

This week, as I read over the exquisite promises in today's Epistle, as recorded in Hebrews, I found myself becoming a bit uncomfortable. Oh, to be sure, I am grateful beyond measure for this passage's affirmation of the truth about Christ's priestly work – its comfort and assurance, its revolutionary promise regarding forgiveness. But then I found myself pondering the *implications* of this blessing – the *responsibility* that is yours and mine as a beneficiary of Christ's offering – and I began to realize what an awesome responsibility that really is.

The ministry of Jesus has become *my* ministry and *yours*. All we who are God's people have been made priests. We are priests called by God and commissioned by Christ. We are priests to each other...and priests to the world around us. And what a priesthood it is!

Frankly, my first reaction to this realization of priesthood was a sense of heaviness as I anticipated having more responsibilities stacked on top of an already large pile of duties. After further reflection, however, I realized that the basic issue here is *not* more tasks to be assumed, but a basic *identity* to be embraced and enjoyed – a recognition of who we are that prods us to be all we can be, all that God created us to be.

As I continued further in my study of this passage, I found myself led to another set of readings, not in our lectionary today, both of which are in the First Letter of Peter. The words shared with us in 1 Peter, chapter 2 and further on down in chapter 4 read like an insightful commentary on the Hebrews text we heard this morning. Christ, who extended grace to us, in turn appointed us as *stewards* of that grace. Just as we received mercy *from* him, we are to extend mercy *to* others. Having been blessed by the unique priestly ministry of Jesus, we also have been charged to bless others through our shared ministry as Christ-appointed priests.

The author of 1 Peter writes with a clarity that leaves no room for doubt or confusion regarding our identity and ministry: **“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood... Once you were *not* a people, but *now* you are God's people”** (1 Pet 2:9-10).

What does this mean? Since Jesus has offered the ultimate sacrifice and cleared the way for us to relate to God personally, what is *now* our job to do? What is the nature of the priesthood to which we have been called by our baptism? Look carefully – the characteristics of this priesthood are enumerated by the author of the Hebrews text in what I suggest are five ways.

First, Jesus commissions us to a **priesthood of forgiveness** (Heb 10:18).

What we see in Jesus points us to the nature of God and to the nature of our lives as the people of God. In other words, what *Jesus* did, *we* are called to do – namely, serve as facilitators of forgiveness.

Let's face it: at times, this can be difficult work. Almost everyone can name *somebody* whom they think does not deserve forgiveness. Jesus, however, reveals to us a God who is

- *not* a moralist,
- *not* an accountant,
- *not* a rules-maker,
- *not* a power-broker,
- *not* a law enforcement officer,

but a *graceful lover* eager to take the burden of sin off people's backs. So our first priority as stewards of the grace of God is to live out, to enact, **a priesthood of forgiveness**.

Second, Jesus commissions us to **a priesthood of humble confidence**. (10:19)

The work of Jesus fills us with confidence that we really do have a God of forgiveness – a God who gives us all the authority that we need to function as priests to each other. *Confidence*, however, must not be confused with *arrogance*. Our responsibility is to *serve* each other, not to try to play God or to take on the authority of Jesus in arrogant ways. So here we have a **priesthood of humility** combined with a **priesthood of proclaiming with confidence** the Good news of God in Christ.

Third, Jesus commissions us to **a priesthood of hopefulness** (10:23).

What good news we have been given to share with people! What we say, what we do, how we live, how we give, all of it points to how God keeps promises. And the promise of the work of Jesus is forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and meaning in life for all of us.

Among priests commissioned by Jesus, the substance of hope consists not of a *Pollyanna* view of the future but of a *realistic* view of the past. Look what God has done through Christ. Consider the provisions made for us in the priestly ministry of Jesus. We have every reason to live **a priesthood of vibrant, expectant hope** and to encourage others to do the same.

Fourth, Jesus commissions us to **a priesthood of profound love** (10:24).

Because we have been loved so lavishly, we are called to order our lives in such a way that we live out that love responsibly. To experience the love of God through the revelation and actions of Jesus is to live by love ourselves and to seek to prompt love among others.

Virtually nothing in this whole Hebrews passage on priesthood makes sense apart from the recognition that its foundation is *love*. Both the gift of God and the offering of Jesus were profound expressions of love. Our subsequent priesthood will reek with a lack of authenticity if both its words and actions are not filled with a similar love within us and a desire for such love within others. We are called to **a priesthood of profound love**.

Finally, Jesus commissions us to **a priesthood of encouragement** (10:25).

To us is given the happy responsibility, rooted in the love of God and the grace of Jesus, of enabling others to feel better about themselves, to see previously unrecognized possibilities in their lives, and to face the future with eager anticipation. Conversely, any priesthood that trades primarily in judgmentalism, negativity, and condemnation is *not* the priesthood commissioned by Jesus. Our commission is as **priests of encouragement**.

Today, as we bring before God our pledges for the coming year, and make our commitments to the work of God in and through this congregation and our Shared Ministry for the year 2019, we must remember clearly that we are affirming not a parish, nor a budget, nor anything less profound than yours and my **priesthood as believers in Christ**.

Over this next year, we will be called upon to work every day at the responsibilities assigned to us by Jesus –

- **offering forgiveness**
- **exuding confidence**
- **confessing hope**
- **prompting love, and**
- **providing encouragement.**

We need not worry about the success of our efforts. The results of our priestly work already have been assured by the one who calls us to this work and makes us strong in the faith that allows us to live as the righteous people of God. But that assurance cannot mean that we back down or that we let someone else do the work you, *uniquely*, have been called to do. Each and every person is important to this magnificent tapestry we call our ministry, our priesthood, as God's people.

And so, this day, place your pledge envelope in this basket and join us in the priesthood to which every single one of us, without exception, has been called. Participate – be nurtured – let your heart be converted – and find in this venture, this journey, an unbelievable joy and blessing. Thanks be to God!