

22nd Sunday after Pentecost – October 24th, 2021
PRIESTS AND PASTORS

Prayer

Lord, we pray that You will open the mouth of Your servant to proclaim that Word in the power of the Spirit. And we pray that this same Spirit will open the hearts of its hearers here assembled to write on their hearts Your holy law and receive Your holy gospel, even as You have promised.

AMEN

Thanks

I want to begin by saying “Thank You” to all our preschoolers who came to uplift us with your songs and to the parents who felt it important enough to bring them this morning to do so.

Background - Sacrifices

To understand today’s Epistle, I want to make explicit what the writer and the first readers understood implicitly. Both writer and readers were Israelites, descends of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and were thoroughly familiar with the sacrificial system that God had set forth in the Torah, the first five books of what we call the Old Testament, written down by Moses. Much of the book of Leviticus is dedicated to this topic – the various ways in which the people could sin – harming their neighbor, harming themselves, or offending God – and what was required to be offered or sacrificed to ‘make

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things right.’ There were also specific offerings for thanksgiving, guilt, and ceremonial impurity. These ‘ordinary’ sacrifices weren’t done by the sinner, but by the sons of Levi, for whom the book is aptly named, on behalf of the sinner. The prescribed sacrifices and officering were initially brought to the tent of meeting and handed over to the priests. Once a permanent temple had been built in Jerusalem by Solomon, the sacrifices were done there.

Background – the Scapegoat (Lev 16)

There was one special sacrifice that I would like to highlight. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, whoever was serving as the High Priest would enter the innermost room of the temple, the Holy of Holies, and there offer a blood sacrifice to cover not only his own sins but the sins of all the tribe of Israel. He would also lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And then the goat was sent away into the wilderness. Some of you might recognize this as the origin of the term ‘scapegoat.’

This then is what is meant by what the text simply calls “the old system.”

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A More Perfect Sacrifice

If that was the 'old system,' what is the 'new system' like? It is the reality that was foreshadowed by that 'old system.'

Daily, bloody sacrifices are no longer needed. When we realize that we have sinned, we repent – meaning to change course or direction – and confess – to acknowledge what we have done or left undone, in thought, word, or deed that has offended God, then, just as I was able to do for us earlier in the service, we are reminded that God has forgiven us because of the Jesus's once for all time sacrifice. We no longer need priests to act as intermediaries between us and God, since at Jesus's death, the curtain leading into the that inner room was torn and discarded.

A Royal Priesthood

In fact, Peter, in his first letter (1 Pet 2:9), says:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

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So, ALL of us who have been adopted into God's family water and the Word at our Baptism are priests, with immediate access to our God, our Father.

The High Priest

And what of the appointed High Priest? As the text says, Jesus is our permanent High Priest, who through this suffering and death, paid once and for all the blood price for all our sins. He became the ultimate scapegoat, taking all of the sins of all of the world into Himself, so that He could freely and graciously offer forgiveness of sins, restoration of our relationship with our creator, and eternal life to each and every one of us. All the work has been done for us. Please forgive the double negative, but we only need not reject the gift thus offered.

Of Pastors and Priests

Now if we are all priests, you may be wondering why some Christian groups reserve that terminology for their clergy. I can't say for sure whether it is because it is traditional or because of a different understanding of the access we have to God and his scriptures.

What I can do is to explain why I am have both the privilege and the responsibly for preaching and not anyone else here this morning.

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While we no longer have priests, born into the office due to heredity, we do have Pastors, who are called by God, through his people, ordained for his service, and placed into the office of the Holy Ministry. It is done for good order, not because a Pastor is somehow less sinful than everyone else, but to avoid chaos and confusion.

The work of a Pastor is not to serve as an intermediary, but as St. Paul states in his letter to the church at Ephesus, (Eph 4:11-12):

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, . . .

This Pastoral office, this shepherding role, is meant to complement and support our royal priesthood as we proclaim the good news of the Gospel in our daily routines by both word and deed. It is precisely because of this equipping role that we read the books by Pastor Finke on *Joining Jesus on His Mission* and have invited him to explore how we can put that knowledge into practice during a special weekend next March.

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Challenge

The hymn the children sang reminded us that Jesus is truly our friend and what He has done for us. Today's closing hymn is a fitting response, asking in a sung prayer that we would be fully committed to our Lords' service, that everything that we are and have would be offered to Him for His glory, in a thankful response to what Jesus has already done for us.

AMEN