

Today's Readings

First Reading: Hebrews 5:1-10

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Gospel Reading: Mark 10:35-45

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be servant of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

It Shouldn't Hurt To Go Home.



In the mid-80's, I was involved in a business that bought and sold aviation parts and equipment. One of our first deals involved the bankrupt Northeastern Airlines and their residual inventory. For the better part of 3 years, I spent a good deal of time in the Fort Lauderdale area setting up a business for reselling the parts to the airline industry.

One afternoon, I found myself sitting in a park alongside the intercoastal waterway in the Fort Lauderdale area. It was a pleasant, sunny day – like so many others, and I was just taking it all in.

Some time had passed, when I noticed that an aphid, one of the cuter green kinds had landed on my finger. It was small little creature, less than a ¼" in size. I raised it up to eye level to get a closer look and was fascinated by its nearly transparent display of the tiniest of body parts in motion.

At about the same time, a yacht, one of those really amazing latest and sleekest kinds, slowly passed by on its way to open waters. As I looked at the aphid and the yacht that passed behind it, I remember thinking that for all the incredible craftsmanship, technology, science, and smarts – all the power and brains that went into making that ship...

It couldn't make that one little aphid!

I smiled and realized just what it was that had landed on my finger, no less than the Power of God and only God.

- I start my comments today from this place to remind me of just how humbled I am in this form I have at this moment.
- I start from here to remind me that whatever power I may think I have is nothing compared to the One that has all power.
- I start today from my total lack of control to witness the truth that the power of creating the smallest of living creatures dwarfs me...and then some
- My hope to be effective depends in finding ways in which to invite God's Power and love into all that I do. When that happens, it is no longer me running the show – or trying to – it is God.

- And that's why I come here. To remember that seeking such perfection will always be the incomplete work of a lifetime, as it should be, for it will always be God who finishes the rest.

So, for me, any conversation about power and privilege needs to be in that perspective, through that lens.

Such conversation needs to have a starting point of God, in whatever ways one might know God. If it doesn't, no matter how good it begins, how well-meaning it is, what great wonders it may perform...it will not be long before the power will begin to surround itself with privilege.

From there, in the vacuum of any spirituality, the power and privilege morph into individual and group entitlements, reinforced by a variety of rationalizations, increasingly building into a domination model for controlling others – at all costs – gaining strength in rationalizations and the comfort and entitlements of privilege, all fueled by a power that has now transcended into might and right.

God? The grace, the blessing, the end of the speech...and not much more.

I am not smart enough to know or even to suggest that the driving force behind the domestic abuse we all know or know of is the end result of the lack of God in one's life accelerated in the free-fall of power to dominance when left to "self-design." However, I do see our relationships to God as fundamental in the way that we live our lives, including the way we love and relate to one another. The absence of God, in some form, seems to be a problem.

I also am not offering these comments today to open and close the topic and terrible secret of domestic violence; a secret that needs to come out.

Instead, my purpose today is to speak about domestic violence and abuse out loud; to raise awareness in this space by raising voice; to let those who might be suffering know they are neither alone nor forgotten.

Additionally, my purpose is to continue a conversation that gives us the language to support each other and to help each other get support. While many see me in my role as Head of Staff at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House, I am also your minister or pastor. It is that role that is always first, even in the most demanding of administrative times.

In this urban ministry of ours, it is easy to become caught up in the "doing" of church. In a way, "activity itself" can become our demonstration of power and authority, that is, unless we remind each other always that it is God at work here, through us. Unless we remind each other always that we are first called to care for one another.

With all that in mind, please, if you or someone you know is suffering in an abusive relationship, let's talk and find ways to invite the Spirit and direction into our conversations. We want to help and we need to help.

No one deserves to be abused.

No one has done anything that deserves their being abused.

No one who is the abuser should be allowed to continue to abuse.

We will still love even the sickest among us; it is that love that is of God.

Suffering, Christian sacrifice and the like is not – never has been the same as the pain inflicted by domestic abuse, violence, domination, or oppression in any form. Such notions are as much the result of power and trust that has lost its way in the secular world – as is the violence itself. We cannot ever accept such things.

So let's talk. Let's raise the lives of people and the subject. We are open to your thoughts and suggestions.

And for a few remaining minutes let's look again at the readings of today's lectionary with a heart towards these comments....

In the first reading Paul is clear in his warning to those in power...do not forget that you, too, are but a human, with weaknesses. Even though you may be the high priest from the line of the Levites and Aaron you must sacrifice for your sins, so as not to forget you are just like those before you.

"Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. The priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since the priest is subject to weakness; and because of this the priest must offer sacrifice for their own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was."

The presence of power or authority is not a presumption of "correctness" or holiness. Nor is it something an individual can demand. It is the humility, the understanding of one's right-size in relation to God and their call to serve others that sets the holy and faithful aside.

Another way of saying that is to recognize that our humanness combined with humility that is set in relationship to God, guiding the ways we serve others is the right use of the power we have been given. That is, the presence of God within us. There is no dominance; no abuse; no marginalization – just service and love. From there all things will come. And when that goes awry – it must be addressed and changes (or sacrifices) be made.

Paul then goes on to talk about Jesus being a high priest in the order of Melchisedec. I encourage you to *Google* or *Bing* Melchisedec. Melchisedek is the priest who blessed Abraham, preceding, in other words, the Mosaic Law and the requirement that all high priests were from the tribe of Aaron and the Levites.

Some say Melchisedec was Spirit, some say a real king of Salem (King of Peace, root of the word Jerusalem 'salem', place of peace). Whatever Melchisedec may have been, it is to his (her) lineage – the first line of priesthood, the highest of orders, the ones that preceded even Moses, that Jesus is said to have come.

If you have ever wondered how Jesus who was of the tribe of Judah and not the tribe of priestly succession of the Levites – is referred to as the high priest, this is one explanation. With it comes the understanding that Jesus's sacrifice was not for his sins, for he was considered perfect, but for all those who preceded even Abraham. Jesus, high priest of the highest of order of priests was to make the ultimate of sacrifices for all those who had sinned and were unable, due to their lack of power – their 'sins', to make adequate sacrifices of their own.

It is as elegant as any high Christology of John, and juxtaposed with humanity in the reading from Mark in the most realistic of ways. (There is a song here, a melody, if you listen carefully, one that rises and falls on the steady beat of God's Love.)

We arrive at this morning's gospel with two of the disciples finagling to get the best seats in eternity. Who was going to grab the most power? Who would share first in the glory and gain? Who was going to get the parking space in front of the church?

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

It has taken us some many centuries to study and understand a little of what the gospels represent. They are still being revealed to us. So maybe we should not be so harsh on those who simply by their nearness to Jesus are expected to understand all that he said and represented.

He, Jesus, was as much an anathema in their time as he is in ours. All that to say that even the disciples thought this was about a power grab in terms of kings and high priests of the times. Even they were seeking some increase in power and privilege as payment or reward for following Jesus. And after Jesus challenges them to be like him in the sacrifices he was prepared to make, his final admonition is one of humility:

"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave [servant] of all."

Servanthood for Jesus and for us is not an easy concept. But it never was about abuse or abusive relationships.

Yesterday, I spent the morning at a Synod of the Northeast Meeting at the Stony Point Conference Center about whether or not an Administrative Commission should be in put charge of the Presbytery of New York City. Allegations and complaints had been made over time about the way in which meetings were being run, how people were being abused, and how the work of the presbytery was being affected. In the end, the decision was for the Synod to walk alongside of the presbytery in resolving its troubles, rather than taking over. No Administrative Commission was recommended. At least, not for now.

The root of the troubles of our presbytery – I don't suggest to know. What I have seen though, is that our presbytery is more diverse than any I have known. Every group, you name it, every group is represented.

Folks who, in one time or another, have been marginalized are now come together seeking ways to share power and to work with one another.

The ultimate and only difference in whether this will succeed or not is that we all see ourselves and our mission in relationship to God's call and our ordination promises.

For me, I think this is absolutely an amazing place to be. I would take this diversity and these challenges any day over a homogenous setting where everyone nods and agrees in their sameness. This *is* what we are all about – living, serving, and praying together without dominance or seeking to rule over one another. Excluding no one and then figuring out how to be Christian toward all. Not proselytizing, saving, or converting – Christian.

On this Sunday, humbled by the smallest of creation and exhorted by disciples and evangelists alike, let us make a promise to ourselves and one another. That in the spirit of this faith journey and all we hold sacred that we will embrace others who are suffering and seek ways to help and to serve. Let us promise not to be dissuaded because the task at hand is hard to do or because we are unsure of the answers. Let us help others to find support in our prayers and our actions. Let us enter the messy place of the shadows that cast darkness in the light and bring the light with us, as we go forward.

We, elders, deacons, members, friends, ministers and all - are here to help. Please, just ask...and we'll go from there.

Amen.