

Every Believer a Priest

sermon digest

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I Peter 2:4-6, 9-10

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It was, quite frankly, a dark moment. It was June 1988 and we were attending a Southern Baptist Convention, seeking (again) to hold back increasingly dominating forces that threatened everything we believed. We had, interestingly enough, passed through Oak Ridge on our way to San Antonio for a “trial weekend” in view of a call to the church here. We were wrestling with grief at the prospect of leaving a loving congregation where we had ministered for fourteen years while raising our children, and it was on the trip that we told three people who were among our best friends that we would be leaving. Added to this personal turmoil, we found ourselves, as we had found ourselves for the previous nine years of “the takeover,” in the midst of an angry, vengeful political convention. As usual the issues of abortion, prayer in the schools and the role of women were fueling the flame; but this year there was a focus upon a particularly despicable and supposedly “recent historical development” in Southern Baptist life: the priesthood of the believer. Judging that the priesthood of the believer was being used to “justify wrongly the attitude that a Christian may believe whatever he so chooses” and worse, “to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church,” the convention wound its way through treacherous (I use the word advisedly) parliamentary debate. By (as usual) narrow margins, the convention resolved that the “biblical doctrine of the priesthood of the believer . . . in no way gives license to misinterpret, explain away, demythologize, or extrapolate out elements of the supernatural from the Bible.” Furthermore, in keeping with the Hebrews injunction to “obey your leaders, and submit to them,” (13:17) the convention determined that the priesthood of the believer “in no way contradicts the biblical understanding of the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor.” The priesthood of the believer, in other words, was okay so long as the believer was willing to “walk in lockstep [and] wear a theological uniform” (from our Grace Covenant). And it was okay, I might add, as long as one submitted to the “right pastor” and not one daring to trouble the waters.

Far from a Johnny-come-lately, the priesthood of the believer is older than the church itself. Writing after the destruction of the Temple, the writer of I Peter is familiar with the scattered stones that once constituted that great edifice and chooses to speak in terms of *living* stones in contrast to the devastating array of now dismantled or dead stones. Christ, the writer assures his fellow Christians, is a living stone that has become the chief cornerstone. In like manner, Christians, too, are to be living stones “built into a spiritual house” (2:5). In the face of the disappearance of the priesthood with the Temple’s destruction, the writer calls his fellow Christians to be “a holy priesthood.” He is writing to what were probably Gentile Christians living on the bottom rungs of society. Many may well have been slaves. Objects of sneers and derision for their newfound faith, they had no grand edifice in which to gather. As a matter of fact, they had no separate building, no designated church buildings at all. Surrounded by the temples and shrines of their neighbors, they “had no art, no buildings, no sacred places. Everything took place within the assembled community of believers” [Pheme Perkins, Interpretation: 1st & 2nd Peter, 43]. Cloistered in individual homes scattered across Asia Minor, those communities, those fellowships were all important. Absent the accouterments of wealth and prestige, all they had to offer was themselves, living individually and collectively as “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” And that was enough. To these tiny, beleaguered bands, the writer addresses his bracing words:

You [yes, *you*] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2:9-10).

Tragically, with the passage of time, the surprising nature of those words tended to get lost to the church. Alliance with the Roman Emperor in the fourth century meant not just protection for the church, but privilege, wealth and the power to decimate perceived enemies. Centuries of establishment saw the crucial importance of the church as the people displaced by a privileged and powerful clergy. When the leaders of the Protestant Reformation stepped forward some 1000 years later to recover the concept, they were charged with seeking to reduce the priesthood to the level of the laity. Martin Luther, himself a priest, retorted that he was rather seeking to raise the laity to the level of priesthood.

The issue at stake was and is about far more than a remote doctrine of the church. More than “an

historical romp, a tip of the hat to giants who once roamed the earth,” to use the words of Lutheran pastor Jo Ann Post [“A Humbler Reformation,” workingpreacher.com], remembering the Reformation and applying its great truths to our day is about recapturing the very essence of Christ’s church. More important than class or office, Christ has removed the walls, not only between Jew and Gentile, but between priest and people. The priesthood is not the private domain of the clergy; it is the proper work of every Christian. God is not only accessible to every person; God is revealed through people like you and me. “*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.*” Furthermore, you are God’s own people with a purpose—“*in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9).

Never one to speak in muted tones, the renown pastor/theologian Carlyle Marney, who grew up next door in the community of Harriman, affirmed the meaning of the priesthood of believers with a vengeance. Frustrated with those who would turn it into little more than “a nice addition to round out a hired professional staff,” Marney spoke of the laity as the ministry of the church in the world. “The aim of the church is not to enlist its [laity] in its services; the aim is to put [its laity] as theological competents in the service of the world!” (*Priests to Each Other*, 14-15). The laity is not to be so consumed building up the institution of the church that they are wrung dry in the process. The church through its teaching, its preaching and its fellowship is to build up the laity so that the “commissions, courts, and councils, committees and divisions and departments, banks, stores, universities, firms, corporations, directors [are] attended by [persons] who know the Christian difference and act accordingly, as priests” (15-16).

Since our very earliest beginning, we have gathered for worship every Sunday morning around a proud proclamation of our commitment to the church as the people. See it there on the back of your order of worship: “Every Believer a Priest.” Our church covenant says it, too. “We covenant to live in the world as servants of God.” We go on to pledge ourselves to the care and nurture of Christ’s fellowship in this place and in the world around us. Accordingly, we commit ourselves to acting as servants of God to all who have given up hope, to working for peace and justice, to supporting a free church in a free state, to caring for God’s creation, and to joining hands with people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God’s children. Our vision, we say, will be “to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love, and revelation of God to the whole human family.”

It is a tall order, isn’t it? But I ask you, in the name of the one in whose name we serve, how could we draw the line anywhere else? Could we draw it at the border of our church family? At the border of our community or nation? At the boundaries of those who look like, talk like, act like, walk in lockstep with us? Somehow, given the universal love of the God we seek to serve, I don’t think so.

So hear again the good news, and hear it with ears a tuned to its surprising and far reaching message:

You [yes, *you*] are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (2:9-10).

Go now and live from God’s surprising, far-reaching mercy until its healing balm envelopes the ends of the earth that God loves.