

The Priest Who Offered Himself Once for All
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, October 20, 2024
Hebrews 5:1-10
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship as we continue our study of the Book of Hebrews. Recall that we have seen how Jesus is the “exact imprint” of the Father. We’ve also explored how through him as our high priest we are able to approach the throne of grace with boldness. We are invited to pour out our ardent prayers before God at that throne.

Today, we will unpack chapter 5, verses 1-10, where we find a job description of the high priest and see how Jesus is able to fill this office. Although Hebrews was written decades after Jesus’ death, the people were certainly aware that he had hung on a cross and died in agony. Hardly the super-hero that one might expect to help them! This picture of Jesus shows him as suffering and weak. Understandably, the congregation(s) to whom the author of Hebrews is preaching wanted to know if Jesus was really strong enough to help them. Yet, despite all appearances to the contrary, the Preacher is firmly convinced that Jesus meets—and exceeds—the qualifications for the high priest.

Writing in his commentary on Hebrews, Rev. Dr. Tom Long points out three sets of comparisons and contrasts (*Interpretation Series*, pages 67-69).

1. The function of the high priest (5:1, 9-10)
2. The person of the high priest (5:2-3, 7-8)
3. The appointment of the high priest. (5:4-6).

Following Tom’s outline, we discover that the main function of a high priest is to act as a mediator, to “stand in the gap” between God and humanity. Jesus fulfills this role, but he also far exceeds it on two counts. Unlike other priests who can only act as mediators between heaven and earth, Jesus himself is the source of our salvation. Second, whereas other high priests had to keep repeating sacrificial acts, Jesus’ unblemished sacrifice of himself was made one time for all eternity (9:26, page 67).

As one “Working Preacher” commentator puts it:

Indeed, those who aspire to work for God must, first and foremost, be called by God, intentionally put in charge of godly affairs, and must become the embodiment of God’s kingdom. Yes, it takes only God to fill hearts with his power, and then the spiritual renewal of a lost church will be born again. That is the gospel message of Hebrews 5:1–10. In Christ’s submission,

humanity had access to salvation, and with Christ's obedience to God, the redemption of the world was set in motion (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-2/commentary-on-hebrews-51-10-6>).

Under the second point of the outline, we learn from Tom that the high priests were pastors, as well as people who performed the duties of a priest. Hence, to do this job effectively, they not only had to offer sacrifices for sin but they also had to be sympathetic to the needs and heartaches of the people they served. We are told that Jesus "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (5:7). He is certainly compassionate! And he does what he does willingly. We see this idea wonderfully illustrated in a 1967 novel.

In *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok's (*Hi'em Poe'talk*) masterful portrait of Hasidic Jews, the Reb, the revered leader of the community, is kind to everyone except his son, a wonderfully gifted young man beloved by all. In fact, the Reb won't speak to his son at all. His silence persists for years and causes the young man untold agony. Finally, the Reb explains his silence. He could see how gifted his son was and this father knew that someday his boy would become a great leader in the community. But the Reb was afraid that his son's giftedness might make him haughty and hard. So, he said, "I was silent so that you would suffer and would be able to be sympathetic with the suffering of your people." Thus, he would be able to deal gently with the ignorant and straying, just like Jesus (<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2015-03-16/hebrews-51-10/>).

The third point, concerning how the high priest is selected and called by God, is also important. Jesus did not snatch the position of high priest. Rather, he was appointed by God for this role. The Preacher quotes Psalm 2:7 in saying, "today I have begotten you" (5:5). According to Exodus 28:1, a high priest must be called by God. Those who God initially called were Aaron and his sons. Aaron and his brother Moses were of the tribe of Levi, which is why we often read about the "Levitical priesthood." All priests were to come from the line of Levi. Well, this seems straightforward enough, but this is a serious glitch when it comes to seeing Jesus as a priest. As we know, he is a descendant of David, who is from the line of Judah. So, how can Jesus be an official priest? The reality is that he can't assume a place in the line of Levi. But wait! There's a loophole. Long before the Levitical

priesthood existed, Abram meets the king of Salem who was also a priest. Melchizedek blesses Abram and, in return, Abram gives him one-tenth (a tithe) of everything (Genesis 14:27-20). Hebrews 5:7 quotes Psalm 110:4, which states, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Commentators understand this to be an allusion to the future Messiah. The only other place this priest is mentioned is Hebrews 7:1-28. Early in chapter 7, we learn that Melchizedek has neither mother nor father; nothing is known about the beginning or end of his life; and “resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (7:3). So, it’s this mysterious figure who is the pattern for Jesus’ priesthood. As Frank Crouch points out: Melchizedek had no standard credentials, no stated pedigrees, no letters of reference, and no official backing from anyone, besides “the God most High...The author of Hebrew connects Jesus to Melchizedek’s line of ministry—one without foundation in familiar institutions, not focused on preserving religious structures, theologies, and practices. It seeks only to be faithful to the living God, wherever that leads (“Working Preacher,” 2021).

