

Lectionary 30 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 24, 2021

Hebrews 7:23-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The word “priest” occurs several times in our second reading. The letter of Hebrews has a big discussion of priests. That’s part of how the letter of Hebrews works. Hebrews is about you and God. And about everything that stands between you and God. Do you think that angels stand between you and God? If you do, you should know that Jesus is the best angel. That’s Hebrews.

Do you think that ancient covenants stand between you and God? If you do, you should know that Jesus is the best covenant. That’s Hebrews. Do you think that a sacrifice stands between you and God? If you do, you should know that Jesus is the best sacrifice. That’s Hebrews. Do you think that a priest stands between you and God? If you do, you should know that Jesus is the greatest priest of all. That’s Hebrews. It’s about all of the ways that human beings try to connect with God. And it says that Jesus is the best in all of those ways. Angels, covenants, sacrifices, priests. Jesus is the best in show. That’s the point of the letter of Hebrews. For a few weeks, we’ve been having readings from Hebrews. And I haven’t preached on any of those readings. But they’ve been there, Sunday by Sunday. Telling the world that no matter how you think you can connect to God, Jesus is a better way. In every category.

Today, Hebrews is talking about priests. And I will preach briefly about the priesthood of Jesus, and the priesthood of ordinary Christians. Lutherans and other Protestants tend to suppress the use of the word priest. In the narrow sense, a priest is someone who offers sacrifices to God. In a broader sense, a priest is a mediator between God and human beings. The Protestant Reformation rejected the Roman Catholic notion that at the church’s altar, Christ is being sacrificed again. The Roman Catholic church is famous for the concept of transubstantiation. But an even greater gap exists between Protestants and Catholics about the way in which the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is actualized for believers. And Protestants, including Martin Luther, rejected the idea that the leader of the worship service is re-sacrificing Jesus. Therefore, some Calvinist churches refuse to call the table an altar. Because there is no sacrifice being offered in Christian worship. They insist on calling it a table— a table of fellowship, a table of gathering, a table of nourishment— rather than a place of sacrifice. More generally, Protestants quit calling that person who stands at the altar a “priest.” In order to avoid any suggestion that Jesus is actually being sacrificed in the church’s liturgy.

In the narrow sense, a priest is someone who offers sacrifices to God. In a broader sense, a priest is a mediator between God and human beings. It was also in this broader sense that the Protestant

Reformation resisted the use of the word “priest.” In the late middle ages, the clergy were notoriously corrupt, and had sort of a monopoly on grace. If you want God, if you want God’s grace, you have to go through the clergy. Next Sunday is the 504th anniversary of Martin Luther’s posting of his 95 Theses for debate and discussion. The trigger of the Reformation was precisely a disagreement about the keys to the treasure of God’s grace. So this idea that the clergy stood between you and God– the corrupt and self-serving clergy– was repugnant to the Reformers. And so the word “priest” faded, and the priestly ministry of the clergy was eliminated or diminished in the Reformation.

However. The actual intent of Martin Luther was not to eliminate priesthood, but to assert the priesthood of all believers. Because all believers are authorized to intercede for others. Indeed, believers are called to pray for others and ought to pray for others. There is something quite profound here that Lutherans generally fail to grasp. The priesthood of all believers does not mean that everyone is a pastor or that everyone is qualified to preach. It does mean that every Christian is qualified to pray. It does mean that every Christian is a mediator between God and other human beings. This great power is given to every Christian in her baptism or his baptism. *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.* That’s from First Peter, one of Luther’s favorite books of the Bible. Royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s own people. You by your Christianity, your baptism, your discipleship– you have the power of priesthood. Which chiefly means the authority to pray for others, and to have your prayers answered.

There is some wisdom here, you who have ears to listen. There is some wisdom here. You know, it is very, very hard to pray for your own self. I find that pain makes me very unable to concentrate. Physical pain. Emotional pain. It’s hard for me to pray rightly when I am upset. In the moment when I most need God, I find it the most difficult to ask. God does not expect me to speak properly to him, but I often use that as an excuse to not pray. Prayer is simple, but it isn’t always evil. That’s why we need others to pray for us. Even pastors and popes need others to pray for us. Hebrews says today that Jesus intercedes for us. Jesus prays for us. Jesus talks to God for us. And in Paul’s glorious letter to the Romans, Paul says that the Holy Spirit prays for us with such intensity that it is too deep for words. *“The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”* [Romans 8:26] That’s two-thirds of the Trinity praying for you. Not bad. But that’s no excuse for you to abandon your priestly vocation. Because you are the image of God, the body of Christ, and you ought to pray as Jesus does. More importantly, your friends and family need you to pray for them. In your words. With your heart. Sometimes that does more good than all the sermons and all the medicines in the world.

One of the great eucharistic prayers that we sometimes use in this congregation concludes with these words: *Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes a victorious Lord of all.* We call Jesus our great high priest because a priest is a mediator of God. Jesus brings God’s love to us, Jesus brings God’s grace to us. Jesus brings our prayers to God, Jesus bring

our pains and sorrows before God on our behalf. He is our priest, our great high priest. But you are one of *HIS* priests— A royal priesthood and a holy nation, and one of God's own people. And you mediate God and his love and his grace to those in your life. And you carry their pains and sorrows and needs to God in your heart and in your prayers. I claim that as your vocation, a vocation given to you at your baptism. I challenge you to fulfill your vocation. Because the world hungers for God. And you, as one of his priests, are able to make a marvelous difference. Amen.