

This is my first day back from vacation, so maybe I'm a little out of touch with current circumstances, but I'm guessing that many of you, like me, are still feeling like you have been running from behind to catch up with yourself for some time now. It's been a busy and full time within our church and community the last two months. In that time, two couples were married, 2 funerals were held with yet another one to come tomorrow, a Fall Fest happened that raised over \$4500 for World Hunger, start-ups for quilting and confirmation and children's church and kid's connect and bell choir and W/ELCA happened, and many have dealt with some significant health issues. Things both joyful and difficult have occurred, and it's been intense. To say nothing of the process within the Knife River community in regards to the Rec Center, which is also a lot to think about! What to do? How to cope in such times? We all have our own solutions, but one of mine is prayer. I'm reminded of my cousin, Ken, who responded to a post on facebook from a mutual relative who is approaching stage 5 of kidney disease while in her 30s. He wrote, "I will pray for you. I already do, but now I'll double down in prayer." That expresses some real wisdom, I think. The more difficult the time, the more timely are our prayers. Luther famously said, "I have so much to do today that I must spend extra time in prayer." The same concept. Pray and then pray some more; double-down on prayer. Our lesson this morning from Hebrews 4 encourages us to pray---to approach the throne of grace with boldness. It also points us to the One who hears our prayers: Jesus. We are introduced in this chapter to a little different image of Jesus than we typically may have. This isn't Jesus the Good Shepherd, or Jesus the Light of the World, or Jesus the healer and storyteller. This is Jesus as High Priest. And frankly, we may not know quite what to make of Jesus as High Priest, because many of us are not that familiar with priests or high priests.

To give just one example, a few years back, Phil and I went to the Taste of Greece festival at Marshall High School where we had absolutely awesome Greek food. The festival was sponsored by the Greek Orthodox Church in Duluth, and while there, we wandered into a kind of make-shift chapel that had been set up. We conversed with a couple that were there to visit with people like ourselves, who told us that their priest would be right back and would certainly want to meet us. Well, the priest I knew best from a decade or two

back was Father Michael, who served at Holy Spirit Catholic church in Two Harbors. He was an older man, single and celibate, with a wonderful Irish accent. And although I know better, I was nonetheless taken aback when *their* priest came bounding in; a middle eastern man in his middle 30s, complete with wife and children, as personable and friendly as could be. I knew that the term “priest” encompasses a lot of different traditions, but I somehow still had the Catholic version in my mind when I met this Greek Orthodox version instead. Yes, Catholic priests are celibate. They are also always male. Orthodox priests are also always male, but they are not celibate; they may marry and have children. Anglican and Episcopal priests may be male or female and may also be married and with children. The fact is, we may all have some preconceptions or misunderstandings about priests, and here in Hebrews 4 we are hearing about Jesus as being a priest, and not only a priest; but the High Priest. Some have positive experiences with priests they know; others have negative stereotypes of priests, sometimes based either on some bad personal experiences or on the tragic scandal of sexual abuse by priests within the Catholic Church in recent decades. Which may make this a problematic image for us of Christ. How do we feel about Jesus as our High Priest? Is this a way of thinking that invites us into prayer? Let’s investigate further.

To begin with, what is a *priest*, actually? A priest, by definition, is a person authorized to perform the sacred rituals of a religion. A *Pastor*, by definition, by the way, is an ordained leader specifically of a Christian congregation. The term “pastor”, therefore, is only used within a Christian context; you don’t have Buddhist or Jewish pastors. “Priest” is a more inclusive term, that functions within *and* outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. You may have Christian priests, as in the Orthodox, Catholic, or Anglican tradition; you may have priests within the Jewish tradition; you may have priests of what we would call pagan religions or within eastern religions like Buddhism. Generally, pastors serve Protestant Christian denominations, may be male or female, and may marry and procreate. But, *priests*, as we have seen, are more variable in these ways. Our reference from Hebrews 4 this morning would be made with the Jewish priesthood in mind.

A very brief review of Old Testament history would reveal that around 1250 BC,

Moses, with his brother Aaron, led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt into freedom in the Exodus event. At that time, Aaron was designated by God as a priest, and as the first High Priest, in a sense, of the Hebrew people. Jesus, in our lesson this morning, stands in line with this ancient office within the Hebraic tradition.

Furthermore, I know that you would like to know that there were three God-given roles within Hebraic religious tradition: prophet, priest, and king. If you like, you may google the phrase “prophet, priest, and king” and take a quiz to discern which type of disciple you most resemble. Seriously. To review briefly, a prophet was called by God to speak a word of justice or judgement, generally, and was usually not of religious training or priestly heritage. Quite often prophets were folks in a completely unrelated field, whom God compelled to say a few choice words when needed. Priests, on the other hand, *were* religious professionals, often of priestly family background, trained, paid, and who functioned as mediator between God and the people, giving instruction, offering sacrifices, leading worship, and so on. Kings were, of course, those who governed, ruled, and defended the kingdom. All three positions in Hebraic tradition were callings of God. Jesus, in fact, fulfills all three of these roles: He is prophetic in his teaching and preaching, calling out the hypocrisy of many and demanding justice for the poor. He is Kingly in his rule over humanity; we give him our allegiance as our King. And he is priestly, in that he functions as one mediating between God and people. It is this last role of Jesus that is featured in our text this morning. Jesus as High Priest.

