

LOOKING IN TWO DIRECTIONS
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
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Hebrews 4:14-16

The 16th century monk Martin Luther had a bone to pick with his church. Actually, he had 95 bones to pick with them, so he made a list on a piece of parchment and on October 31, 1517, nailed his 95 propositions to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther did not know, when he did that, that he was starting a revolution. But it is from that date that we mark the start of the Protestant Reformation.

One of Luther's complaints had to do with the priesthood. The priests and bishops and archbishops and cardinals had gotten out of touch with the people. People would come to church and up at the front would be a screen. The screen would have holes in it so that the common people could see the priests moving around doing whatever it was they did with the bread and wine. All very mysterious.

Luther wondered: Why did it have to be that way? Why were the priests considered separate from the people? Here's how he put it in one of his early writings: "We are all alike Christians. We have all been baptized. Why do we have this great distinction between Christians?"¹ So one of the things that most Protestant churches have done is to eliminate the office of priest.

Still, priests had served an important function in the church. Priests were intermediaries between God and the people, the go-between. The priest looked in two directions,² facing the altar to bring the people's needs to God, and facing the people to extend absolution. If you eliminated the priests, who was going to do that?

¹ *Address to the German Nobility*, in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. (Nashville: Abington Press, 1950), p. 154.

² The image is Tom Long's in *Hebrews* (Louisville: John Knox Press 1997), p. 65.

The book of Hebrews anticipates that question. Hebrews is presented as a sermon, a pretty long sermon, too—it would take over an hour to preach it. (Don't worry; we're not doing that today.) It is a sermon to a discouraged bunch who has been beat up and beat down. They may have been undergoing a time of persecution, these discouraged Christians, and they wondered if their faith was still good and if there was any point in prayer. The preacher of the book of Hebrews is seeking to put a little fire in the belly again and inspire their faith.

Here in the fourth chapter, the preacher gives a remarkable answer to our question about priests. Who is going to serve as the priest? Who is going to face in two directions, toward God and toward humankind? The answer—it is Jesus:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Jesus is the priest, the high priest, the intermediary between God and humankind. Any human priest is imperfect. Not just in Luther's day, but in ours, we have regular reminders of the failure of priests and ministers—sex scandals, church leaders dipping into the till, all the pomp and ceremony that calls attention to the self and not to God.

But Jesus is the perfect priest. How is he perfect? He became one of us. He lived our life. He was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. He knows what we go through, and the idols that would call us away from God. Jesus didn't stand far away and say: "I love you." He showed that love by coming and living among us as one of us.

Jesus was perfect in another way as well. He offered the perfect sacrifice—himself. Human priests through the ages offered animal sacrifices for sin, and those sacrifices had to be offered over and over again. But Jesus the priest became Jesus the sacrifice. He offered himself. There is no need for any additional sacrifice, for the perfect sacrifice has been offered. His sacrifice changes everything: "Where there had been alienation, there is now rapport, where there had been bondage and despair, there is freedom and hope."³

³ Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 522.

Because Jesus has lived and died among us, the preacher of Hebrews makes a remarkable claim: “He sympathizes with us in our weakness.” Sympathy, *sympatheia*—to feel with, to suffer with. That is what Jesus did.

We have heard it for so long that we don’t hear anything so remarkable in that claim. Of course, we would say, Jesus sympathizes with our weakness. That’s who he was.

But the first hearers of this sermon would have been startled. For a god to show sympathy was itself a sign of weakness. The group called the Stoics said that gods don’t show weakness. They strive, not for *sympathia*, but for *apatheia*—not caring, not showing pain or weakness, not feeling the hurt of others. It’s an attitude that is still around today: I’m tough; nothing bothers me.

But Jesus sympathizes with us. He feels what we feel, he identifies with us, because he has been among us. He knows our world and knows us. Five years ago when the terrible events of 9-11 took place, one of the reasons why we felt such pain for those who died and for their families is that we could identify with them. Some of you had been there, eaten a meal in the Windows on the World restaurant at the top of one of the towers. Or even if you hadn’t been there, you could imagine these people, not so different in their lives from us, and what they must have endured that day.

Jesus sympathizes because he has been there, or rather here, among us, one of us. He faces God for us. He presents our pain and hurt and need to God.

Therefore, says the preacher, pray with confidence. “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness.” We bring our prayers, knowing that they are not too silly for God, knowing that the God who loves us enough to send Jesus will hear us. “The distinctive feature of early Christian prayer is the certainty of being heard.”⁴ No wonder we offer our prayers “in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.” He is the one who faces God for us, bringing our need. He is the perfect priest.

Then, Jesus turns in the other direction, and faces us. We see the shining glory of his face, and behold the face of God.

⁴ Heinrich Greeven in Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation to John and Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1988), p. 94.

You see from the bulletin that Maggie is in Scotland for a time of continuing education. She is on the tiny windswept island of Iona, just off the west coast of the Scottish mainland. It may seem like a strange place to go for a spiritual retreat, except that Iona is considered the place where St. Columba first brought Christianity to the British Isles in the 6th century. Iona has been holy ground for a long time.

By now Maggie has seen and probably attended worship in the old church, the abbey that stands in the center of the island. Its construction is typical: a chancel and a nave. In the Middle Ages, the people would sit out in the nave, and the priests would sit up in the chancel, behind one of those screens that Martin Luther objected to. After the Reformation, the building fell into disrepair. But recently, Scottish Presbyterians have revived the worship at Iona and restored its abbey, but with this difference: there is no screen. All sit together and worship without distinction, for all are baptized and all—ministers and people alike, belong to God. The glory comes from Jesus who turns his face to us.⁵

What we celebrate is Christ who is the perfect priest. He faces God to bring our needs to the throne of grace, and he faces us to bring the glory and grace of God to our need. “Christ has done everything that needs to be done to restore us to a right relationship with God.”⁶

But it is not quite right to say that there are no priests any longer in the church. The Reformed tradition, of which we Presbyterians are a part, do not want to destroy the priesthood. We want to have, not fewer priests, but more! All of us are priests to one another. We call it the Priesthood of all believers.

It means that we face in two directions with each other. We bear one another’s burdens and convey those burdens to God in prayer. We convey the encouragement, the love, the glory of God to each other.

The story is told of a woman leaving the grocery store when her sack burst, scattering canned goods all over the floor. She knelt down to gather them up. A sixteen-year-old girl knelt to help her. In gratitude the woman said: “The Lord be with you.” And the girl replied: “And also with you.” And they looked at each other and they *knew*—they belonged to one another. They were a part together to the community of faith. Each one

⁵ Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 106.

⁶ Wallace Alston, *The Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press 1984), p. 44.

helps the other. Each one prays for the other. Each conveys the presence of Christ to one another. In the name of Christ the great high priest, we are priests to each other.

You do it too: Every time you take a casserole to a grieving family, every time you call on the phone to ask “How are you doing?” every time you convey, by your touch and word that you care for the other, you are a priest to that other person. We are not aloof from one another, not a-pathetic, but we sympathize with each other.

Because—

We have a high priest who has passed through the heavens

Jesus, the Son of God.

He sympathizes with our weakness,

for he has been tested in every way as we are.

Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness

so that we may receive mercy

and find grace to help in time of need. †