you (although, I can ask!) or consecrate you or anything else, (which is to make something holy in God's sight). So there *are* differences between pastors and priests! And we all call Jesus our "great high priest".

JESUS, “fully human” and much like a pastor, except without sin.

Our text points out the human condition of Jesus as he ministered on this earth. It reminds us of the “reverent submission” that propelled him to the cross. I love what Hebrews 5: 7-8 says about Jesus earthly life:

“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. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

There should be no doubt that Jesus lived and died as a human person, humble before God and subservient to the mission of being “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The preacher who wrote the book of Hebrews took time to broadcast clearly the concept of Jesus as the suffering servant, not as a glorified deity on earth, but like us in every way, except for sin. We read that in Hebrews 4: 15, that Jesus, our high priest, “has been tempted in every way, just as we are- yet did not sin.” How wonderful that would be- to face all temptations and never sin?!

We believe in the Biblical “priesthood of all believers”- that we come to God through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. Jesus is the mediator, the intermediary, now. We do not have earthly priests like in the Old Testament. We confess and are assured of our forgiveness without the need for someone to tell us how to earn it or pronounce it to us.

Sue read one of the parables that Jesus taught, from Luke 18: 9-14. I remember that story from my earliest Sunday School days! Note well- there’s no priest in that story; there’s not some required intermediary to whom Jesus encouraged confession. The humble person calls out directly to God; Jesus instructs that to be our model. “God have mercy on me, a sinner” (Mark 18:13).

John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* (4.12.2) in the 1530s that “the high priest was a type of Christ, “... but Christ held the office “without successor, consequently resigns that honor to no one else”. Christ was the last high priest. While the system of priestly duties worked for a while, once Jesus completed his human life there could be no priest that “high”, that mighty and effective, ever to follow. Besides being fully human...

JESUS was at the same time, “fully divine”, the only true priestly mediator between God and people. Jesus was God, like-us in every way, and at the same time uniquely different and holy. The only “begotten” son, whom John’s gospel says was there from the beginning of everything.

The text from Hebrews 5 says:

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”;

How do we know that Jesus was fully divine? Just knowing that Jesus *did* face all human temptations and lived without sin- no human is capable of that! The glory given him was not earned by being “good”, but was appointed by God because of his identity as the Son of God. We know the resurrection of Jesus on that first Easter give spiritual power to several cowards and changed the world forever.

What else does this text from Hebrews 5 point out? That Jesus, as our fully divine high priest is the final high priest.

Jesus, the divine Christ, the appointed, anointed, devoted high priest is the **final** sacrifice for forgiveness. Final, not frequently replaced like the Old Testament priests or repeated like those sacrifices. Final, not like going to a local priest to make a confession to another human, time after time. The last and final sacrifice needed was that of Jesus on the cross.

Jesus as the divine Christ, the appointed, anointed, devoted high priest is the **forever** sacrifice, our eternal source of forgiveness. Forever, not like the Old Testament priests who rose up and passed away, some who were good and some who were evil. Forever, not like your local current pastors who are both in their 60s, and likely to retire someday, but not soon. Forever, as our text in Hebrews 5 says: “once for all”.

Jesus as the divine Christ, the appointed, anointed, devoted high priest is the **perfect** sacrifice. The Old Testament system was flawed because an animal without blemish still never was truly perfect. The current system with pastors or priests to help you in your spiritual life is good, but like the earlier verses reminded us: pastors are subject to weakness. I know I will fail. I know Jesus will never fail.

Final, forever, perfect. Fully human and especially fully divine, Jesus, our high priest forever.

PS: An “oh, by the way.”

Melchizedek is mentioned twice in today’s Hebrews passages, in verses 6 and 10.

Yes, I saw that, but have opted to ignore it for now- right now only wishing to practice my pronunciation. *Melchizedek*. He comes back again next week, in chapter 6:20, and we will ignore him again, then. But the week after that I promise to have good answers about Melchizedek, and what his order was all about.

Today, take this thought home. Remember this, because the first part of Hebrews chapter 5, verses 9 and 10 is way more vital than Melchizedek: way more important.

“Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God ...”

Thanks be to God!

amen