What was unique about the *High Priest*? Perhaps an analogy might be that of the Pope to Catholic priests. The High Priest was the head of the priests, the leader of the priesthood. The high priest was the only man who, once a year, could enter the Holy of Holies within the Temple, to offer the sacrifice of atonement on Yom Kippur. The high priest at the time of Christ was Caiphas; as you recall, he didn’t care for Jesus at all; in fact, he was instrumental in plotting with the Romans for Christ’s execution on the cross. Yet, in spite of all of this drama and even treachery, and in spite of whatever personal associations we may have with priests or high priests, that *is* how Jesus is identified here, and this image is intended in the most positive way possible. Not only is Christ the High priest; he remakes or changes that role forever. Because while the high priest traditionally entered the Holy of Holies to offer the annual sacrifice for sin, Christ *became* the sacrifice for sin,

Himself, offered up once and for all, in the event of the crucifixion. And at the time of his crucifixion, you may recall that the curtain of the temple, which separated the worship space from the Holy of Holies, was torn in two, symbolizing that Christ was tearing open the curtain that separated humanity from God. Not only was Christ *a* High Priest; in our Christian theology, he was the ultimate and final High Priest.

This might all sound rather formal and theological and make Jesus seem quite distant from us. And yet, the point of this chapter in Hebrews is not only that Jesus is Lord as High Priest for us, but also that Jesus is a high priest who truly understands human woes, weakness, testing, and suffering. He is not some strangely removed holy person, far different from us, looking at us with disdain or disgust; He can truly sympathize with us, we read in these verses. The author wrote, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are.” Isn’t it true that often the best counselors for addicts are recovering addicts? Or that the grief counselor who has experienced loss themselves truly relates to the grieving? That’s the point here: God understands us. And it wouldn’t have had to be that way, would it? We take it for granted, but God could have presented God’s self to us in any number of ways once God chose to be incarnate in Christ. How would it have been for us if Christ had not been in solidarity with us, with the common people of His day? What if Christ had, in fact, only associated with the upper crust and the very best people, instead of seeking out the lost and the sinful? What if he had avoided all contact with lepers or the sick, in case he caught something himself? What if he had made nice to the religious establishment and cozied up to the Roman occupiers, rather than challenging them at every turn? What if he had refused the way of the cross, never grieved at the death of his friend, Lazarus, never agonized in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, never knelt to wash his disciple’s feet at the Last Supper, because that was servant’s work? How different a Lord would we have, if *that is* how Christ had lived? We’d have a high priest that could *not* understand or sympathize; a God who had no *clue* what it means to be human, sinful, weak, vulnerable, or broken. We would have a Lord that we would fear rather than love, and One to Whom we would be unlikely to double down in prayer in times of need. We wouldn’t have Christianity at all, would we? It’s mind boggling, when you think about it.

But that is *not* the kind of Lord, the kind of Christ, the kind of High Priest we have. Thank God for that! Instead, we have *our* Lord who identifies with the weak and sinful, embraces suffering for the sake of others, and knows what it means to be tempted and tested. While obviously all that we all do *cannot* please God, nothing we can do is beyond God's understanding—or God's capacity to forgive. That's the radical nature of grace. And because we have this kind of Lord, this *sympathetic* High Priest, we are urged in my favorite verse out of this reading: "Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

What does it mean to approach the throne of grace with boldness? How do we approach in prayer a God Who empathizes with us? I suspect we find that God's empathy for us in Christ does not make us passive and helpless, but rather emboldens us to pray. Talk honestly with anyone about prayer, and you'll discover that we all pray differently. Some of us pray very specifically; some of us pray more generally. Some of us pray with a sense of urgency or even demand; some of us pray in a spirit of peace or acceptance. Some use prayers of ritual or ancient tradition; others are completely spontaneous in prayer. It doesn't matter how we pray, just that we *do* pray. And all of these types of prayer are modeled in Scripture. Hopefully, our text today increases our sense of God's accessibility, of our freedom to be honest and upfront in our prayers. Whether we pray in grief, hope, joy, anger, or doubt, we have a High Priest, a Lord, who empathizes and listens. Because God understands, and God invites our bold approach to the throne of grace. As we read, "Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

There's a story told of a rural church in southern Minnesota about bold and hopeful prayer that I love. There had been a significant drought, and farmers were growing anxious. It was decided to meet at the church for a special service of prayer for rain. Many folk gathered, both men and women, both young and old, but only one little girl made a statement about boldness in prayer---she brought an umbrella with her. Because she expected God to respond to prayers for rain.

Now, as adults we know it's not always that simple; prayers aren't just automatically answered in just the way we want and with the timing we'd like. Nevertheless, what a great picture for us of bold and hopeful prayer; if you're praying for rain, bring an umbrella! And if you pray to God in Christ, a High Priest who truly understands, pray boldly. Knowing that the throne of grace is indeed where we will find mercy and help in time of need. Amen.