

October 17, 2021

## Hebrews 5:1-10 “Excuse Me, Are You the Priest?”

I can't tell you how many times people drop by the church and ask, “Are you the priest?” I fight the urge to say, “Do I look like a priest?” I mean I don't wear a clerical collar or robes or vestments of any kind. In fact, most of the ministers here in Chico who meet for coffee on Wednesdays don't wear anything that would set them apart from other folks ... not even Richard Yale from Saint John's Episcopal whose title *is* “priest.” Ben Colohan over at Faith Lutheran is the only one among us who wears a clerical collar, but the thing is he looks great in a collar. He's young and handsome and has this dark hair and this perpetual five o'clock shadow. And most of the time he wears blue jeans with his black shirt and collar and sometimes in the winter he wears a black leather jacket too. He makes it all look so cool. But even though he looks like a priest, and a stylish one at that, his title is pastor. So, what do *I* say when someone comes to the church and asks, “Are you the priest?” I say, “No, I'm the custodian. The custodian of the Gospel of Jesus Christ!” No, not really. I keep forgetting that the average non-churched person doesn't usually know the difference between pastor and priest. And that's okay.

So that leads to the question, “Then how do you tell a priest from a pastor?” In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we shy away from titles when it comes to our clergy. In fact, our founders, for the most part, rejected titles. In the early years of our movement you wouldn’t hear the word “reverend” used to describe any of our clergy. In fact, most clergy, even ones who received formal theological education, were bi-vocational. For example, the founding pastor of the church that Mary served in Snowville, Virginia was Dr. Chester Bullard. Dr. Bullard founded the Snowville church in the early 1800s. But “doctor” didn’t refer to any kind of theological degree he earned. He was, in fact, a country doctor ... a physician. And according to many of the folks in that part of the country, it’s a good thing he received a call to ministry because apparently Chester was a much better preacher than he was a doctor! But he was not a Reverend Doctor like our regional minister, Rev. Dr. LaTaunya Bynum or our General Minister and President Rev. Dr. Theresa Hord Owens. Obviously our beliefs have evolved over the last 200 years because most Disciples Ministers these days have at least *accepted* the title “Reverend” if for no other reason than to clarify our role as spiritual leaders. So what is the difference between a priest and a pastor? Some people would say there’s really no difference and that it mostly boils down to preference depending on your church tradition. But I

disagree. Let me explain what I believe is the difference between a priest and a pastor.

The first verse of our reading from the letter to the Hebrews this morning is a good a place to start.

According to this passage, our *true* priest is Jesus, the risen Christ and what we are doing here in worship every week relates to what *he* is doing as *our* high priest. The verse says, “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.” As odd as it seems, this sounds kind of like a Union Representative, right? When workers want to communicate or negotiate with the big bosses, they send in the union representative to do it for them. That may seem like a weird comparison, but it’s not a bad illustration when it comes to understanding priests. In the ancient Jewish temple, the idea was that God was actually present in the Holy of Holies. But not just anyone could go into the Holy of Holies. There were restrictions and limitations on who could get how close. Gentiles could only get into the outer courtyard. Ordinary practicing Jews could get into the inner court, but only the priests could go inside the temple itself. Only a High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies where the people of the time believed was where God lived ... or at least it was the place where God was present. This High Priest could only go into the temple once a year on Yom Kippur which is the Day of

Atonement. So when it came to dealing with God face to face, you had to rely on the High Priest to be your union rep ... your mediator between God and the people.

This passage in Hebrews went into a bit more detail describing the high priest's role in offering sacrifices on behalf of people who came to realign themselves with God after they had sinned. It speaks about the necessity for the priest to be one who understands his *own* weaknesses and thus be able to understand and support the ones he represents. Then it goes on to say that no one can take on this honored responsibility unless God hand picks them for the job.

And so, with that job description spelled out clearly, the passage goes on to describe how God has chosen Jesus to be our "forever high priest." It illustrates how he had to go through everything we go through before he was perfectly suited for the job. It describes Jesus as being so identified with human suffering that the very nature of his priestly work was to offer up prayers and appeals with loud cries and tears. And it says that having been appointed by God to be our high priest he has become the source of salvation for us and for all who follow him.

In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we affirm this. In fact we affirm this every week here at this table. Every week we affirm our belief that Jesus the risen

Christ is our high priest. By coming to this table, we affirm God's grace and we point to Christ as the one who is able to "present us faultless and joyful before the glorious presence of God." We are naming Christ as our high priest and that through Christ we can approach God and hear from God. We confess our sins and seek forgiveness; we offer gifts; we offer up prayers; we offer the sacrifice of our praise and our lives offered in gratitude and service. All this is possible because Jesus Christ is our high priest ... the one who has direct access to God and can represent us to God. According to our scripture Christ mediates between us and God. Not just us individually — Christ mediates between creation and creator, between heavenly things and earthly things. Christ mediates in order that there might be reconciliation. And as priest, as mediator, it is a two-way thing. Christ represents us to God, but he also represents God to us. Whenever we gather here, we are one side of an act of reconciliation between heaven and earth and that reconciliation is only possible through the mediator ... the great "forever high priest."

Now, here's a problem. If I were to just stop right here and say, "Amen," some of *you* might say, "Whoa ... wait a minute. You always say that the three big sacraments in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) are baptism, the eucharist (or communion), and the priesthood of all believers!" Some of you might even open your bibles and

quote 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:9 and say, “See, it says right here – ‘But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.’ So yeah, it says here in Hebrews that Christ is our High Priest, but isn’t it true that Christ makes *all of us* priests? Isn’t that why we have laypeople preside at the communion table even though we have an ordained clergy person who could do this? The answer is, “Sort of.”

If you understand this passage to mean that you, as an individual, have been made a priest and therefore you have the right of direct access to God without any mediator - that you can walk straight into the holy of holies without reference to anyone else - then the answer is, “no.” It doesn’t work like that. In *that* sense *none* of us are priests. None of us - not you, not me, not our regional minister or our general minister and president, not Mary the mother of Jesus – none of these people have access to God other than through *our* high priest. And who is *our* high priest? Jesus!

Okay, so what does it mean, then, to say that we are a royal priesthood or that we share in Christ’s priesthood? What it means is this: we are the body of Christ. Literally. The term “the body of Christ” is not just a figurative name for the church, it is a literal description of our

relationship to Christ. We are his body. In our baptism we have been incorporated into Christ and so we share in all that Christ is and does, *including his priesthood*. Because Christ prays for the world, we pray for the world - in Christ. Because Christ gives his life for the world, we give our life for the world - in Christ. Because Christ strives to reconcile earth and heaven, we strive to reconcile earth and heaven - in Christ. Every one of us shares in the priesthood of Christ, *but not in individual isolation*. We share in the priesthood of Christ only in as much as we are part of his body. We practice “the priesthood of *all* believers,” not “the priesthood of each individual believer.”

Don't get me wrong ... I still feel weird when people ask me if I am “the priest,” because no, I am not *the* priest. I'm the minister. I'm the pastor. I'm the custodian of the Gospel. But around this table together we do perform priestly functions. We confess our sins. We bless ordinary food and then stand in the presence of the holy. We pray for the salvation and healing of the world. We mediate between heaven and earth, representing the world to God and God to the world. We do all this in Christ and through Christ because we have been immersed into the life of our high priest and all that he is can be shared with us in the grace of God.