

# "Priests to Each Other"

communion meditation

July 6, 2008

1 Peter 2:4-10

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Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on our priesthood:

*We will be priests to one another, ordained by our baptism to the work of a caring ministry.*

In discussion of the issues surrounding the Protestant principle, "the priesthood of all believers," Ray Bailey told of a exploration of the building in his first pastorate. He came upon a janitor's closet in which he found a hand-made sign that read, "Minister of Maintenance." He found humor as well as a serious question about how far we extend the role of professional ministry. I thought of the stress level that emerged when our janitor petitioned the Trustees to be advanced in title to "Maintenance Engineer." An engineer was offended. The janitor's role in church, minister or engineer, is not too far removed from the question today related to the statement in Grace Covenant, "We will be priests to one another, ordained by our baptism to the work of a caring ministry."

The social identity with priesthood is not always positive. Carolyn and I visited with Keith and Hiromi in Japan in 1995. Keith arranged for me to speak to a community gathering in a clinic where he was working in Osaka. My assignment was to explain my work as a pastor. When Keith translated my title as "priest" and my explanation that I visited people who were sick, I heard a lot of mumbling and audible gasps. Keith began to laugh. They associated priesthood with the Buddhist priests whose primary role was to attend to funeral rituals. For a priest to visit in the hospital was akin to an undertaker's visit to measure the body for a coffin.

The questions are bigger than Protestant. After Vatican II, Father Neal M. Flanagan registered: "clerical circles have joked that the council ended up by giving bishops the power, married deacons the fun, laity the priesthood, and priests the run-a-round." (*Worship*: Vol 42, No. 9, p. 532) Father Flanagan observed that Jesus fit neither the professional priesthood of the Sadducees nor the scribal profession of the Pharisees. Among Jews, Jesus was a layman. He took a priestly role of service in the world and commissioned his disciples to continue his ministry.

**All priests are people.** In my early experiences as a pastor I was somewhat surprised to discover unwritten community standards and role expectations that set clergy apart from laity. I never wore a collar but found myself in a priestly class with behavioral expectations that were often higher than those of peers in secular vocations. I was a pastor in a small community between Fort Knox and Louisville at the height of the Vietnam War. Because of the overload at the Army Post, our town was full of military families, and our little church reached record levels of attendance of young soldiers leaving and returning from war. I was a seminary graduate student and spent most daylight hours during the week on the seminary campus. Sundays were busy both with worship services and pastoral calls.

One Sunday afternoon I visited an Army couple that had been in church that morning. The address was in a cluster of apartments that looked like Fort Knox North. Rather than going to the door, I walked up to a small group of soldiers gathered around a car on blocks with the hood up. Four legs in military fatigues extended from under the car. I recognized the young man who had been in church that morning and approached him with hand extended to renew our acquaintance, but I was interrupted by a voice from down-under: "Hand me the \*\*\* crescent wrench!" One of the men gently kicked the extended foot and said, "Hey, there's a reverend up here!" I was more amused than offended. We were about the same age. I knew exactly what a \*\*\* crescent wrench looked like and would have been comfortable crawling under the car to help, but my pastoral identity was a barrier. I think that was my first encounter with the value of the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers. I could either play-up the holier-than-thou role expectation of my profession or try to break down the barrier.

Time and events made some changes in role expectation. The Jonestown massacre, the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals, and the more recent sexual abuse cases in the Catholic priesthood have certainly lowered the moral expectations for clergy. The old idea of the priest as a "holy man" has shifted to a slightly lower level. Also, I strongly suspect that a contributing factor in moral failure has been the social segregation of the professional ministry. Human beings, even pastors or priests, do not belong on pedestals. All of God's children share the same moral and ethical standards, and all of us are equally accountable before God and to one another for our behavior. The *laos* from which we derive laity simply means "the people." That includes pastors and priests. We share a common humanity.

In addition to a negative reaction to the ecclesiastical office, Martin Luther attempted to revive a New Testament understanding of priesthood during the Protestant Reformation. He was accused of lowering the priesthood to the level of the laity, but Luther insisted that the gospel raises the laity to the level of priesthood. He declared, "Every shoemaker can be a priest of God, and stick to his own last while he does it." His idea of church was every priest a Christian—every

Christian a priest.

Luther struggled with his own role as pastor/priest in Wittenberg Church. Because the priest was guardian of the Sacraments, he was in a position of power and control limiting access to God. The protest against the Catholic priesthood had roots in the New Testament Book of Hebrews challenging the role of the Jewish priesthood, and Luther simply revised the application for his time. Somehow the idea of a universal priesthood in the church got distorted to mean that freedom from priestly control renders the priesthood unnecessary, that each individual stands alone before God. In spite of the significance of the priesthood of all believers in the Reformation, the radical distinction between clergy and laity continued to be the unwritten law in Protestant as well as Catholic churches.

***All Christians are priests.*** The reading from 1 Peter reflects on the Jewish images of worship that focused on the Temple in Jerusalem. The building under construction at the time of Christ was easily associated with the huge blocks of stone in construction and the Christian gospel in which Jesus was the "stone which the builders rejected." Fred Craddock sees "living stones" as a bit of an oxymoron, but notes the extended figure of Christians fitting together to form the walls of the community of faith. Here the Epistle touches Hebrew memory in which the hope for God's people is that they will become, "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." Peter repeats for the church, "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation." The whole people of God, the entire church, is a priesthood.

How is this supposed to work? Rather than an assignment that is limited to Apostles, bishop/overseers, presbyter/elders, or deacon/ministers, the priestly work belongs to the whole community of faith. In the language of Carlyle Marney, We are priests to each other in the church, and the church is priest to the world. Far from being rid of priesthood, Peter recognized the universal need of priestly ministry, and the universal responsibility of priesthood in the church.

In thinking back to my misfit experience with the young soldiers in Kentucky, I have come to realize that I cannot possibly be all things to all people. People were in my congregation who had been in combat and understood military better than I. Who was to say that I rather than they had the primary responsibility of priesthood in that situation?

In the Fourth Gospel, the Lord's Supper begins with a moment of humiliation. Jesus, stripped to a towel, bends before his disciples and washes their feet and commands that they were to wash one another's feet. The role of priesthood is about service rather than authority or status. We are to love one another as Christ has loved us.