

“We are all priests”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 5:5-10 and John 12:20-33

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For weeks now, we’ve been talking about the Reformation—a movement begun 500 years ago to reform the Christian church. The Reformers sought a radical change, not only in how we understood God, but also in how we understood ourselves. They summed up this change with one phrase: the priesthood of all believers.

It’s the idea that, through Christ, we all have access to God, and together, as one holy community, we are called to serve and witness, to worship and learn, to pray and read Scripture, to lead. No longer shall the spiritual estate of the priesthood be reserved for clergy; it shall be for all baptized believers.

It has been the rally cry for the democratization of the church ever since: we are all priests; we are all ministers of God. We love this idea... until we actually start to think it through. It’s sort of like how we all, when we were kids, couldn’t wait to become adults and have all that freedom and power. Oh, the mounds of ice cream we would eat! We would play with our friends all day, sleep in whenever we wanted, and get all the toys in the world. But then we grew up, we became *adults*, and there were no friends (too busy) and no sleep (too stressed) and no toys (too poor) and no ice cream (too fat). And then, with horror, we realized that all we really wanted was to be a kid again.

I see that same look of horror in someone’s eyes when they rush to me with a new ministry idea—a major new project that will revolutionize the church—and I say, “That’s great! Would you be willing to lead it?” I never knew I could empty a room so fast.

Over the years, people have found the priesthood to be so scary that someone in the Middle Ages invented a legend that when the Jewish high priest entered the Holy of Holies and knelt before God, he tied bells to his waist and a rope to his ankle—bells because if they stopped jingling, people outside would know that the priest had made a mistake and had been struck dead by God; the rope, because they needed a way to pull his corpse out.

Which sort of sounds like entering the raptor cage in Jurassic Park. No thank you.

And that’s how it’s been throughout history. In Exodus, God proclaimed the Israelites a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6). But when they saw God’s awesome might as Moses received the Ten Commandments, when they witnessed the thunder and lightning and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and backed away. They gave up their birthright as priests and asked Moses to do it for them, saying, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die” (20:18-19).

Out of their fear, a special order of priests was created—the Levites. Only they were allowed in the inner sanctum of the temple; only they were allowed to speak directly with God and offer sacrifices on behalf of the people.

Many centuries later, the apostle Peter said that all Christians are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9). He said that we are all given the task of proclaiming the mighty acts of God. But around 200 CE, two church leaders, Hippolytus and Tertullian, decided that there should be a “special priesthood,” and “by the end of the fourth century that office had been formalized, and the ‘laity’ accepted second-class status in ministry” (Jack Haberer).

Today, we are still afraid that we are unworthy, unwanted, for this task. While we long to hear God speak to us, we fear it too. We fear what will be said and asked of us. And so, over and over again, we’ve deferred our relationship with God to a separate order of priests—people we ask to speak to God on our behalf, to mediate between us and our Creator.

In the Gospel of John today, we hear of Greek travelers who want to see Jesus. We’re not told why. But we can guess that they’ve heard stories about Jesus—miracles, healings, teachings, resurrections. And maybe they’ve heard that some are calling this man the Word of God, and they want to hear that Word for themselves.

When Jesus learns that these strangers have asked for him, he declares that the hour has come for him to be lifted up, first on the cross and then in resurrection. The time for Jesus’ glorification comes when even those who are considered outsiders, even those who would be deemed unclean, unworthy, and uneducated, boldly ask for Jesus. Then he shall become for them a priest unlike any other. For he will offer in sacrifice his own life, that our relationship with God might be mended, and all—even these Greeks—be invited in.

No longer shall the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the temple, the presence of God, be reserved for the clergy. All shall enter. All shall behold God.

Jesus doesn’t abolish the priesthood; he expands it, becoming for us our high priest, and entering each of us into the holy order. And there we learn that we do not need to be afraid anymore. For Christ has made us worthy. And Christ has whispered the words of the Lord, and they are not thunder, and they are not fire, and they are not lightning; they are love.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we are told that we can now “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need” (4:16). We do not clad ourselves with frightened bells and ropes and step slowly into the presence of God. We run in. Because life, not death, awaits us.

A new covenant, Hebrews tell us, means that God has established the Holy of Holies, the temple of God’s wisdom and grace, right inside of each of us. God says, “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Heb. 8:10-11).

We may have different gifts and different tasks: pastors, deacons, elders. But we are all priests. We are called to speak and show the love God has written on our hearts.

John Calvin took that idea and built a church around it, a new way of governance in which congregation and clergy “alike would serve in ordained offices of leadership—as peers in proclamation of the Word, peers in intercessory prayer, and peers in mission service” (Jack Haberer).

I know that that would be too daunting, too scary, if we had to do that alone. But we are not called individually; we are called into a collective priesthood, in which we take care of each other, pray for each other, and lead each other.

And I thank God for that. Because I can’t do this alone. It’s not only that I don’t have the time or the energy. It’s that I can’t approach the throne boldly without you at my side. You teach me about God every day.

Valerie, when I hear you praying with such passion and compassion, I see God. Vickie, when you hug me close with so much love, I see God. Lori and choir members, when you sing and make that beautiful music, such that I have to close my eyes, because I’m so overwhelmed with grace, I see God. Linda MacKay, when you go up to a visitor on Sunday morning and make them feel welcome, feel seen and wanted, I see God. Susan and Jill, when you gather together people exhausted from caring for their loved ones and show them that they are not alone, I see God. Jim, Robyn, and all the members of the Property Committee, when you crawl in stagnant water to fix this building, when you show up early to shovel snow, when you give your rare free hours to serve in ways people rarely notice, I see God. Annette, when you fight to make a dream of children’s and youth ministry come alive, I see God. Sammy, when you run up to the chancel, shouting in excitement, for the children’s message, I see God. George, when I remember how you shook and cried as you hugged me close at my sons’ funeral, I see God. Chrissie, when you provide shelter to the homeless... Kim, when you create safe space for LGBTQ teens... Linda Russell, when you teach in the Children’s Worship Center... Bev and Bob, when you organize a musical about the power of love... Roger, when you volunteer for a training in the sanctuary movement... Paul, when you make the incarcerated feel like free men... Shavonn, when you boldly proclaim the word... Jim Cramer, when you serve the hungry at the Salvation Army... Audrey, when you teach at a Lenten soup and study... Aaron, when you inspire us to become evangelists... Judy and Penny and all the deacons, when you prepare meals for the grieving... and I would totally keep going, except this sermon would never end... all of you, when you worship and serve and teach and dream... I see God.

This Lent, when we ask to see Jesus, may God open our eyes to the priesthood all around us, to the Holy of Holies that is in each of us. May we leave behind our fear and approach the throne of grace boldly! **Amen.**