

Personal Priest
Hebrews 7:23-28 The Message
10/28/2018 LUMC

Theme: Forgiveness is close at hand

I chose to use the Message Paraphrase of the Bible today, in part, because I think it helps us to understand the text within our modern context. But, a second reason is because Pastor Eugene Peterson died last week. Along with this work, he was a prolific writer, pastor, and pastor's pastor. He was one of the greats of our generation and will be missed.

I encourage you to use more than one translation and a paraphrase of the quality of The Message is very helpful in learning and reaching a deeper understanding of the Bible.

So, on to our text today and a discussion about priests. A Rabbi, a minister, and a priest walk into a bar. The bar tender looks up and says, "What is this, a joke?"

We'll come back to the priest in a moment but first I want to talk about personal services. We live in an age when you can get personal services for just about anything. We love our pets and we love travelling. Some hire pet sitters to come, care for your pet but also to walk the dog play with them and be your personal pooper scooper.

We have wedding planners who do it all, from invitations to making sure Uncle Bob and Cousin George are sitting as far from each other as possible. Personal trainers who will come to your house, in-home services for cooking and cleaning, personal shoppers so you don't even have to go to the store, and even personal organizers for everything from your garage (don't touch my tools, please) to your taxes, clothing, and shoes. You might hire a personal nutritionist to help with your eating health.

One of the other 'greats' we lost this year was Billy Graham. Beginning with Harry Truman, he was confidant and personal pastor, priest, if you will, to many presidents. Some had other personal pastors, Pastor Tony Campolo served in that roll. Pope Frances even has a personal priest because, "Even the Pope is a sinner and in need of confession."

All this business about priests was Greek to me growing up in a church that barely acknowledged the need for personal prayer but emphasized the terrible consequences of backsliding into sin. I remember asking Pastor Williams, our associate and youth pastor, about this passage and why the Bible was talking about the priesthood since we didn't have priests. I remember him being uncomfortable and saying something about that just being old language we didn't need to worry about any more. "But," I said, "in 2 Samuel 20:26, Ira the Jairite was the personal priest of King

David. We don't even have priests, so what are we missing?" Okay, I didn't actually say that, I wasn't smart enough to know about 2 Samuel 20:26. But Hebrews was confusing me because the only priests I knew about were Catholic ones and we didn't talk about Catholics.

All this talk about personal services and priests is to get us to the very cool notion that Jesus Christ is our personal priest. That's right. You have a personal priest and you didn't even have to hire him, he's available for free, right now!

Here are some of the personal services Jesus offers to you as your Personal Priest:

- He is your friend – John 15:14. He is your shepherd and has made certain commitments to you; he will stay with you, never leave you, and he will lay down his life for you- see John 10.
- Oh, wait! He did that already – laid down his life – on the cross! Jesus' death on the cross was a priestly action. Not only offering a sacrifice for sin, a priestly action, but offers himself.
- He's divine, so he's got the power. His priestly – and voluntary action was taken on your behalf, but also for everyone. He's got that kind of power. Divine, universally offered, yet personal for you.
- He's also human. So, he knows you. He knows your struggles and your needs. If we're going to be on this kind of journey in life, doesn't it make sense to have someone along who knows you, knows your history, and is connected with you?

He not only knows you, but he's one of us, he's human. Jesus, knows what it's like to be tempted, tempted in ways we probably don't want to talk about in public, he knows and understands and, he wants to help you with that problem.

This characteristic of humanity is critical because it qualifies Jesus the 'priest' to offer the ultimate sacrifice for sin. Were he purely divine he would be unable to offer the sacrifice portion. God's perfect justice demands accountability for sin. Jesus is uniquely qualified to be our personal priest.

The Message reads, "**So now we have a high priest who perfectly fits our needs: completely holy, uncompromised by sin, with authority extending as high as God's presence in heaven itself.**" Since Aaron, the law appointed priests for the people, but they were always imperfect and never able to get the job done right. But Jesus did, once and for all.

