APRIL 26TH SERMON : ARE WE REALLY PRIESTS?

TEXT: 1 PETER 2:9 "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

The obligation to heal those who fall, to aid those who yield to temptation, is not simply the obligation of a professional clergyperson. A minister is simply the servant of the fellowship, which is God's instrument of healing, of the commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," Martin Luther admonishes us: "we should so fear and love God as not deceitfully to belie, slander, or raise injurious reports against our neighbor, but apologize for him, speak well of him, and put the most charitable construction on all his actions." The Smaller Catechism

Here is the acid test for the Christian: what does the Christian do with the person who falls or fails? What is the attitude toward those who are overtaken by their faults, who yield to temptations? What is the obligation to this person who has failed? "Is everyone a priest? Is there such a thing as the "priesthood of all believers?"

The Apostle Paul speaks to this directly in his letter to the Galatians when he reminds them that they, as followers of the Christ, are indeed obligated to restore such persons and to do so in a spirit of meekness. Paul suggests that those who are spiritual should do these things without exception, for we
should at all times look out for the spiritual well-being of all persons.

But what are the marks of a spiritually minded person? I think Paul would say that he is referring to those who try to fulfill the purposes of God in their lives, that there are opportunities that do arise in which one is able to show his or her spiritual character by sympathetic help, not just by sympathy, to the weaker person. It is not just a temporary lift, but rather the task of placing the individual in a more wholesome, fruitful direction so that person may fulfill the purpose of her or his own creation as well. It is the aim of the spiritually minded follower to place the offender in a position of "good" spiritual health---with all of its benefits. This is a priestly function and anyone who seeks to do this is a priest to his or her fellow human being, a priest in the most proper and fullest sense of the term.

This is a deliberate and difficult task. And it is so because for it one needs a "spirit of meekness, a spirit of gentleness, of compassion, understanding, kindness and sympathy. The chief obstacles and hindrances to this challenge, a challenge open to every Christian, are pride, self-conceit, vanity and a modern form of Phariseeism---things we all possess at one time or another. To respond to these, Paul suggests that we consider our own weaknesses and shortcomings. Consider yourself, Paul tells us, lest you also be tempted. This caveat is frequently missing in religious circles, which fall into an unhealthy mode of self-righteousness. As Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher-theologian once wrote so convincingly:

"The world has often seen examples of the presumptuous religious individual who is perfectly secure in his own God-relationship,
flippantly assured of his own salvation, but self-importantly engaged in doubting the salvation of others and in offering to help them. However, I believe it would be a fitting expression for a genuinely religious attitude if the individual were to say, 'I do not doubt the salvation of any human being; the only one I have fears about is myself.' Even when I see a man sink very low, I should doubtless have to suffer this terrible thought. A genuinely religious personality is always mild in his judgment of others, and only in relation to himself is he cold and strict as a master inquisitor. His attitude toward others is that of a benevolent patriarch to the younger generation.

These are the qualities of priestly behavior for all.

For some people, life is a solo: everyone shall bear their own burdens. But life is also a chorus, for as Paul points out: bear one another's burdens. Isn't this paradoxical? Bear my own burdens, but also bear the burdens of others. Perhaps, but perhaps not! For as we fulfill this task, we are fulfilling the challenge of Jesus to be priests, not for ourselves, but for our fellow human beings.

Both statements are true because a person may help to carry another's burden, but may never carry that person's responsibility. We may execute our priesthood, the priesthood of all believers, as Luther said: we may take upon ourselves the burden of others, pulling more than our own weight---fulfilling such commands as:

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak (Romans 15:1)."

"Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brothers, you have done it unto me (Matthew 25)."
Paul was concerned, deeply concerned about the fellowship of the church, the fellowship where this sharing of burdens takes place. But why should a person like Paul, with his first-hand experience of the Christ, with all of his intellectual talent, why should he be so concerned with the fellowship of everyone, of average people who constituted the bulk of the early church? Why? Because he was more than a great intellectual, he was a great human being. He was a practicing Christian. He craved the human touch, the human experience, second only to the divine. He was more than a hair-splitting doctrinaire, out to condemn as heretics all who differed with him. Believing with all his spirit that the church has primary responsibility as the custodian of Christian truth, he knew that truth is not only doctrine, but also shared experiences. As one lifts a person up, one bears someone else's capabilities. In this process of sharing, the humblest and most unlettered may have better insights to truths that are denied to those to those who are intellectually gifted. Did not Jesus himself say: "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. (Matthew 25) But be it wise or foolish, young or old, male or female, only as our relationship to God is expressed in our relationships to each other, as human beings, can God's command of love be fulfilled and it is a relationship that extends from the cradle to the grave---and perhaps beyond.

This is a tiresome, burdensom, wearisome task. This is a task by which we are often frustrated, discouraged, and angered. But this life as a servant of God also gives us joy and fulfillment, completeness and wholesomeness. I know of a woman who had served her church for several
decades who one day asked her pastor if he remembered how wretched her health was when he first met her. She was a nervous wreck. And then she went on to remind him that she had so many burdens to bear in her family and outside that now she was a relatively well woman. Bearing the burdens of others lifted her own. The help given another to carry their burdens is one way by which God strengthens us to get under our own.

If you have never read Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, I suggest you may very well enjoy it and find some deep meaning about the Christian faith and its power when it awakens us to our Christian responsibilities. It is an exploration of this last illustration I gave showing how bearing others burdens affected an entire congregation. Some who have read it scoff, others revel in its impact on their lives. This book is a simple statement and the gospel is not complicated, except to the point that we understand it, it is powerfully radical and many simply back off and go through the motions of faith.

Amen and Amen!