“Over time”

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Hebrews 7:23-28

October 27, 2024

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***23Furthermore, the former priests were many in number because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24but he holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever. 25Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.***

***26For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. 28For the law appoints as high priests humans, who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.***

Two weeks ago we looked at an earlier chapter of the Book of Hebrews that was the first of three lectionary passages discussing the role of a high priest. Last time the text explained that unlike the high priest that people would experience in their own temple activities, Jesus was a high priest who could sympathize with our weaknesses, had been tested just as we are although sinless, and therefore gave us permission to “…approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Jesus as high priest is someone who is sympathetic and approachable, and invites us in to the holy of holy, the throne of grace. With Jesus we no longer have a high priest who stands in-between God and the people, behind a black curtain. This text is about how Jesus can relate to us, and invites us in.

Today’s text offers us another view of Jesus as high priest. This text is more about who Jesus is. As a high priest who is holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens, Jesus is a far cry from the human high priests the people were used to. This text separates the *law* from the *call* from God. The *law appoints as high priests*, but the word of the *oath appoints a Son*. Unlike the high priests appointed by the law who are human and subject to weakness, the Son has been made perfect, forever. Jesus is not a work in process, Jesus has been made perfect completely. And not just until he dies, like a human high priest, but forever, because he has already died. Jesus’ call to duty does not have an end date. There is not a signed contract. For Jesus all of the human concerns that a high priest might have do not apply. There is something comforting in that all-access Jesus. For more than 2,000 years Jesus has never had time off. Christianity took a long time to be formally named and institutionalized. The changes and understandings of the followers of Christ have taken many paths.

One path became known as the Reformed Tradition, of which our denomination is a branch. Today Reformation Sunday, we celebrate the birth of our branch on the Reformed Tradition, marking the day that Martin Luther posted his 15 Theses to the door of Wittinburg Church,. Even within the Reformed Tradition there have been many branches born over time.

The first churches were organized soon after Jesus’ death. They were gatherings of the followers of Christ who met in people’s houses. From there Christianity continued growing and splitting and growing and splitting always in reaction to some shift in the culture. In the 11th century, the Eastern Orthodox expression of Christianity split with the Roman Cathohlic expression of Christianity. Over hundreds of years European communities formed according to territory and power. By the 1500’s the system of government was Feudalism and the largest religion and most powerful institute of society was Roman Catholicism. The Renaissance from the 14th to the 17th century was a time of great rebirth in the cultural, artistic, political and economic arenas. In the later years of the Renaissance, in the 16th century there was a great boom in many areas of life. This time called the Reformation, has been called by one source, “a change of outlook, an eagerness for discovery, a desire to escape from the limitations of tradition and to explore new fields of thought and action.”

What we call the Reformation, was happening in more than just in religious circles. Many historians have called the 16th century the time in which the rise of the West occurred. There were explorations to further corners of the Earth and new trade routes; It was the time of many rulers and emperors, fine arts thrived during this period, musicians and composers lived during this period, as did Galileo and Kepler in the sciences, and the field of philosophy grew as well.1 Here are just some of the names that may be familiar to you. What is astounding to me is just how many subject areas were caught up in the new cultural direction.

Sciences

Copernicus in *Poland* (Astronomy)

Galileo in Italy (Astronomy)

Kepler, scientist Germany

Nostradamus in France (Astrologer, Philosopher, physician)

Medicine

Vesalius, Pare, (Surgeries, anatomy, circulation, physiology)

Exploration

Magellan, Sir Frances Drake, Cortes in Spain (exploration)

Writing

Shakespeare, England

Politics

Machiavelli (Politics)

Henry the VIII

Music

Palestrina (Italy), Monteverdi in Italy, Thomas Tallis in *England*

Art

Michelangelo in Italy, Raphael *in Italy*, DaVinci in Italy (also Scientist, inventor) (Artist), El Greco in *Greece*

Religion

John Knox in *Scotland*

John Calvin in *France*

Luther, Argula von Grumbach in *Germany*

Zwingli in *Switzerland*

St. Ignatius of Loyola founder of the Jesuits, in *Spain*

Martin dePorres in *Peru*

This sounds like one of those Hallmark birthday cards that lists many of the world events in the year that you were born. These things made up the air that young German theologian and preacher Martin Luther was breathing. At the time, one of the things the Pope mandated that preachers preach on was the benefits of indulgences. Indulgences are a means of alleviating the punishment of sins, by perhaps a prayer or a pilgrimage or a payment to the church. At Luther’s time, that practice was greatly abused so that the church was really just filling its coffers. Martin Luther argued that God’s grace was enough. Luther was not the first to question the Roman Catholic traditions and teachings. Theological streams of change has been around for many years. It was Martin Luther though who wrote his 95 Theses and posted them on the door of Wittenburg Church in Germany in 1517. From his teachings, we in the reformed tradition claim that “grace alone (God’s initiative), faith alone (not good works) and scripture alone (not church traditions or human opinions)” He did not have the intent to separate from Roman Catholicism, but soon he was seen as criticizing the Pope and was excommunicated. There were others who were intrigued by many of Luther’s thoughts, including one of the few women of the Reformation, Argula von Grumbach, as you can read about in the bulletin insert. The Reformation continued in Scotland, France, and Switzerland among others, and was brought to the North America in the 1700s.

When we think of something being reformed, we think of something being improved. But for whomever didn’t agree with the change it might not be an improvement. How does the Church adapt to the air around it, and what happens when a transformation is required but resisted?

“In her book *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Trible says the church goes through regular cycles of change, seasons of transformation which she likens to “rummage sales,” when the church sorts out its accumulated stuff – theology, doctrine, liturgy, practice – and clears away all that is extraneous to the gospel in order to reclaim the core of its faith.”2  Trible has suggested that we are in the midst of another Reformation now. At about year 1000 the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions were split. 500 years later Luther posted his 95 Theses on the church door. 2017 was 500 years later. Are we in the midst of something new?

The Church has been maneuvering through time since the birth and life and death of Christ. One of the greatest beliefs about Christianity is that it is the fulfillment of, the continuation of God’s work with God’s people, not the replacement of what went before. Jesus has never taken a day off. Whatever direction the Church has taken over the years, Jesus and the gospel have never abandoned us. It is we who cannot leave the gospel behind.

Today’s text is talking about the freedom we have when we see Jesus as the one who is holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, appointed by God to be our high priest, without any human limitations like death or sin or time. Our branch of the reformed tradition has been constantly striving to transform along with the forces of the world, keeping our eye on the gospel of inclusion and justice, just as Martin Luther was doing. As we pay attention to the air we breathe, let us hear these words from our denominations 1983 confession, The Brief Statement of Faith:

In life and in death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve.

With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (“Brief Statement of Faith” 1983)

Amen.

1<https://www.thefamouspeople.com/16th-century.php>

2<https://www.westminstermpls.org/we-are-the-church-love-and-serve-the-lord-rejoicing-in-the-power-of-the-holy-spirit/>

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