***LIKE MELCHIZEDEK***

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Texts: Genesis 14:17-20 and Hebrews 7:1-4, 11-17, 23-28

Within the pages of Scripture there are a number of obscure figures of whom you probably know nothing or virtually nothing and whose names you can’t even pronounce. Their story was never told in your first grade Sunday School class, for they are men and women who make cameo appearances in the story of God’s people and then disappear. They have names like Abinadab, Mephibosheth, Zerubbabel, Trophimus, and the ever popular Maher-shalal-hash-baz! If you read through the Hebrew Scriptures which is our Old Testament and then through the Gospels and then through genuine letters of Paul you might think that Melchizedek was one of those obscure figures. He is mentioned only briefly in four verses in Genesis and a single verse of Psalm 110 and then no one else remembers him until a thousand years later when the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is searching for a way to explain what Jesus has done for us, and suddenly he remembers – Melchizedek – King Melchizedek, priest of God Most High.

Nothing in that story from Genesis suggests the kind of accolades Melchizedek gets in the letter to the Hebrews. Something must have happened in the two thousand years between Abram’s encounter with the King of Salem and the writing of that letter to the Hebrews that made Melchizedek an honored name in the first century. That “something” seems to be the growth of a legend around Melchizedek that made him a figure bigger than life. As Tom Long describes him:

*[He] was something like the “three kings” of countless Christmas pageants, an amalgam of biblical material and popular piety….[[1]](#endnote-1)*

It was said that he had no parents – neither father nor mother and was eternal, having no beginning and no end. His name was associated with words like *shalom* and *righteousness* and *eternity*. There was no biblical or historical grounding for these rumors, but by the first century they had become so connected to his name as to make him a legend not only in his own time, but for all time. As Tom Long concludes:

*[T]he main point of all this is not really about Melchizedek per se but rather how the qualities seen in him – righteousness, peace, and timelessness – point forward to the nature of Jesus, the true and perpetual great high priest.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

In other words, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews wants us to recognize in Jesus the living reality of all those wonderful traits of the legendary Melchizedek. Jesus is like Melchizedek, a living legend, the real deal, the great high priest who personifies the righteous, peaceful, eternal authority of the Most High God who is Yahweh! But he is more!

Some years ago as we were completing the building project that included the Great Hall and breezeway expansion we debated what to do with the courtyard that lies behind the chapel. Several suggestions were offered, including the one we adopted: pouring a concrete patio to create a plain, flexible place for quiet reflection. The more creative solution for that space came from Grif Bonham who suggested we plant grass and put a goat in there so we wouldn’t have to mow it; the goat would also be available in case we needed an animal sacrifice, he noted.

If you read through the Old Testament, animal sacrifices were pretty common. There are instructions for offering to the Lord unblemished lambs, rams, sheep, bulls, and birds as sacrifices of well-being, and goats as sin offerings. They were slaughtered on the altar of the Lord as expressions of gratitude to God or of repentance for sins. These animals were the cream of the flock – the best people had to offer – for nothing less than the best was appropriate for an offering to the Lord. The animals were given to priests who interceded for the people in making the gift to the Lord and offering to God their prayers. In the New Testament sacrifices were still being made at the Temple. Recall Jesus driving out those who were selling sheep, doves and cattle to traveling pilgrims who needed an animal to offer as a sacrifice to the Lord. But such liturgical sacrifices are not just things of the distant past, for there is a man in Louisiana who is raising a herd of pure red heifers to be offered on the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem if and when it is rebuilt – which is problematic since Islam’s Dome of the Rock is built upon the site where the Temple once stood!

Today we come to worship with no animals in hand, except a few stuffed animals to be cuddled. We have no altar upon which to make a sacrifice, no priest who presides here – just Sarah and me. So it has been in our Presbyterian churches for a long, long time. What happened – to the animals, to the altar, to the sacrifices, to the priests?

What happened is Jesus – the Messiah, the crucified and risen Lord, the lamb who takes away the sins of the world, the high priest for all seasons. What happened is redemption, mercy and forgiveness, not through a ritual sacrifice by a priest at the altar, but redemption, mercy and forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. We need make no further sacrifices at the altar in atonement for our sins, for Christ has made that sacrifice for us. As Tom Long describes it:

*[Jesus] placed on heaven’s altar the deepest possible sacrifice: his own life made perfect through suffering. In other words, he brought as an offering to God nothing less than the fullness of the human condition perfected by his own obedience.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

Jesus offered himself, wholly, fully, obediently, perfectly, and while God did not demand that he die, his willingness to be obedient unto death has redeemed us in a way that is more powerful and enduring than any sacrifice we can offer.

