

The Priest Who Prays Always for Us  
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, October 27, 2024  
Hebrews 7:23-28  
Choptank Charge      Pastor Nan Duerling

Good morning, friends, and welcome on this Reformation Sunday. This day commemorates Martin Luther's posting of his 95 Theses (propositions intended to spark debate) on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. As an Augustinian monk and professor, Luther was deeply concerned that God's freely given gift of grace had become lost in a system in which works were emphasized and indulgences were sold. Think of an indulgence as a "get out of purgatory free" card. Those who had the money were buying them for themselves and others. If you didn't have the means to buy an indulgence, you and/or your loved ones had to spend time in purgatory purging your souls of sin. Luther insisted this whole idea of indulgences was not right for two reasons: 1) the pope had no control over purgatory where souls that were said to be atoning for their sins resided after death and 2) Scripture alone is authoritative and justification (being put right with God) is by faith alone, not works. Luther's intent was to reform the church, not to split it. But the outcome, as a result of Luther's teaching along with that of other reformers such as John Knox and John Calvin, was that a group of Roman Catholics split off from their church in protest. This was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. For his trouble, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church in 1521. Fortunately, though, he was not executed.

Please bear with me a bit longer as we draw a line from the Reformation to Methodism and back to Hebrews. We'll get there, I promise, but today we're taking the scenic route.

The Lutherans certainly broke from the Roman Catholic church. So too did what are known as Reformed churches, such as the Presbyterians. Although Methodist churches are definitely Protestant, we got here by means of the Anglican Church. Remember that John Wesley was an Anglican priest until his death. Also remember that King Henry VIII of England was responsible for pulling the Anglican Church away from the Roman Catholic church, because he no longer wanted to be under the thumb of Pope Clement VII. Pope Clement refused to dissolve Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

The rest of this messy story need not concern us, but in the early 1530s

Henry became the head of a new Anglican denomination, which in most respects was like the Roman Catholic Church, headed not with a pope but with a king instead.

Like Luther, Wesley had no intention of founding a new denomination. He wanted to make the Anglican Church better. Also like Luther, Wesley was keen on the idea of Scripture alone and faith alone. In 1738, while attending a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, John Wesley heard Martin Luther's "Preface to the Romans" read and felt his heart "strangely warmed." More than 200 years after Luther had posted his 95 Theses in Wittenberg, John Wesley felt assured of his salvation by hearing some of Luther's work read aloud. He knew he had been freed "from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

Wesley was definitely on board with Luther's ideas of Scripture alone and faith alone. Wesley, along with Luther, promoted the concept of the "priesthood of all believers." They both taught that all baptized persons have the same access to God. The term had its origin in Exodus 19:6 where we read, "**you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.**" also find this idea in the New Testament: (bold type added):

**1 Peter 2:4-5:** "Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones let yourselves be built a spiritual house, **to be a holy priesthood**, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

**Revelation 1:5-6:** "To him who loves us and freed from our sins by his blood and **made us a kingdom, priests serving God and Father**, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

**Revelation 5:9-10:** They sing a new song...:you **have made them a kingdom and priests serving God**, they will reign on earth."

Assuming you're still awake after this deep dive into church history and theology, I hope you can sense a connection between the Reformation and today's passage from Hebrews 7. Recall that the author of Hebrews has focused attention on the difference between the Levitical priests and Jesus. The former are charged with the task of being mediators between God and the people. They offer daily sacrifices for their own sins and the sins of the people. Their office as priest ends when they die. In contrast, Christ is not a priest from the tribe of Levi, but rather is a priest, as we saw last week in Hebrews 5:10, "according to the order of Melchizedek." Recall that he is the priest to whom Abraham paid tithes. We know nothing about his

parents or anything else. He's a mysterious figure. Moreover, the sinless Christ had no need to make any sacrificial offerings for himself. Nor did he have to offer daily sacrifices for the people because he offered himself once and for all to atone for the sins of the people.

As Hebrews 7:26 says about Jesus, "it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." Christ is the only mediator we need between ourselves and God. He is willing and able to make intercession for us. He is praying for us at all times. As part of the "priesthood of all believers," Christians can act as priests through prayer. Our sins can also be pardoned without the need for a human priest to hear our confession. And, we are able to read and interpret the Bible for ourselves, though it's best to do that in a community of students, not only as an individual.

