

Hebrews 4:14-5:10
Jesus is Greater than Priests
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
3-6-16

We all have times in life when we just need a little help. Ringo said it pretty well when he said, “I get by with a little help from my friends.” Never mind what he says next.

We’ve all faced that moment in our lives (and if we haven’t, we will) where things have gone colossally wrong. Maybe it was with our health, or a choice we made, or a business risk that went south, or it was thoughtless and ill-placed word that cut deeply. It’s moments like these that we need a little help, right?

If you hadn’t noticed, the world is a pretty chaotic and volatile place right now. And not just politically and socially. As a congregation, we are dedicated to sharing the hope of the Gospel with one another and with our community, whether things are smooth and easy, or when things are volatile and chaotic. And there are people in this community who know something about this right now.

We all need a little help in life, we all need someone who, when we’re weak, when we’re running on empty, has the strength to hold us up.

In the book of Exodus, the Israelites won one of their battles for as long as Moses’ arms were raised. But like any of us, Moses’ job, his task wore him out. So he needed a mediator, a priest, to intercede and help hold him up. Aaron the Priest and a man named Hur were these mediators.

[Amy’s Testimony]

First, why we need a mediator: Difficulty in our relationships and in a life with God is a story as old as time. Almost from day one, we as humans have needed someone whose job it is to provide the connective tissue, someone to bridge the gap between the Sovereign and Holy Creator and the sin infected creation. What we needed was a mediator. What we needed was a priest.

In ancient Israel, priests or Levites were men whose job it was to intercede on behalf of the people to God. Verse 1 gives a nuts and bolts definition. **For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.** The High Priests were mortals chosen from among other mortals to offer gifts and sacrifices to God for the sins of the people. The High Priests do not save the people from their sins—only God can do that; the high priest is but a messenger of salvation, carrying the symbols of repentance from humanity to God. In the Old Testament, this was represented by the High Priest bringing an offering before God for themselves and for the people. Then when that offering had been made in the Holy of Holies once a year, the priest would return to the people with the good news of forgiveness.

The Old Testament priesthood had deep symbolic meaning for the people of Israel. But his role for the people was not just ceremonial; Old Testament priests weren’t impersonal and unbiased third parties. The priests of the Old Testament were also the pastors and care givers to the people. Verse

2 says that **every priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to the very same weaknesses. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.**

One of the most sacred things in this life is the ability to share one another's deep needs, yearnings, brokenness, and joys. As a pastor, I consider this one of my most sacred functions, hearing another person share is like receiving an offering from them, being given as a symbol of the deep secrets of life.

One morning a number of years back, as I was sitting in my office, a young man came in and asked to talk. Immediately, I knew something was deeply wrong. But when he sat down to share, he began pouring his heart out, confessing to a moment of weakness that led to an act of infidelity that had decimated his new marriage. Sitting beside me was a fragile, disoriented, broken man. I realized what he was doing...he was entrusting his deepest pain, shame, and brokenness to me, and asking me to mediate for him. The offering was one fragile, finite person, to another fragile, finite person. When it comes down to it, in that moment, I was no different than he was. I am just as sinful and broken, and because of this I was able to deal compassionately, with gentleness and understanding.

In Ancient Israel, this is how the priests cared for their flock. They approached God's throne entrusted with the most precious offerings of their people, but also they themselves brought offerings of sacrifice for their own sins.

As I sat with that young man, I didn't callously listen in as one who was more righteous or devout. But we were able to share and confess with one another, he in his brokenness and I in my brokenness.

For years, centuries, God's people waited for a Great High Priest. There was still a barrier that stood between God and humans, literally a curtain that spanned the divide. It represented the reality that though sacrifices are made and atonement granted, there remains separation between God and His people, a separation we cannot overcome. No matter how righteous the priest was, no matter how compelling or compassionate or wise the pastor in our day is, we cannot fully mediate that divide. We cannot bridge the gap.

Here is where we get to the heart of the passage in verses 4-6. Priests who follow in the line of Aaron, the very first, are not self-appointed, they're called by God. So also Christ did not glorify himself but the one who said to him, "You are my son, today I have begotten you."

Jesus is not only a compassionate pastor and a wise teacher, Jesus is the Great High Priest. Jesus knows the pain of being human. Jesus embodies human life, including all of its frailty and limitation. Jesus takes on the full range of what it means to be human and doesn't spare any of the agony or suffering. The difference between Jesus and us is that Jesus lived a perfect life and is fully capable in himself to approach the throne of God as the perfect High Priest, on behalf of imperfect people.

Verse 7 says that Jesus offered up prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death. The picture Hebrews paints here is Jesus standing at the altar of heaven in the very presence of God offering to God the whole of our brokenness, our sin, our sufferings, praying tearful, sorrow-drenched prayers to the God of salvation. When Jesus spread himself out in the Garden of Gethsemane, begging "let this cup be taken from me, but not my will

but yours,” when Jesus cried out from the cross “my God why have you forsaken me?” he was not only crying out with prayers for himself, but in those words were the very offerings of our deepest selves, our most intimate confessions, our innermost longings, “Please God, do not forget me.”

But in the midst of Jesus’ suffering, one thing set him apart from all other priests before him, and all others after. Jesus never lost sight of the fact that he was God’s Son, the true High Priest who could lead his people. Jesus sat with his disciples at a different sort of altar and said, “This is my body, offered for you.” It was Jesus of Nazareth, our brother, our friend, who took into himself all of the hopes, fears, joys, and sorrows this world had to offer, and then once and for all offered himself as the perfect substitutionary offering for the world. Jesus our Great High Priest intercedes with the Father on our behalf, as a brother, as a friend, and as a Savior.

I want to close by circling back to the last two verses of chapter 4. Hebrews 4 reads: **Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

So what does this mean for us? Bold courageous prayer. Since we have this hope, Jesus our mediator and priest, we are emboldened in our prayers to him. Like the friends of the crippled man who let their friend down through the roof to see Jesus, we can join one another in bold courageous prayer. “The Bible invites us to move past courteous and fearful prayers, tidy prayers, formal and distant prayers toward a way of praying that storms the gates of heaven with honest and heartfelt cries of human need.”

Life is not always neat and tidy. Life is messy and full of struggles that, if we’re honest, bring us to our knees crying out to God for wisdom. If we are formal and distant in our prayer, which Presbyterians are known to be, it is to our demise. Eugene Peterson writes, there are no small prayers, for every prayer is an act of approaching the very throne of heaven and inviting the Lord of the Universe to enter in.

As we close, I want to invite you to join me in a time of prayer. We are going to spend a few moments before almighty God, and in this time I want to encourage you to lay yourself out before God. There’s no need to hold back, no need to put up airs, no need to withhold anything—he knows it already, but he wants to share with you in it.

Then I want to offer you the chance to receive the Lord’s Supper in a unique and maybe different way. We all are like the blind, the lame, the lepers, leading one another to the one who can make us whole again. So maybe it’s with a spouse, or a friend, I want to invite you to come two by two, and when you get to the front of the line we will hand you the bread and the cup, and you will serve one another by saying, “This is Christ’s body, for you___; This is Christ’s blood for you___.”

Let’s intercede for one another, as we gather at the table of our one true intercessor, our Great High Priest. Amen.