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The Priesthood of All Believers
A sermon on 1 Peter 2:2-10
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I've shared stories with you before about the summer I did Clinical Pastoral Education, otherwise known as CPE, at St. Joseph Medical Center in Kansas City, MO. In CPE, you basically serve as a hospital chaplain under the supervision of full-time, professional chaplains, and this is great training for ministry because it exposes you to all kinds of interesting situations where you have to learn to think on your feet and provide spiritual care for people who often see things differently than you. As part of our training back in the summer of 2006—I'm not sure that they do this anymore, but they did back then—we had to spend one night a week “on call,” meaning we spent the night at the hospital and if somebody needed a chaplain in the middle of the night, they would page us and we would show up and hopefully provide whatever spiritual care was needed.

One night when I was on call, I got paged to the emergency room, and when I got there the nurses introduced me to a woman who was in deep distress. Her husband was dying—he had sepsis and was failing fast—and she said to me, “He hasn't been baptized. Can you baptize him?” I thought, holy smokes. What do I do? I was not ordained yet, and in the Presbyterian Church, we really like for people to be ordained and have session approval before they baptize anyone, although we also realize that there are special circumstances when we have to bend the rules a bit. My bigger concern was that this woman, a Catholic, had been married to her husband for YEARS. The fact that he had not been baptized in all those years suggested to me he probably didn't want to be! I was married to an atheist at the time, and I kept picturing how resentful he would be if I forced an unwanted baptism on him in his dying hours. When we

asked the man if he wanted to be baptized, he groaned in a way that sounded to me like “No,” yet his wife was devastated at the thought of him dying without having been baptized. What was a not-yet-ordained Protestant female seminary graduate to do?

This one excused herself, made a phone call, and 15 minutes later, Father Tim walked through the door. I’ll never forget how visibly relieved the woman looked when she saw that a real, honest-to-goodness Catholic priest had arrived. Believe me, I was relieved, too.

Father Tim quickly assessed the situation, deciding that the groans I interpreted as a no could just as easily be interpreted as “no problem,” and promptly baptized the man using a Styrofoam cup full of water that I fetched from the nurse’s station. The man died later that night, and his widow had the comfort of knowing he’d been baptized and prayed for by Father Tim. I’m so thankful she had that.

I’ve told this story to teach about different understandings of baptism, but today I’m using it to say something about the role of priests. Here we come to one of the biggest differences between the Catholic Church and those of us who worship in Protestant churches. In the Catholic Church, priests are very important. They carry out the sacraments, lead worship, and serve as intermediaries between God and humans. But ordained priests and regular folks are separate from each other.

In the scripture that Pat read from Exodus, you heard just a few of the detailed instructions that God gave Moses and the people of Israel for how to ordain Aaron and his sons as priests. It’s worth your time to go back and read all the rich details about their priestly garments, and all the sacrifices that were part of their ordination, and their special priestly tasks. These descriptions serve to highlight how these men are truly set apart for special service. That setting apart continues with the priesthood in the Catholic Church today.

In 1520, several years after publishing his 95 theses in Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther declared that all Christians were “priests” since they are believers in Jesus Christ, who was the ultimate intermediary between people and God. Luther said all Christians, both ordained and non-ordained, had equal standing before God. All were called to minister to others. All could approach God directly through Jesus Christ without needing a mediator. All could interpret Scripture.

This did NOT mean that individuals should just privately interpret scripture to mean whatever they want, privately baptize themselves, or privately eat bread and drink wine and call it communion. It’s the whole community of believers together that functions as a priest, not each believer privately.

One of the best examples of how this works is our weekly prayer of confession. We don’t practice the sacrament of confession, as our Catholic brothers and sisters do, but we do confess our sins together each week in worship. Maybe sometimes you’ve prayed along in our unison prayer of confession and thought, “Wait a minute . . . I didn’t do that . . . that doesn’t sound like me.” But somebody in this body of Christ undoubtedly has, and we’re connected to each other, and what some of us do affects all of us, so we offer up this prayer together.

