

Show Me Your Credentials

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Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
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Text: Hebrews 5:1-10

“You should apologize,” the parent says. “You hurt your brother, you hurt your sister.” “But I didn’t mean to!” replies the child. This was not malice aforethought, the child argues. This was not a crime born of evil intentions. I wasn’t looking where I was going, that’s all. I didn’t mean to do any harm. And yet you did. Maybe you were being careless, or maybe it was just an accident, but you caused hurt, and now the proper thing for you to do is to acknowledge that hurt, and to say you feel bad about it, and to do what you can to make your brother or sister feel better.

I feel as though I live this script over and over, and maybe other parents feel the same way. There’s something inside us, and not just when we’re children, that makes it seem as though good intentions ought to be vindicated, that the simple fact that we *meant* to do right ought to be enough. And when our words fall flat, when what we had intended as a compliment or a kindness causes offense, we shake our heads and say, “No good deed goes unpunished!”

And yet those unintentional hurts we cause don’t call so much for punishment as they do for honoring the other person, their feelings, and the relationship we share. We do intentional harms when we’re angry, or when we’re in circumstances that shape a hurtful choice. But the unintentional hurts so often have to do with persistent and lasting differences of experience, differences of power, differences of values, and because of that they are all the more threatening to our relationships, and make it all the more important to acknowledge the person we’ve hurt.

This is a long way of coming to what our text from the book of Hebrews says about acknowledging our vulnerability in a way that qualifies us to serve others and to be their advocate with God. A priest, it says—in other words, someone who offers intercession for others—“is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness....” Before we talk about what this text means, I think it’s important to recognize ourselves in that phrase, “ignorant and wayward,” because we have all harmed others out of ignorance, and we’ve all wandered unintentionally off the track God has set for us. Because those who are called to serve God, as we are, will be of no use to anyone unless we understand that it is our weakness, our vulnerability, and our fragility that serve as our credentials.

Let’s back up a minute and remember what’s happening in the book of Hebrews. This book has been called an epistle or letter, but it’s not really that. It’s more like a pep talk or a rousing half-time speech from a coach who wants his team to get back on the field and give it everything they’ve got. And it draws on the traditions and institutions of the ancient Jewish religion to illustrate to folks who Jesus Christ is, in a way that’s going to inspire them to go out and win the game, so to speak.

In this passage, the author is talking about the role of Jesus as a high priest. The Hebrew scriptures, especially the book of Leviticus, describe what it means to be a priest. A priest offers sacrifices on behalf of the people, animal sacrifices, but also grain

and produce and incense. And these sacrifices serve to ritually purify the people, but also to enact atonement and forgiveness for their sins. But if we were to imagine, say, a robot in the role of high priest, someone who looked human but didn't have a family or friends or anxieties or jealousy or grief, someone who never experienced frustration or temptation or envy or anger, then a priest like this might very well lose patience after a while, right? "I keep sacrificing for you people, year after year, and blast it! You just keep right on sinning! I've had it with you! I quit!" But it's precisely because the high priest is human himself, precisely because he has to atone for his own sins, as well as those of the people, that he understands how important his role is, and he can continue to serve. That's not to say that it was OK for high priests in ancient times to carry on without accountability. In the first book of Samuel, when the sons of the priest Eli steal the people's sacrifices and commit sexual misconduct, God denounces them, and they die in battle. It wasn't OK for priests to do wrong. But it was expected that they would be flawed, vulnerable human beings. You are human, you are vulnerable, you are tempted, and *therefore, because of these things*, you have what it takes to be a high priest.

So the author of Hebrews says that's why God doesn't send down a robot-priest from the sky to atone for our sins. That's why God calls one of us, a sinner like us, to stand at the altar and make our sacrifices. And because every one of us is subject to the same weakness, it makes no sense for any person to stand up in front of everyone else and say, "Me, me! I have what it takes to be a priest!" Of course you do. We all do. That's the point. But God chooses one of us to serve, to stand in that role. In God's own mysterious wisdom and providence, God calls forth a leader, a minister, who has no earthly claim to superiority or preference, but only the same qualifications as everyone else, *plus a divine calling*.

Even Jesus, says the author of Hebrews, didn't step up and choose his own role — he was called to it, by God, who called him first, "my son," and then, "a priest forever." While we as Christians believe in a Jesus who was fully human and fully God, the emphasis in this passage of scripture is on Jesus as human, Jesus as one of us, subject to weakness and temptation. Listen to the way Jesus' work as priest is described. This is no robot-priest from the sky! It says, he "offered up prayers and supplications, *with loud cries and tears*, to the one who was able to save him from death." Jesus' vulnerability, his grief, his willingness to undergo pain alongside the people he cared about — these things are vehicles for God's grace and forgiveness, in the same way as the humanness of the priests of old who preceded him. Called by God and bearing human weakness in his body and spirit, Jesus became our great high priest. The book of Hebrews goes on to describe how the sacrifice Jesus made was different, how it brought us a once-and-for-all atonement and forgiveness that was never possible before. But for today, just understand that Jesus was able to stand in our place before God because he came there weak and vulnerable and nonetheless called by God.

Some years ago I was at a conference where I heard the theologian Juergen Moltmann speak. He had a powerful story to tell. He grew up in a secular family in Germany, and he attended church maybe once a year as a boy. At 17 he was drafted into the German army to fight a war he didn't believe in. He saw his friend blown apart right next to him during an air raid, and he cried out to God for the first time: "God, where are you?" He deserted and surrendered to the first group of Allied soldiers he could find. In the POW camp in Belgium, he was given a New Testament to read, and he came across the words of Jesus on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And in that moment, he said to himself, "Here is someone who understands me." Later on, when he was responding to a question, he said, "If it weren't for Jesus Christ, I don't think I could believe in God. I believe in God only for

Jesus' sake." Without Jesus, God is a remote and unknowable and fearful power. Jesus is the bridge that connects our human fragility and vulnerability with God's transforming power. That's what the disciples saw and felt on the mountain, and that's what Juergen Moltmann saw and felt as the story of Jesus spoke to the story of his own brokenness.

That hidden, loving power is here too, you know. When you look at this community, what do you see, what do you recognize? A human organization, a nonprofit corporation with bylaws, officers, and books? A group of good friends who like to worship at the same time, in the same way? Look closer. This community is an expression of the body of Christ, and because of that, this community has inherited Jesus' priesthood. These flawed, vulnerable people around you have the power to pray for you, to touch you with God's own blessing, to forgive you, to feed and clothe and provide for you, to tell you not to be afraid when you stand in the holy presence of God with wonder and awe. And to the extent that you are capable of screwing up, subject to ignorance and waywardness, you are eminently qualified to take part in the ministry of Jesus. How many times has someone shared a deeply personal hurt at joys and concerns, put themselves out there and been vulnerable with this community, only to hear someone else say, "I've been there too."?

God has called you not because you are perfect, but because you are weak, fragile, and vulnerable. May you hear God's voice speaking to you, as a part of Christ's body: "Welcome the ignorant and wayward, bear with each other, pray for each other, forgive each other. You are not perfect, but you are my child and a minister of grace!" Amen.