

“Our Great High Priest” – Stephanie Wing, 10.18.09

When I meet people from other religious traditions who find out my profession, they often ask what I am called - a preacher, a priest, a minister, or pastor? Ordained ministers in the Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopalian, and even many Lutheran churches are called priests, but the title of “Priest” seems more foreign to us Presbyterians. Ironically, the English word for "Priest" derives from the Greek word, "Presbyteros," which actually means elder, and is of course where our own denomination gets its name. It seems strange to think of Jesus as a High Priest. What does it mean for us today?

The tradition of priesthood comes to us from Judaism, where decedents of Aaron in the tribe of Levi were the priests in the Temples, offering sacrifices to God on behalf of the religious community and themselves. The High Priest was the chief mediator between God and God's people. He was responsible for performing many rituals and sacrifices, and for leading the people in repentance.

This tradition is still alive and well in Catholicism, where Priests serve as a mediator in Confession, giving absolution and declaring forgiveness. One of the big marks of the Reformation 500 years ago was promoting the "priesthood of all believers," meaning that there is no such thing as "special access" to God. We do have a mediator, but that is Jesus Christ, and through Jesus Christ we are all equally free and able to approach God, just as we are.

The idea of Jesus Christ as the ultimate high priest comes primarily from this letter to the Hebrews. Unlike other letters written to specific people or specific communities of Christians, this letter was written primarily for the Jews scattered throughout the region in the first century. It relies heavily on the Hebrew Scripture to argue that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God. It uses Jewish imagery and terminology, including that of the priesthood in our passage today.

The Jewish audience would have spotted a problem in this particular imagery right away. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, not the priestly tribe of Levi. But the author ties Jesus' priesthood even further back than Aaron, to Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who was Abraham's contemporary. Abraham was Levi's Great-Grandfather, so generations before the birth of the one for whom the priestly tribe was named, we see the earliest High Priest of God named in the Bible. He appears in the 14th chapter of Genesis. Abraham has just rescued his nephew Lot from captivity, and King Melchizedek of Salem goes out to greet them, bringing bread and wine. Melchizedek's name literally means "Righteous King," and as King of Salem, he is literally the "King of Peace." He is mentioned once more in Psalm 110, in which the Lord tells David that he is a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. As David's descendant, Jesus could claim *this* priestly order, and with this connection to Melchizedek, the author of the letter to the Hebrews rests his case - Jesus is the High Priest, forever.

In Leviticus there is a lengthy description of Aaron's ordination to the Priesthood, but we know nothing of Melchizedek. His authority and office seem to come from no human source, but only from God. He is a priest of God Most High, an agent of interaction between the human and divine, before the Jewish people were even a people. Jesus' priesthood is also independent of any human action or ordination. It is bestowed by none other than God, and publicly recognized at his Baptism, when God claims Jesus as Son.

The most important priestly function was offering the sacrifice for sins. Jesus didn't offer any Temple sacrifice in his life; the sacrifice he offers is, of course, his own life. Through his self-sacrifice, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation. Once that sacrifice was made, there is no other sacrifice required. We still sin and we still live in a world plagued by sin, but our sins are forgiven once and for all because of the sacrifice of Jesus. Today we do not offer sacrifices in exchange for atonement; we give freely of ourselves and our resources in gratitude for the assurance that we have of forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ.

If we understand Jesus' priesthood only in terms of sacrifice, I think we miss an important point. The passage from Hebrews opens by saying that every high priest is chosen from among mortals, to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since each high priest is also subject to weakness. Since the earliest days of the Church, we have struggled with how to understand and articulate the

fact that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. It is often hard to think of God as having any kind of weakness or lacking perfection, but in our passage today the writer implies Jesus' weakness and talks about his being made perfect. It emphasizes some of the very human characteristics of Jesus. For the writer of this letter, it is important to emphasize because it means that Jesus can relate to us more fully because Jesus shares in our own experiences and emotions. Jesus, as high priest, is not emotionally removed from the people.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. We know this from the Gospel stories, but this view of Jesus' passion and humanity is something that often doesn't quite sink in with us. We read that he offered prayers with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard. Shortly before his arrest, just after the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus prays to God to take away the cup that is set before him. But as we know, it isn't taken away. Jesus obeys, to the point of his death. It seems like an unanswered prayer, or at least a prayer answered with what Jesus didn't want to hear. But our reading today reminds us that even as he prayed it, Jesus was heard. His loud cries and tears did not fall on deaf ears, and God was all the closer to him through his trials and ordeals.