Does this all sound as if we no longer need what we would call ordained clergy? Let me pause for a moment to make clear that Wesley did not advocate getting rid of ordained clergy. On the contrary, in his sermon based on Hebrews 4:5, titled "The Ministerial Office" and later known as "Prophets and Priests," Wesley differentiated between two different leadership roles: the prophet and the priest. This will sound familiar to you, because lay people like me who are called to preach and ride all over town are ones who Wesley designates as prophets. For the record, I don't think of myself in that way, but that's a term Wesley would use to define my office within the church. The other office was that of the priest. This is the ordained person who has the authority to administer the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. As I hope you all know, because I am a layperson, I have to have our Communion elements blessed by an ordained elder before I can bring them to the churches to be served. In the days when an ordained circuit riders could only get to a congregation every three or four months, congregations had to wait to experience the grace of Communion, since their regular lay preacher was not allowed to preside over this sacrament. This all gets a bit tricky in our day when we know that no ordained person will be riding in on a Sunday to serve us Communion. So, the elements have to be blessed before we gather for Communion. Times are a'changin' and it's possible that at some point, as we have fewer and fewer ordained clergy, that lay preachers will be allowed to take on some of these sacramental responsibilities.

As we near the conclusion of today's message, which is titled "The Priest Who Prays Always for Us," I'd like us to focus on the idea of intercession. This is something we do as a body every Sunday as we pray for those who have needs for healing, or support in time or grief, to ask for

forgiveness, or for some other reason. The word "intercessor" comes from Greek and means "to meet with, come between." So, we are "coming between" the person(s) in need and God in order to bring about change in the life of an individual or group.

We can certainly offer intercessory prayers at any time. But if you're like me, they are most likely to be offered as "flash" prayers when something jogs my memory. For example, a siren may prompt me to pray for someone who is ill or injured. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul reminds us to "pray without ceasing." *Practicing the Presence of God* is a short book written by a French Carmelite lay brother who worked in the kitchen of a monastery in the seventeenth century. Brother Lawrence was able to be in close, constant communion with God. He prayed simple prayers, such as "Lord of all pots and pans and things...Make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates" (page 8). He's a great role model, but I haven't been able to master his way of prayer. I probably need to be more focused. Still, I do the best I can. And I trust you do too!

But the truth of the matter is that none of us can offer the constant intercession that Christ is able to do (Hebrews 7:19). He is praying at all times. And we are beneficiaries of his continuous intercessions. Of the many examples of intercessory prayer found in the Bible, perhaps none is more striking than his "high priestly prayer," which is offered on behalf of his disciples just before his crucifixion. Jesus prays both for himself (17:1-5) and his disciples (17:6-19). And not for them alone but "also on behalf of those who will believe in me (17:20). How amazing—and comforting—to know that Jesus was interceding for us even before he ascended into the presence of the Father. As soon as he finished offering this prayer, he went out to the Kidron Valley where he was arrested.

Jesus intercedes for us and wants to intercede for others. Why should we do this? God wants us to pray for others. Interceding on behalf of others reflects the love and mercy of God's own character. When we pray for others, we are learning how to move out of our own tiny worlds and grow in compassion for others.

Mike Bennett provides us with some biblically-based suggestions for offering effective intercessory prayers (<https://lifehopeandtruth.com/god/prayer-fasting-and-meditation/how-to-pray/intercessory-prayer/>):

**Pray for others from the heart, with deep feeling and sincerity.**

**Pray for others regularly.** Jesus told us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11;). We should pray for our

needs and the needs of others every day.

**Pray for others in detail.** God knows everything; but He wants us to come to Him with all our specific requests because He likes to hear from us and to know what is important to us. The Bible compares our prayers to incense, and God loves prayers that are like “sweet incense beaten fine” (Leviticus 16:12). Detailed, thoughtful prayers are more pleasing than rushed, summary prayers to “bless everybody” a prayer list or journal can help you remember the details.

**Pray for others with faith,** knowing that God has all power and loves the people we are praying for. Faith reminds us that God knows what is eternally best for each person, and that even if God does not answer in the way we want at the time we want, we can trust He has all of our best interests in mind.

**Pray for others with love.** Remember that names on a prayer list represent real people with deep needs, struggles and feelings. Consider that God loves each of them and wants us to have the same outgoing concern. Godly love is totally unselfish and is the essence of God’s character

**Pray for others fervently—with intensity, zeal and passion.** James 5:16 tells us “the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”

**Pray for others with a desire to help where we can** This might include physical help and encouragement. Cards, calls and visits might be helpful. It is not wrong to tell a person you are praying for him or her if it will encourage them.

**Pray for others occasionally with fasting.** a situation is very serious or hits close to home for you, you may decide to fast and pray to draw close to God to present your supplication to Him.

Thanks for hanging with me. I know we’ve covered a lot of turf today...and none of it has been easy terrain to traverse. Your challenge this week is to reread the sermon and call me with any questions so we can chat. (I don’t guarantee answers). Then, I want you to spend some time every day offering intercessory prayers for those on our list or in your heart. Prayer does change things! Love, Nan