

Pastor Joe Polzin
1 Peter 2:2-10
“Chosen to Be Priests”
Year A – Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 14, 2017

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

A pilgrim from the north makes his way south into Judea on a long and sacred journey. And as he approaches the regions surrounding the city of Jerusalem, the road beneath his feet begins to slope upward. Slowly at first, but then rapidly, as he climbs in elevation. Higher and higher he goes, until he sees them – the walls of the city. And behind those walls, he can see, the top of the temple, the holy place of God. That’s where he’s headed.

Through the gates of the temple mount he goes, past the porticos where teachers sit and instruct their disciples. He enters the courts of the temple, first the outer courts, then up the stairs to the inner courts. And finally, as the grand columns move aside, this pilgrim sees the innermost structure, the holy temple. And in front of the temple are a host of special people, attending to their very important job.

There is an array of priests, moving in, out, and around the temple with fine precision. These are the descendants of Moses’ brother, Aaron, and the tribe of Levi, the priesthood. They wear special garments to mark them for their sacred task. The pilgrim hears them proclaiming God’s Word, using liturgies of Scripture, so as to remind the people of how God has saved them. He also hears the priest offering prayers up to God on behalf of their entire nation and for all people. And he can smell the sacrifices being offered on the altar, a wonderful fragrance to God, as the sacrifice was given for the sake of the people of God.

This would have been a scene well-known to the apostle Peter, as *he* had visited Jerusalem on numerous occasions throughout his lifetime. One wonders if he was imagining this scene as he wrote the words found in our Epistle Reading today, calling Christians a “holy priesthood.”

He writes, “As you come to [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

This was an unusual thing to say, both then and now, so we should take notice of it as Peter, on two occasions in our reading today, calls the Christians to whom he writes “priests.” First, we should understand what Peter means when he says the word, “priest.” It may be confusing to us because there are some Christian denominations who call their pastors “priests.” This is not what he means. Rather, Peter has in mind the image of the priesthood of Israel, which is now carried on in Christians.

Second, we should also be very clear noting who this applies to, who *is* a priest? Martin Luther explains that Peter is talking about something called the “priesthood of all believers,” or the “priesthood of the baptized.” In other words, there’s only one job qualification needed to be a priest in God’s kingdom: Baptism. If you’re a Christian, not only are you qualified for the role, but the role is automatically yours the moment you’re baptized.

And third, we need to understand why Peter is calling Christians a “priesthood” in the first place. And, looking to the whole of his letter, Peter is describing what life is like as a Christian. What we’re supposed to be doing day in and day out. Without knowing this, we might be wondering, “What does my life look like as a Christian? What am I supposed to do?” Imagine if you were hired for a job, but were never told what your role was. Your supervisor meets you when you show up, and says he’ll be back at the end of the day to check in on you, but you have no idea what to do between now and then! It would be confusing, and difficult, and unproductive.

But that’s not the way it is with our lives as Christians. God tells us exactly what we’re supposed to be doing in our lives, and it becomes our honor and joy to do it. Peter says your task is to be part of the “holy priesthood.” Which means, the tasks that the holy priesthood did for *Israel* are now *ours* to do for the whole world. And just as the priests of Israel had three primary responsibilities, so do we: we are to speak the Word of God to those around us; we are to pray on behalf of others; and we are to offer our lives in service to one another as spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.

It’s fundamental to note, and Peter makes clear, that before our role as priests are possible, the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, has made it possible. You see, the priesthood of Israel was perfectly fulfilled when Jesus came. He proclaimed the Gospel, the salvation that God brings, to all people. He Himself was the Word of God made flesh, bringing light and life into the world. He offered prayers on our behalf, and still does today, and he even taught us how to pray. And in the greatest act of sacrifice, he was willing to offer himself up on the cross, so that what once separated us from God, our own sinfulness, would now be fully absolved and taken away.

Peter calls him, “A living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious...” (v. 4). And Peter quotes Isaiah 28, a prophecy about the coming Christ, “[God says,] Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame” (2:6). Jesus is the living stone, because he triumphed over death itself and came back from the grave. He is chosen and precious to God as His only Son, and through Jesus and by his blood, we are chosen and precious in the sight of God, as well.

Now, because of what Christ has accomplished fully on our behalf as our Great High Priest, we are called out of the darkness of sin into the light, called to be priests in our lives as Christians. To do what? The first task of a priest is to speak God’s Word, to share the good news. In verse 9, Peter says, “That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Simply put, we are to tell others about what Jesus has done for us. To talk about, and praise, glorify, and give thanks to God for how He’s working in our lives. And not in the shadows, where others can’t see it, but in the light, as we are in the light. In our first reading from Acts, we heard of Stephen, who was the first martyr, the first one to lay down his life, in the name of Christ. He wasn’t an apostle, and yet, he didn’t hesitate to share the Word of God, even in the face of persecution and death.

