

The Priesthood of All Believers
Exodus 19:1-6, I Peter 2:4-10
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Some years ago, a minister friend decided to preach a sermon series on the Apostle's Creed. The first Sunday, he preached a sermon entitled "I Believe." The second Sunday the sermon was entitled, "In God." The third, "The Father." The fourth, "The Almighty." And so it went, Sunday after Sunday, until somewhere around the fifteenth week and "Under Pontius Pilate," the minister overheard a conversation at coffee hour that caused him to alter his plan. What he heard was one member of the congregation asking another, "Which do you think will end up being longer, the forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness of Sinai or Dr. McMillan's sermon series?"

We are four Sundays into our **only** six week long sermon series on the central affirmations of Protestantism. I hope you have enjoyed the journey so far. I certainly have, though I am glad that, now, with only two weeks to go, we can begin to see the Promised Land on the horizon!

I genuinely appreciate your interest in rediscovering our identity as Christians shaped by the Reformed tradition of Protestantism. Last Sunday, after church, a visitor said to me, "Being here today really helped me, Reverend Adams. I did not grow up in the church, and I have had no idea what it would mean to be a person of faith."

What does it mean to be a person of faith, to say that in life and in death, we belong to God? Martin Luther, one of the leaders of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, once memorably defined faith as "a lively, reckless confidence in the grace of God." Shall we arm

ourselves this morning with reckless confidence in divine grace and traverse a particularly tricky terrain- the notion that is called the priesthood of all believers? You would be hard-pressed to find a word that sounds more un-Protestant than the word “priest.” (1) The Catholic church has priests, but Protestant churches, with the exception of the Episcopal Church and a few others, have pastors and ministers. Wasn’t one of the major goals of the Reformation to debunk the idea that another human being was necessary to be the mediator between God and the people? Those sins must be confessed to a priest for forgiveness and absolution would never be granted? Wasn’t it settled long ago that priests were no closer to God than other mortals, and that they were no more or less holy than other people?

I choked on my Cheerios as I looked at the front page of the Atlanta Journal Constitution this morning and read the expose of a Pentecostal Bishop in Dekalb County who, it is alleged, has been involved in multitudes of sexual abuses and acts of misconduct across many decades. Sometimes the behavior of members of one’s own profession makes one ashamed to be a part of that profession. That troubling article is one more reminder that ordination does not guarantee sanctification.

Today, I am particularly indebted to Protestant theologian Robert McAfee Brown for his insights into the idea of the priesthood from the Protestant perspective. Brown suggests that both Catholics and Protestants have often misunderstood the meaning of grace and out of that misunderstanding of grace has emerged a distortion of the meaning of the priesthood.

(2)

The error toward which the Catholic branch of Christianity tends is the assumption that divine grace can be institutionalized. The church comes to the point where, rather than gratefully receiving grace as an undeserved life-giving gift distributed as God would distribute it, like manna in the wilderness of Sinai, the church begins to act as if it is entitled

to grace, can control grace, indeed, has the authority to dispense grace as the church sees fit to whomever the church concludes is worthy or withhold it from those whom the Church deems to be unfit. The priests become the only authorized distributors of what actually are the gifts of God for the people of God, who never has been in the custody of the church. According to the Scriptures, God's Spirit blows where it will. God's grace is freely given. In contrast to the Catholic temptation to institutionalize grace, Protestants tend to err on the opposite end of the spectrum. The more independent - minded we become, the more tempting it is to think, Well, who really needs the church at all? I can put on a CD, build a fire in the fireplace, soak my feet, and feel as close to the Almighty as I want to, whenever I want to. And, what is grace anyway if it's not the reassuring feeling that I'm alright and you're alright, and even if we are not alright, that's alright? The problem with this approach is that it assumes that divine grace can be separated from what God has done and is doing for the world and for each of us through Christ and through the community that gathers in his name.

I rejoice that people can feel close to God in other venues besides the faith community. I am all for good feelings and finding ways to be at peace. I'm glad that people can have religious experiences on the golf course depending, of course, on how their game is going. The Reformers described these things as common grace. But redemptive grace, the grace of which our scriptures speak, the grace that has the power to lead us from death to life is not a free-floating cloud of positive karma. It is the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose again from the dead. He is the foundation of life. He is our hope. I Peter describes him as "a living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight." And, it goes on to say that we all are called to come to him and to become like "living stones" ourselves, built into a spiritual house of which he is the foundation. As we

participate in his community, as we participate in his ministry, we become members of the royal priesthood. We offer ourselves to God and to our neighbors as Christ offered himself. We serve as vessels of divine grace.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the people of God were called to be “a priestly nation.”

(Remember, this was a theocracy, not a democracy). What they were supposed to do was not occupy a place of privilege so much as to be representatives of God to the whole human family and to represent the whole human family before God. That is the priestly function of a corporate body. Think of us here as the congregation of Morningside Church. We fulfill the priestly function when we lift up in prayer the needs and the wounds and the worries of the world. We also perform our priestly function when we reach out toward the world and become engaged in mending that which is broken in God’s good creation. In this way, we represent God in the world.