After we do, I as the pastor do NOT absolve you of your sins, because I do not serve as a mediator between you and God. Rather, I stand with everyone else in sharing our common failings and our common need for God’s grace. That means any believer, whether it’s me, an elder, or a non-ordained liturgist, can then offer the assurance of pardon. We view God’s pardon as something we’ve already received through Jesus Christ. It is not something we earn, nor something anyone else can give us. All we’re doing in the assurance is reminding everyone of something we already have.

Now, we've been living with the whole "priesthood of all believers" concept for a while now. We proudly declare on the back of our bulletins that if you're looking for the minister, look no further than the people sitting around you, because all the members are ministers, with important gifts to share. Some of us are called to particular ministries, like me, as a pastor—I'm set apart for preaching the Word and for administering the sacraments of baptism and communion. Our elders are ordained for the ministry of leadership, and our deacons are ordained to the ministry of compassion and service. But all of us are called to ministry. And I think we "get that" pretty well. Whatever our age or stage of life, whatever our occupation, we know that we can bring glory to God whoever we are and wherever we are through our attitude, integrity, and the way we treat people.

Our scripture today, 1 Peter 2:2-10, has an interesting metaphor we do well to remember as we reflect on what it means to be a priestly community. It's in v. 2—"Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation." I love this image of new Christians as infants, longing for milk—if you've ever fed a hungry baby before, or watched a hungry baby as they are being fed, you've seen how their little mouths quiver in anticipation, and how once they latch on to their food source, it's like they are hanging on for dear life and they are not going to let go until they are good and ready. Maybe you've had a season, or are in one now, where you've been spiritually hungry like that.

But the point of feeding infants milk is to help them grow. And eventually, believers need to grow up. One of the things the priesthood of all believers does is to help us mature and take responsibility for ourselves. We don't have a human priest to approach God on our behalf. We approach God ourselves. We don't have a holy person who hears our confession—we hear each other's confessions. We don't project our ideas about what a holy person should say, and

do, onto a human priest—we embody those things ourselves. By extension: when somebody in the congregation has hurt our feelings or offended us in some way, not that that would ever happen here, we talk to them directly, like a grown up. If we need spiritual sustenance and we aren't getting it, we ask for what we need, or even better, we offer to help provide it. For example, if we want to be part of a Bible Study or a small group but don't see one that meets at a time and place that works for us, we offer to partner with someone to host one here at the church or maybe even in our home. If our favorite hymn hasn't been sung in two years, we don't complain to our lunch buddies—we join the Worship team so we can be part of offering helpful input and creating a variety of meaningful worship experiences. We share the privilege of caring for each other when we're sick, lonely, struggling, and hurting. We don't remain a community of infants, dependent on a parent-figure to take care of us—we grow up. We learn to use our words, we learn to contribute, we offer help, we ask for help.

There was a cute little scene in the sequel to the movie The Princess Diaries. Princess Mia is in a parade and comes across a little girl who is upset because she's had been picked on. She's sucking her thumb and clutching a blanky. Princess Mia says, would you like to be a princess today? And she invites all the little girls in the orphanage to be princesses for a day and walk in the parade with her. She buys tiaras from a local vendor and hands them out and instructs all the girls: OK, if you're going to be a princess, you have to believe you're a princess. You have to walk the way you think a princess would walk. You've got to stand tall and wave and just have fun. So all the little girls start to follow her, and the little thumb sucking girl walks alongside her. Princess Mia leans over and says, "Just remember, you really are a princess." Pretty soon the little girl starts to wave, and then slowly she stops sucking her thumb, so she can

wave with both hands. She has to leave childish behavior behind, so that she can fully embrace the princess.

Our scripture says, we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. As God's own people, may we embrace the wonderful roles God has given us—with all its privileges and all its responsibilities.