

The Priestly Covenant

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Hebrews 5:5-10

We Presbyterians belong to the Calvinist branch of the church tree. Jean Calvin was a brilliant lawyer practicing in Paris, France, when he first encountered the writings of the original Reformer, Martin Luther. They set Calvin on fire. He studied the Bible and Luther's work intensively. He modified many of Luther's teachings, creating the theological and worship differences between Lutherans and Presbyterians we see to this day. One teaching Calvin changed hardly at all was the "priesthood of all believers". Luther and Calvin, two giants of the Reformation, essentially agreed on this one. From Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion: "We are defiled in ourselves yet are priests in (Christ). (Because of his sacrifice) the offerings of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God. This is the meaning of Christ's statement, 'For their sake I sanctify myself.'"

What is a priest? For Luther and Calvin, priests mediate between God and people. They perform certain rituals that establish a connection between us and our maker. Among the Hebrews of old the primary way in which their priests mediated for them with God was through performing animal sacrifices in the Temple. When synagogues appeared animal sacrifice continued in the Temple but not in the synagogues, essentially the churches of their day. There, the rabbis mediated

primarily by becoming learned in the Torah and teaching it to the people. Then came Jesus. We will speak more about him shortly. With his ascension in Acts chapter one, he left behind the new-born church. Almost immediately Christians created a new priesthood. The Roman Catholics maintain the Apostle Peter was the first priest. The early priests mediated between God and people primarily by having walked with Jesus and having insider's information on what he wanted from his followers.

Luther and Calvin's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers marked a radical departure from the Catholic system, fourteen hundred years old by Luther's birth. In the Reformers' thinking no one is holier than any other. Indeed, Calvin called us all defiled in that quote we read. How, then can we dare to call ourselves priests, mediators between God and ourselves? We can only because Jesus has paid the sacrificial cost for our sins. He died on the cross for this specific purpose. Through him our offerings become acceptable to God. He was and is sanctified, made perfect. So, Calvin concluded, we must learn God's law. It teaches right and wrong. It convicts us of our sin, as none of us can be as perfectly holy as Jesus. Again, only through his perfect obedience can we dare to approach God.

The Book of Hebrews tells us a bit more about how Jesus became *the* priest. "Christ did not exalt himself to be made the high priest, but was appointed by him who said, 'Thou art my Son...'" God the Father made Jesus the eternal high priest. While "in the days of his flesh", when he walked on the face of this earth, he prayed and supplicated with loud cries and tears." (Supplication is basically a prayer of begging.

The best-known example of a supplication in the Bible is probably Jesus in the Garden on the eve of his crucifixion, when he begged God not to make him go through with it. (“Take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will.”)

Jesus suffered terribly and, the author of Hebrews tells us, this made him perfect in obedience. The author concludes that when we obey him he offers us eternal salvation. He mediates between God and us through the pain of the cross. Which of us can possibly claim we could perform that role? We rely on Jesus, and him crucified, and him resurrected.

Living about 600 years before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the prophet Jeremiah had a vision that every follower of God would have an internal, instinctive understanding of the law. Nobody will need a priest to connect with God, because God's law will “be written upon their hearts.” God tells Jeremiah this will happen through a new covenant. This covenant will differ from the covenants God made with the Patriarchs of old. Each of those had been made with one human being, with Abraham, Moses or David, who would serve as surrogates for the whole people of God. Now, in this new covenant there will be no intermediary, no priest, no charismatic leader who goes to the mountain to receive the law on behalf of the whole people, no divinely anointed king to rule the nation.

Not only will this new covenant come directly to all who call upon the name of the Lord, it will offer them forgiveness. “I shall remember their sin no more,” Jeremiah

hears God telling him. Unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah apparently did not receive many visions about the Messiah. He does not explicitly mention the Messiah here. But as we look back from the advantaged position of having read the New Testament, we can say that Jesus was and is the means by which God saves.

So what does all this mean for us? It means that while we remain sinners, we have the law of God written on our hearts. We have a god-given conscience. We know right from wrong in almost every situation. And we can approach God directly, without needing a priest. We can pray. We can confess our sins in prayer. We can receive the incredible gift of God's forgiveness. We can read the Word. We can live in gratitude to Jesus for his loving us and his obedience to the Father. We can comfort one another with the faith that our salvation *is* eternal.

God has made covenant with us. It is the priestly covenant, the new deal in which God offers us direct access. Give thanks for God's mercy! Thomas Merton wrote, "To be grateful is to recognize the love of God in everything he has given us—and he has given us everything. Every breath we draw is a gift of his love, every moment of existence is a grace, for it brings with it immense graces from God. Gratitude therefore takes nothing for granted, is never unresponsive, is constantly awakening to new wonder and to praise of the goodness of God. For the grateful person knows that God is good, not by hearsay but by experience. And that is what makes all the difference." Ironically, Thomas Merton was a Trappist monk, a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. Yet he also wrote movingly of universal human

experiences and how we as believers might relate to the God with whom we have connected. Be grateful. Pay attention to the wonder surrounding you.

God has written our knowledge of God on our hearts. Jesus obeyed God's desire that he die to pay for our sins. Have we gotten a bit too used to that? This Lent, as we now stand two weeks away from Easter, let us use these days to consider our place in God's plan. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "If we truly pay attention to God's loving work, our experience of this life must become beautiful. Thank God, thank Jesus Christ." We have been connected with God. Enjoy that now and forever.