

Sermon: “The Priesthood of All Believers”

Scriptures: Exodus 19:1-6; 1 Peter 2:1-10

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“Would you please pray for me, pastor?” she asked. “I’m not sure my prayers make it any farther than the ceiling. Pastor, I’m sure yours make it all the way to heaven.”

Another said: “I’m sure if you pray, Reverend, we’ll get results. You’ve got a direct line to God.”

Such comments are interesting, especially coming from card-carrying Protestants. Do these comments suggest that some believe that the prayers of a minister have a better chance of being heard and answered by God? Do they suggest that a mediator is needed when praying in order to get through to God?

Certainly some of the comments are said in jest. Still, I wonder, if many have forgotten a central tenet of the Reformed faith (the branch of Protestantism of which we Presbyterians are a part). That central tenet is “the priesthood of all believers.”

This doctrine was strongly espoused by the fathers of the Reformation—people such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. But what is it?

Peter, in our New Testament lesson, was writing to Christians—some were Jews and some were pagans prior to their conversion to Christianity. Both the former Jews and the former pagans were acquainted with the roles of priests.

Priests make sacrifices to “the gods” (in the case of the pagans) and to the God of Israel (in the case of the Jews of old). Why make a sacrifice? In most cases the sacrifice was made in an effort to appease the gods (in the case of the pagans) or to seek and secure forgiveness from their sins and to please God through an act of worship (in the case of the Jews).

In both cases priests were “middle men.” They were mediators. They were the means through which other humans could make a connection with God.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, we read of the sacrificial system. The priests regularly made sacrifices on behalf of themselves and the people they served. Once a year the High Priest (and only the High Priest) would enter the tabernacle (the moveable place of worship for the Hebrews during the Exodus) and later the temple. He would go behind the veil or curtain

and enter the Holy of Holies. No one else was to enter this sacred space. Annually, the High Priest went in and made a sacrifice (of an animal) to atone for his own sins and for the sins of all the people. The High Priest was the middle man. He was the mediator.

In the New Testament Jesus is referred to as the Great High Priest. He offered a once-and-for-all sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity. Jesus was not only the High Priest, but also the sacrifice—the victim offered up for the sake of all.

At Christ's crucifixion, when He breathed His last breath, the curtain/veil in the temple in Jerusalem—that same curtain/veil that the High Priest went behind annually to make his animal sacrifice—that same curtain was miraculously torn in two. Because of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice, all believers have access to God. We do not need a High Priest. Jesus was and is the Great High Priest who has done all that needs to be done. Through His sacrifice, we may approach God freely. All believers' prayers are heard. They all reach the ears of God. We do not need a middle man.

Wow, you might be saying. Then we don't have to sacrifice anymore since Jesus has done it all. Certainly we no longer make animal sacrifices to seek forgiveness or gain access to God. However, we are called to be living sacrifices. Yes, us. LIVING sacrifices. We offer ourselves—"all that we are, all that we have, all that we hope to be"—freely and sacrificially to God through service to others. We do none of this with any notion that we are working our way to God through acts; rather we offer our selves to God in gratitude for the sacrifice Christ made for us.

Romans 12: 1 says: "I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, which is your spiritual worship."

Well, this is a lot of background information to help us understand our New Testament text from 1 Peter 2 and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

Peter says in 1 Peter 2:9-10: "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. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

What a wonderful gift it is to know that we belong—"body and soul in life and death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ" (the Heidelberg Catechism). What a wonderful gift it is to know that we have an identity—an identity that can never be stolen from us, an identity we can never lose.

Perhaps you don't feel like you belong—not in your family, or your school, not at your new retirement community, not at your job, maybe not even here at church. Remember that you belong to God and to God's family. You are a member of a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation—the family of God's people.

Perhaps you feel confused about your identity. Maybe you find yourself in constant role strain. You may be a dad, a husband, a son, an employee, a boss. Your identity has somehow become lost over the years of caring for an aging relative, raising kids, supporting someone else's career. Maybe you wonder if anyone really knows your name—who you really are—apart from your roles. Remember that your identity as God's person is uniquely yours. God knows you and understands you completely—without your roles and masks. You are known. You belong and you are loved by the Lord of the Universe.

Peter also knew that some would hear these words and take credit for their “position” or their “chosen-ness.” With that in mind, he reminds his readers and us that all this is a gift from God—not something we deserve or earn. He also reminds us that this gift we have been given is not for privilege but for responsibility.

Recall Peter's words: “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.**”

As priests, this is our mission: “to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.” This is our responsibility.

Friends, this is one reason we have been working through our series on Spiritual Gifts. As priests we are uniquely gifted and called by God. The ways in which we will proclaim God's mighty acts will vary. When we know ourselves—our Spiritual Gifts, Talents, Resources, Individuality and Experiences—and surrender those to the Lordship of Christ, we become the most effective priests we can be. We are equipped to give ourselves as living sacrifices to God that others may know His mighty acts and discover his mercy, love, and grace.