

Sermon: "I'm a Priest, You're a Priest"

Scripture: 1Peter 2:1-10

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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This October 31st 2017 will be the 500th anniversary of when the Catholic monk, Martin Luther, walked up to the Castle Church in Wittenberg and nailed his 95 theses to the front door. That act itself wasn't quite as offensive as you might imagine because public announcements in medieval Europe were nailed on church doors as the most public and accessible place for everyone to see. It wasn't until people began reading what he wrote that the scandal of it began to rumble. And while Martin Luther didn't exactly start the Protestant Reformation on October 31st, 1517 - there were many a man and woman ahead of him who sought to address the abuses of the church - there was something tinder box about the moment that sent Martin Luther's challenge deep into the heads and hearts of people unlike anything before it had. And so here we are 500 years later, Protestant Christians worshipping God in our particular way largely because of that fiery little monk who stood on those church steps with a hammer and nail and risked to speak the truth to the powers of his day.

Over the next 2 months in honor of this anniversary, we will take one theme each Sunday from the Protestant Reformation and build our Sunday worship services around it. I feel sorry for Judy because her once-a-month preaching commitment happen to land on that lovely Reformation theme of "total depravity" *and* Animal Blessing Sunday out on the common October 15th. I can't wait to see how she negotiates that

one with our nice little service for animals and neighbors out there. But as we all know, if anybody can do it, Judy can!

The Reformation theme that we lift up today, on this the first Sunday of our program year, is an awesome one; so deeply a part of who we are and how we think as Protestant Christians. It's a theme that Martin Luther addressed clearly and often and the other reformers; John Calvin; Ulrich Zwingli, Philip Melanchthon - names you will come to learn over the next two months if you don't already know them - all held as one of the most important ways their reforms of the church was to be lived by the people in the world. That theme is "the priesthood of ALL believers".

But let me just give one important caveat here at the start: we must be careful in our honoring and celebrating of the Reformation not to set up a mostly false dichotomy between ourselves and our Catholic brothers and sisters. For one, just as Jesus was a Jew reforming Judaism, not trying to start a new religion, Martin Luther (and many of the other reformers) was a Catholic reforming the church not necessarily trying to start new churches and denominations and for certain not 24,000 denominations like our Protestant tradition has spawned and splintered over the years. We must remember that The Catholic Church did reform itself as a result of the Reformation but also resisted certain other reforms. It would be un-Christian, unfaithful to Jesus himself, and even our reformation roots to celebrate ourselves as the good guys and Catholics as the bad guys. Speaking of Calvin's doctrine of Total Depravity, one of the central points of the whole reformation project was to understand the extent of our own sinfulness

and our inability to save ourselves and the trouble caused by our efforts to do so, was at the core. Setting ourselves up as those who got it right and the Catholics as those who got it wrong is to fall into a self-righteousness that the reformers specifically sought to root out of the church, their society and themselves.

So that caveat understood – let’s explore for a moment “the priesthood of all believers”. It’s a beautiful, powerful, captivating doctrine of the Protestant tradition that I cannot do justice to in the few minutes I have up here, but I will try and offer you something this morning. All of these Reformation themes, remember, above all else, have to arise out of scripture and scripture alone, not out of the ingenuity of the reformers or even the deep traditions of the church but out of scripture. So the passage from 1Peter that you just heard Jenny read is one of the primary scriptural accounts that led the reformers to claim absolutely and completely that there can be no mediator between me and God, between you and God, because Jesus Christ was and is that sole mediator himself, that corner stone to the new temple that forms us into a church and through him and through him alone we all become a royal priesthood. This was a radical if not revolutionary claim given the power that religious authorities had over society at the time.

Hear the words of Martin Luther on this account:

It has been devised, that the Pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the Spiritual Estate; while princes, lords, artificers and peasants, are the Temporal Estate; which is a very fine, hypocritical device. But let no one be made afraid by it; and for this reason: That all Christians are truly of the Spiritual Estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone.

And Martin Luther continues...

As for the unction by a pope or a bishop, tonsure, ordination, consecration, clothes differing from those of laymen -- all this may make a hypocrite or an anointed puppet, but never a Christian or a spiritual man... for we are all consecrated as priests at baptism... in fact whoever issues from baptism may boast that he (and I'd add she) has been consecrated priest, bishop, Pope, although it does not beseem everyone to exercise these offices.

Ouch, huh? You can understand why the religious authorities wanted Luther's head and he had to go into hiding for a while. That notion would have been as incendiary as someone with real power and influence over the masses saying today "the heck with Baker and Walsh and Trump, we are all mayors and governors and presidents!" You can imagine that some would think Luther was proposing out right anarchy. And that's where we were born folks. While currently we White Protestant Americans are, for the most part in our country, the powers that be and defenders of the status quo, our roots are in protest against the status quo and revolution against the powers that be and even an upending of the structure of society because it was not conformed enough to the Word of God.