We’ll talk more how we share God’s Word in our lives, as we discuss the other tasks of a priest. But for now, let’s consider the second task, lifting up prayers to God on behalf of those around us. Before my days at the Seminary, studying to be a pastor, Jennie and I lived in Wisconsin. And I found a group of coworkers, with whom I grew fairly close with. One of these guys was named Robert. Robert is a great guy, very friendly, thoughtful, and intelligent. But

Robert is also an atheist. We'd have honest conversations about what each of us believed, never angry, always respectful and calm, discussing faith and God. But we never saw eye to eye.

One day, Robert tells us that he's going on a trip, but not just any trip, a trip to see the world. He had a plan in place to pay off all his debt, finishing his lease, and quitting his job. He would then spend the better part of a year going west, and traveling all the way around the world. And if you knew Robert, you'd know that he wouldn't say he was going to do something unless he had already made up his mind to do it.

The night before he left, we were having a goodbye party for him. And at one point, Robert and I were talking without anyone else around for a moment. And Robert said he had something to ask me, and I wasn't sure what he was going to say. He said, "Joe, I want to ask you to pray for me while I'm gone."

I was a little stunned, to say the least. I didn't know what was going on in his heart or mind at the time, or what this meant about his relationship with God. But something had led him to ask me to pray for him, and of course, I said I would. And while he was gone, I did just that. I prayed for him. And I didn't realize it at the time, but what Robert had asked me to do for him was to fulfill the role of priest for him. That I would lift up prayers to God on his behalf.

Now, I've come to realize that we don't have to wait to be asked to do it. In fact, we shouldn't. Our lives should be lives of prayer, especially on behalf of others. Imagine what that's like for God, hearing the prayers of his people as we lift one another up. It's incredibly important for us to experience that, too. I'm sure we've all had someone come to us and share a troubling experience, or the worries on their mind. We have that feeling of sympathy where we wish there was something we could do for them.

Well, what if, at the end of that conversation with that person, you simply say, "Could I pray for you?" And in that moment, you speak a simple prayer that God would be with them during this time. Or, if you're unsure of the words to say, taking their hand or placing your hand on their shoulder, and saying the Lord's Prayer with them. And in our own prayers, we should constantly be praying for others, for our communities, our nation, and our world. This is the role of a priest. This is the role of a Christian.

And this brings us to the third task of a priest, which really culminates everything we've heard so far. And that is to offer our lives in service to others as a sacrifice to God. Again, we're only able to approach this noble task because our Lord Jesus offered *his* life as a sacrifice for us, and now we are able to live sacrificially for others. God doesn't need our sacrifices; Jesus has atoned for all through his life, death, and resurrection. Rather, our *neighbor* needs our sacrifice and our service. When we love and serve others, we love and serve God.

And this doesn't only mean that we would be willing to die for those we love, as I think, unsurprisingly, many of us would be willing to do, if the situation ever arose. Rather, what is more likely, is that we *live* in a way that is sacrificial, not for our own benefit, but for the primary purpose of serving others. And when you have the whole family of God living in this way, no one placing themselves first, but everyone being placed first by others, things tend to work out very well.

Of course, it's only natural when talking about living sacrificially for others that I would mention the importance of this day, and the importance of our mothers. Martin Luther taught that every Christian has many vocations – not just our occupation, that's one example of vocation, but also all the many different roles which we fill in our lives. And we serve God by serving others through our vocations. Motherhood is an important vocation. We have all been shaped

into who we are because of our mothers. And a child's life and a child's faith is shaped in critical ways by the way their mom models and shares her faith with her children.

For a mother, her primary responsibility after her spouse is her children. A mother's most important role as her part of the priesthood of the baptized is for the benefit of her kids. She speaks the stories of God to her children, telling them about the love of Jesus. She prays to God on their behalf. And she obviously serves sacrificially each and every day to love, care, and provide for her family. Mothers gives us a wonderful example of how we can all serve as priests in this world. [We saw parents today, doing just that, as they placed the Word of God in their children's hands, have studied it with them, and have prayed over them.]

Obviously, God has not given the vocation of mother to all Christians. So, consider, what are your vocations? What are your roles in your job, your community, your family and extended family, and with your friends and neighbors? I have been given the vocation to be pastor, to be a priest, publicly on behalf of this congregation; that's my occupation. But I also have the vocation of husband, father, brother, son, grandson, neighbor, and friend, to be a priest of the baptized, to be a Christian, in each of those relationships.

There is no coincidence why God has placed you where He's placed you this very day, why he's given you the vocations that you fill. He's put you there to be a priest of the baptized – where there might otherwise be no presence of the Word of God, He's placed you in your vocation to speak it. Where there might otherwise be no prayers offered on behalf of those who need it, He's placed you in your vocation to offer them. And where there might otherwise be no service or care of those who need it, He's placed you in your vocation to offer yourself as a sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest. It truly is a wonderful calling. In Jesus' name. Amen

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our risen Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.