One of my favorite theologians and thinkers is a Catholic Benedictine sister named Joan Chittister. She tells a story of an ancient seeker of God who spent much time on his prayer rug. And as he prayed, past him there went a parade of people who were disabled and people who were hungry and people who had been beaten and abused. After finally opening his eyes and seeing this parade of human need, the religious seeker went down, down, down deep into prayer and cried. “Great God, If you are so great God, if you are that loving Creator I thought you were, can you not see these things, can you not do something about them?”

Out of a long silence the voice of God came back: “I did do something about them. I made you.” (3)

When you put on your sneakers and your blue jeans and go to the Food Bank on a Saturday morning when you could be sleeping in, or drinking a third cup of coffee, you are living out your membership in the priesthood of all believers.

The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Christ is the one and only high priest, chief intercessor for the human race before God and the chief representative to God for us, but we who are baptized in his name as we do our thing, as we say no to injustice, as we light our little candles of kindness and love wherever we can, are demonstrating that we are living stones, participants in the royal priesthood.

I love something Helen Keller once said, “I long to accomplish great tasks but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great. . . the world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but by the aggregate of our tiny pushes.”

We are to be God’s pushy people, proclaiming in word and in deed the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness and into God’s marvelous light. Please note that you do not, yourselves, have to do the mighty acts. We are simply to bear witness to God’s mighty acts. When you teach a classroom full of kids in Sunday School, you are proclaiming God’s love for all the children in the world. That is a noble and holy task. When you make supper for a young family with a new baby, you are announcing your gladness over the fact that the Maker of the heavens and the earth is still in business, forming little fingers and toes and breathing life into mortal flesh.

I thought this week about where I’ve seen God being witnessed to in a particularly strong way in this priesthood that is Morningside. I recalled a night almost a year ago when four of us gathered together some grape juice and some communion bread and went over to the hospital when Laura Dame, one of the great ladies in this congregation, was coming to the end of her life. We stood in a circle around the bed, the oxygen tank hissing quietly nearby.

It was an elder who had the idea. I was the one who had the privilege of saying the words, “This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood. This is Christ’s body broken for you, Laura.” We touched her lips with the bread and with the cup. We said a prayer for a peaceful passing, and then we were gone. That very night she died. By our presence, we said there is a fellowship created by God that extends beyond time and space called the communion of the saints. In the face of death, we bore witness to the power of God over the forces of darkness. How did Paul put it in I Corinthians? “Where, o death, is your sting? Where, o grave, is your victory? This perishable body is putting on imperishability. Thanks be to God who gives the victory through our Lord.”

Some people believe that that expression “the priesthood of all believers” means that we can all be priests to ourselves, but that is the opposite of what it means. What it means is that every one of us is priest to the other. We are vessels of grace for one another. The Christian community is not simply a good idea for the lonely or an outlet for the extrovert. It is essential to human wholeness.

Last Sunday we spoke of God’s sovereignty and how God’s Spirit is at work in the broader realms of culture and society. The church can never claim that God is only at work through the community that gathers around Word and Sacrament. We must confess that God acts mightily sometimes in spite of the church and its prejudices, mean-spiritedness, self-righteousness, and exclusivity. But we must also say that the Church is the designated body of Christ. It was God’s idea, not ours. We have a unique calling. The church is a collection of decidedly inadequate human beings. Individually and collectively, we sometimes smell to high heaven rather than serve as a fragrant offering, but God in God’s own wisdom decided to use imperfect people to embody God’s own perfect love.

There is a great old story about two reprobates who had had a night out on the town to end them all. Somehow, late in the evening they ended up wandering into the sanctuary of a downtown church and lying down on the back pews to sleep it off. When the 8:00 a.m. service began, they were still snoozing away. The little congregation that had gathered in the front stood up to say the prayer of confession. Oh Lord, we have done those things that we ought not to have done, and we have left undone those things we ought to have done and so on and so forth. At that point, one of the guys woke up. He elbowed his friend and said, “Sal, you’ve gotta hear this. I think we’ve finally found our crowd!”

We do not glory in the fact that the church is full of sinners. It is simply the truth. What we glory in is that God is willing to use this broken community to pass along, generation to generation, pilgrim to pilgrim, the good news of God’s saving grace.

For years, a man named Bob Smith directed the Lay Institute out at Columbia Seminary. He used to say the church has a problem with inclusive language. The church has let the preachers and the pastors have the ministry of the church, but the truth is we are all ministers in the church of Jesus Christ.

You have your ministry to do, in this congregation, in your place of work, in your home, in the way you treat other people. I have my ministry, too, but it is not one bit more important than yours. We teach one another what it means to have a reckless, lively confidence in the grace of God. That’s what we do around here. Thanks be to God for the privilege of sharing with you the priesthood of all believers. In the name of the Creator, the Sustainer and the Redeemer. Amen.

Notes:

(1) Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*

(2) Ibid.

(3) Joan Chittister, *The heart of the Temple*