Let’s turn our attention to how these writings about how Jesus is our High Priest might pertain to us. I keep thinking about how Jesus was willing to be vulnerable and to stand in solidarity with us. Where would we be without him? Buck Owens’ song, “Where Would I Be without Jesus” asks the same question and the refrain answers it this way:

Where would I be without Jesus? / Where would I spend eternity?
Lost in a world full of sorrow / Without Jesus, where would I be?

You may be familiar with the story of Nicky Cruz, who was born in Puerto Rico in 1938 but was sent to live with his brother in New York when he was 15. According to his autobiography, *Run, Baby, Run*, he joined the gang known as the Mau Maus and participated in all sorts of mischief, mayhem, and crime. David Wilkerson, who founded Teen Challenge and wrote *The Cross and the Switchblade*, worked the streets of New York in an effort to convert gang members. Dave’s early encounters with Nicky did not go well. Soon after Nicky became the gang leader, he encountered Dave, who told him, “Jesus loved him and would never stop loving him.” In response, Nicky slapped Dave and threatened to kill him. Dave tried again and Nicky’s response was the same. Dave kept trying to bring these kids to Christ. At an evangelistic meeting, Nicky and other gang members accepted Christ. After serving as director of Teen Challenge, Nicky went on to found his own ministry in California.

If we were to ask Nicky, who is now 85 years old, where he’d be without

Christ, I'm certain his answer would be "in a graveyard, having been shot to death or stabbed to death." Instead, he gave his life to Christ, went to Bible college to become a preacher, and was responsible for leading some of his former Mau Mau cronies to Christ.

While our own stories probably don't rise to the same level or drama or stoop to the same depth of evil that these gang members perpetrated, the reality is that we all need Jesus to atone for our sins and enable us to be put right with God. Since the days of Aaron, the priests offered sacrifices not only for the people but also for themselves. Only Jesus, who was sinless, did not need to offer sacrifices on his own behalf. As a man, he understood human weakness. But he did not succumb to sin, as both the people and the priests did.

Hebrews tells us that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered" (5:8). The sentence continues in verse 9 to say, "and having been made perfect." What does this mean Wasn't Jesus already perfect? Well, yes, he was sinless, but

being perfected means being fitted properly to the role of the high priest and this required suffering. This was described in 2:5-11. The ultimate purpose of Jesus becoming high priest is given at the end of verse 9: "He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." It takes an eternal high priest to bestow eternal salvation (Scott Shauf, "Working Preacher," October 2012).

Notice that Jesus "is source of eternal salvation for *all who obey him*" (italics added). When we look around and see how church membership has declined in our lifetime, we have to wonder if folks have lost their way and perhaps, they feel they have no need of salvation and/or they simply refuse to obey Jesus. Instead, they prefer to do it, as the popular Frank Sinatra song proclaimed, "my way." In our society where a cardinal virtue is rugged independence, "my way" often becomes "the only way." And yet, that idea doesn't begin to square with the model of Jesus who, with cries and tears, obeyed his Father to the very end and willingly died on the cross to bring about our salvation.

What does obedience to Christ entail? There was only one Savior...and we're not him. We are not being called to sacrifice ourselves once and for all as he did. Nor is it likely that we will be martyred for our faith. But we are often called to make small sacrifices to put Jesus and our service to God and neighbor on his behalf first.

What might we be asked to do? There are plenty of opportunities to work in the church. We have committees that too few people are willing to

work on. Perhaps you've heard of the Pareto Principle, which observes that 80% of the consequences come from 20% of the causes. Thinking of this 80/20 rule in terms of people, it means that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. And in case you're wondering, this holds true for churches of all sizes.

Volunteering to work within the walls of the church isn't the only way we can obey Jesus. People within our own families, circle of friends, neighbors, and church members may need help that we can render. We obey Christ when we aid others by doing things like pick up some groceries, rake leaves, walk a dog, or make a check-in call. We also obey Jesus when we do random acts of kindness, such as paying a toll for another car or lunch for a diner.

When we think about all that Jesus has done for us, it seems to me that obedience is a small way for us to say, "thank you, Lord, for the gift of eternal salvation." And yet, some people have no understanding of the value of this gift, or why Jesus would do this for us. This charming story illustrates how one person finally got the message of Christ's sacrificial love:

In a column entitled "The Man and the Birds," religion editor Louis Cassels recounted the story of a man who refused to attend a Christmas Eve service with his family because he did not believe in the incarnation. He remained at home, where it began to snow. Minutes later, he heard what he thought was someone throwing snowballs against his window. Going outside to investigate, he found a flock of birds trying to fly through his window as they sought refuge from the storm. He thought they might find shelter in his barn, and he made his way there. He opened the doors and turned on the light, but the birds stayed outside. He created a trail of bread crumbs for them to follow into the barn, but that did not work. He tried to shoo them into the barn, but that effort also proved unsuccessful. "If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety." At that moment, the church bells began to ring, and the man sank to his knees in the snow. "Now I do understand," he whispered. "Now I see why You had to do it" (Bryan Whitfield, "Working Preacher," 2009).

Love, Nan