"You're a priest, I'm a priest", Martin Luther basically said and the foundations of medieval Europe were rocked to the core and the reverberations of that claim had aftershocks across the world and throughout history. So much so that on one rainy afternoon in the 1980's, across the ocean from Europe and in a little camper on the coast of what has come to be known as the state of Maine, something took place to a member of our church, actually, that could not have been imagined before the reformers incited their revolution.

At our Deacon Ceremony and Dinner back in the Spring we all gathered up here in the chancel and we invited everyone to share their baptism stories, many of them had to do a quick call to their parents to find out. We went around in the group until we came to Leigh Carlisle, one of our new deacons, (I got permission from her by the way to share this) who sheepishly said “I’m not sure if I’m baptized to tell you the truth. I think I am but I don’t know.” And she shared that she and her sister would go up to visit her grandmother Nana in her little camper on the Maine coast every summer. Nana was not happy with the fact that her daughter had never gotten her granddaughters baptized. So there was one summer afternoon that was raining and Leigh relates that there wasn’t much to do. Here are her own word – “So Nana decided she was going to baptize me and my sister. She told us that anyone who has been baptized can baptize anyone else. So we stood in her kitchen/bedroom/living room of her camper and she ran her hands under the water in the sink and ‘baptized’ us. Then we just went and played cards.” Leigh was not sure it counted.

But you see her Nana was absolutely correct, knew the basics of Protestant Theology 101, and was following the example of her Protestant forebears. She enacted what Martin Luther established 500 years ago when he said that the scriptures were clear and that “we are all consecrated as priests by baptism which is why in cases of necessity, every man/woman, can baptize and absolve.” So Leigh is a baptized Christian thanks to Nana and her grasping of her own priesthood or priestesshood.

“You’re a priest, I’m a priest”, which means Jesus Christ is the only mediator between you and God and since Jesus Christ is God incarnate we have a direct and immediate connection to God via Jesus Christ, no one can dictate the terms of that relationship, no one can tell us we have to confess or pay indulgences or get special dispensations in order to be right with God. Being right with God is sacred territory that we must traverse ourselves. But that’s not all that our priesthood entails, by any means.

Integral to the biblical notion of priesthood is sacrifice. The priest, in the time of Jesus and ancient Judaic history, was the one who would offer blood sacrifice of animals to take away the sins of the people and get them right with God. The priest would go into the temple and into the Holy of Holies and sacrificing a lamb he would sprinkle the lid of the Arc of the Covenant with lambs’ blood. This sacred act was commanded by God so that God could forgive his people for their sins and the people would be made righteous again. Not just in Judaism but in a vast majority of ancient religions the sacrificial acts of priests and priestesses were the heart of their practice. But then one cloudy afternoon on Golgotha in ancient Israel, this violent ritual suddenly took on a human historical formulation and the impact upon the world and human consciousness was so immense that it became the fulcrum of human history itself.

Instead of a priest shedding the blood of a lamb for the sake of the people, the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, allowed his own blood to be shed and opened a channel to God that had hitherto been obscured. And everything changed. The whole human sacrificial system was contained

within HIM and undone forever more - he was the priest and he was the sacrifice and he was the God to whom the sacrifice was offered, all in one, so that our predilection for sacrificing others was made conscious and rooted out.

So we say all those who profess Jesus Christ as Lord are a royal priesthood themselves, but the temple ceases to be a place in Jerusalem or anywhere else and instead they form the temple themselves with Jesus as the cornerstone, as 1 Peter describes. And they, WE, become priests of that temple who, and this is the key, in imitation of their Lord, offer sacrifice – but of themselves! They become priests of praise and sacrifice for the sake of others for the glory of God.

Again, to Martin Luther's words:

A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, (and I would add: a teacher, a lawyer, an ad man, a stay-at-home mom, a custodian, a doctor,) every man (and woman) has the office and function of his calling (his work), and yet all alike are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man in his office must be useful and beneficial to the rest, that so many kinds of work may all be united into one community: just as the members of the body all serve one another.

SO YOU ARE PREISTS! However God has called you in this life, you are priests of God, offering praise and sacrifice in your little spheres of influence for the sake of God's world and in the spirit of God's love. Do not underestimate the power of your priesthood no matter what you are doing and where you are for "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 the darkness and into his wonderful light!" Amen.

BENEDICTION - remembering that you are royal priesthood that has received the mercy of God, go forth into your week, into your work, into your calling and offer praises and sacrifices of love and mercy for the sake of others in Jesus' name, Amen.