There are many metaphors to help describe what this looks like. One I particularly appreciate is this; Because of Jesus' redeeming work on the cross and overcoming death on Easter morning you can be forgiven by confessing your sin and placing your trust in him. You are still human, you still sin, but there is something

different now. Jesus, as your personal priest stands between you and God – he is your intercessor. All God sees is the perfect Jesus, your sin is forgotten as if it never happened.

Of course, our response to this gift of forgiveness is to live differently – to “go and sin no more” or work toward that doing our best, seeking forgiveness when we hurt others, seeking to be stewards of our lives for God’s benefit. This is not a free ticket to do what you want with your life because you are saved. With our salvation comes a call. When you get in trouble, you want someone there with you, someone who has your back and your personal high priest says, “Hey, I’ve got this, wait here.”

It took me a long time in life, but I learned the real meaning of the priesthood of all believers. **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”** (1 Peter 2:9) We are here for each other and we’re to have each other’s backs. It means we need to be gentle with each other whether you are strong or weak, whatever your ethnic background, whether you struggle with addiction, or loneliness, or pain, or loss, or have tattoos, or lying, or have a lifestyle we don’t agree with. We need to be full of grace, just like Jesus, as we live together as a family. Pastor Ross often says, “The church is a hospital for sinners.”

My sister, bless her, won’t darken the door of a church because she says everyone there is a hypocrite. She says, “They all paste a smile on their face, but outside they are something different.” Yeah! Thankfully, she professes a faith for Jesus, but she doesn’t understand what church is really about. It’s okay to put on your best, dress up in your best clothes, put on that smile even if your inside is crying out in anguish for the pain in your life. It’s okay, because Jesus is here. He’s here, and here, and here. The good news is you can take him with you – he just wants an invitation. And there are folks who really do want to hear what’s going on inside you. People who will understand your pain because they’ve experienced it. One of the most important things we can do as a church is to give space for pain and love those in the middle of it.

Yeah. We’re all sinners. We’ve dark places and spaces in our hearts.

Another of our “greats” in the world of theology is New Testament Professor, N. T. Wright, whom I had the pleasure of having dinner with a few years ago before a lecture at Fuller Seminary. He is an ordained Church of England priest, but this is what he says about the priesthood:

“Jesus is the one and only Priest. If there is any other priesthood, it is found not by addition, but by inclusion: not by other people being priests as

well, alongside Jesus, but by other people being priests within this priesthood. Jesus is the place of atonement, the place where heaven and earth meet.

That is what priesthood is all about: standing at the painful, holy place where the great fracture in creation is healed, the great gulf bridged, where the Word has become flesh and pitched his tent in our midst, revealing God's glory as the Father's only Son whose very nature is love."¹

So, what is your relationship with the Great High Priest, Jesus? What should it be like? What can you do to change your relationship and have your very own amazing personal priest? Here are eight things you can do:

1. It must be a relationship of trust. If you can't trust the one in whom you confide, it won't last long.
2. It must be on-going. This on again/off again relationship stuff doesn't work with boyfriend and girlfriends why would you think it would work with God?
3. Acknowledge your role. You are the patient – the penitent coming to confide in your Lord and Advocate.
4. It is immediate. There is no access code, holding cue, or wait time. And, good grief, don't think, "Well, God doesn't have time for my trifling problems." That's exactly what your personal priest is all about.
5. Follow his counsel. When you receive advice from Jesus, through the Bible or prophetic word from a friend or maybe even a pastor, heed it. Do it. Make a change, it's a word from God, after all.
6. Live to please God not mankind. He is your Lord and Savior. It doesn't much matter if your neighbor, cousin, or friend disagrees with you, we're not following them, we follow Jesus.
7. You don't have to impress Jesus. He already knows your secrets.
8. Take heart. Even though your personal priest knows the absolute worst about you, he loves you – and he won't stop loving you.

Having a personal priest is not a luxury. It is not a perk reserved for presidents. It's not something just for the rich and famous. Each of you has a personal priest, someone who was human, who was tempted, who suffered. Someone who died for you. He's a priest who is alive and well whom death can never again touch.

Pretty amazing.

Jesus.

¹ N.T. Wright, "The glory and the prayer," a sermon preached at the Ordination of Priests in Durham Cathedral, June 2, 2010. ntwrightpage.com. Retrieved April 11, 2018.