Being close to God - even being God's son - didn't save Jesus from suffering and emotional turmoil. Being close to God today doesn't save us from suffering

and emotional turmoil. We know this. In our reading from Mark, James and John ask Jesus if they can have places of honor at his side, when he is glorified. They were as close to Jesus as just about anyone else. They had given up everything to be there, and now they wanted some promise of reward for it. But Jesus asks them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They say, "We are able." So Jesus replies that they will drink the cup and share the baptism, but sitting at his right and left hand is not his to grant. What they are asking is to be close to Jesus in all his glory, and he grants it, but the closeness comes not from sitting at his right or left, but from drinking from the same cup. It is a cup that even Jesus asks to be taken away, if it is God's will.

The cup is a cup of suffering, filled with tears and prayers that seem to go unanswered as the suffering continues. There is so much unjust, unexplained suffering in this world. It seems like lately I have heard many horrible stories, full of sorrow and tears and unanswered questions. In these trials, we often start wrestling God, like Jacob did. Some people step away from God completely and permanently. They wonder where God could possibly be in the midst of all of this pain and suffering. They wonder where God is when prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears seem to go into some void in space, unanswered and unheard. I can sympathize with that. But there are others who somehow manage to draw even closer to God in the midst of suffering. They know that Jesus doesn't

just pray for us, he prays with us. He cries with us. He suffers with us. He shares the cup. They know that everything from their deepest secret thoughts to their public prayers and cries is heard by the God who loves us just as he loves his son.

The God that we worship isn't some far-off cosmic being. In the person of Jesus Christ, our God became flesh, just like you and me, and suffered all of the physical, spiritual, and emotional pains that we might suffer. At those times when we are in the midst of trial, when it seems like God couldn't be any further away, it is actually in those moments when God is closest to us, and when we are closest to God. God didn't simply take on a human body. The human body is a magnificent creation, but the mechanics of the body are hardly what make us human. What makes us human is the rest of the stuff that makes us complicated people, people who feel pain and feel joy, who mourn and who celebrate, who are triumphant and who fail. Jesus Christ is the high priest who was God and yet became fully human, not to be glorified on earth, but to serve as he was appointed, to be a servant, as we are also called to serve. In his life Jesus offered prayers and supplications, and in his death and resurrection he continues to draw us close to him, praying for us and interceding on our behalf. And through him, we have eternal salvation.

Now as we prepare to come to this table, we don't come to re-enact the sacrifice of Jesus. It needs no re-enactment; the sacrifice has been achieved once and for all. We are reminded that Jesus offered himself - his very life, body and

blood - for our salvation. But our high priest still prepares this table for us. Jesus is our host here, offering bread and wine, as Melchizedek offered to Abraham. The meal we eat here is not a bitter one, but a sweet one, full of the promise of eternal life and reconciliation with God our creator and all of creation. In drinking from this cup we still pull close to Jesus, but more importantly, Jesus pulls close to us. As we eat this bread and drink this cup, remember that we do not eat or drink alone. Whatever we might encounter in life, whatever trials, whatever suffering, we encounter as part of a community of faith. Here at this table, we gather together in love and fellowship, and mutual support. We also remember that in our suffering and in our trials, whatever they may be, we have a Savior who has already been there, and who is with us on every step of the journey. He prays with us, cries with us, shares this meal with us, and walks with us. So let us come to the table to eat this bread and drink this cup, and be strengthened for the journey ahead.