In the early 16th century Martin Luther came to that same conclusion. Try as he might he could find no sacrifice adequate to assure his salvation. He looked at the divine scoreboard and found his sins so far outweighing his good deeds that nothing he could do, no sacrifice he could offer, could make up the difference. He looked at the indulgences offered for sale by the Church and found them empty of meaning and corrupt at their core. He despaired of being redeemed, and only then did he begin to understand the amazing grace of God, the gift of salvation freely given, not earned. It was then that he realized what Paul was trying to tell him and us: we are saved by the grace of God not by our own works. Thus was sparked a Reformation of the church that continues to this day, a reformation that acknowledges God’s initiative of grace toward us in sending Jesus Christ into the world. For it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!

Now instead of an altar where we offer sacrifices we have a communion table where we remember Jesus’ sacrifice. Here we remember his body broken and his blood shed as we take, eat, and drink in remembrance of him. The altar has been replaced by a communion table, for there are no more sacrifices to be made; there is only the ultimate sacrifice to be remembered. At this table we gather with one another and with the saints who gathered here before us and in some mystical way with the risen Christ to experience the grace of God by sharing the gracious gifts of God. Here we offer no sacrifices except our prayers and the sacrifice of our lives dedicated to the one we call Lord. Here we remember the sacrifice Christ made to break the power of sin and to restore us to right relationship with God.

We offer no sacrifices, but we do bring tithes and offerings to the Lord, gifts freely given from the work of our hands; rarely are they live animals – though one of my seminary professors did have a woman at the door of a church in West Virginia tell him, “Pastor, I put two chickens in your car for your Sunday dinner,” for which he was most grateful until he found two ***live*** chickens in the back seat! The gifts we bring represent the fruit of our labors brought, not to buy God’s good favor or to atone for our sins, but to offer heartfelt thanks for what God has done for us. They express our awe, our reverence, our praise for the God from whom all our blessings flow. Like our obedience in daily living, they are offered to God in gratitude for what God has first done for us.

And what of the priests? The answer is twofold. First, the writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the eternal priest who makes intercession for us. He is the high priest who surpasses any human priest. The priest was an intercessor or mediator between God and humankind, offering sacrifices for the people and lifting to God their prayers. The sacrifice Christ offered was himself. He prays for us, but he also invites us to pray directly to God, to seek God’s ear without mediator or intercessor. He alone is the priest who intercedes for us, but he does call us to be priests for one another – to pray for one another and serve as instruments of God’s redeeming grace. The priesthood of all believers is that holy office to which we all are called in baptism. My calling as pastor is no greater than my calling as attorney, and no greater than your calling as teacher or student, doctor or nurse, parent or grandparent, all called to serve with the gifts with which God has blessed us as disciples of Jesus and as priests to one another.

Today we remember some of the saints who have gone before us, those who showed us what that priesthood of believers looks like. As we heard last week, each of us is shaped by our experience of grace at the hands of such saints whose faith was shaped by saints who preceded them. We remember them, thank God for them, and learn from them what it is to be priests to one another in that priesthood of all believers. We remember the gracious spirit of Anna Racca and gracious smile of Judy Campbell, but we also remember their faithfulness. We remember the wise counsel of Richard Gardner and the persistent determination of Raymond Lotts, but we also remember their faithfulness to God and family. We remember the compassionate care, humility, and gentle good humor of Lew Lewis, but we also remember his devotion to Christ and the church. We remember how God worked in and through each of them to touch our lives with grace, just as God works in and through each of us to extend grace to others.

This day in Pittsburgh there are a lot of folks in need of such touches of grace in the aftermath of the shootings at the synagogue in Squirrel Hill. There are too many *days after* these days – *days after* mass shootings, *days after* mail bombs, *days after* violent expressions of hate, *days after* Charlottesville and Charleston and Orlando and Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook and Squirrel Hill and one might wonder, whose next? Are we to live in fear the rest of our lives, armed to the teeth and dreading the violence that awaits outside our doors and the days after yet another violent disaster? No! We are to confront the hate with love, and we are to confront the violence with peace, and we are to confront rampant fear with rampant love that refuses to be intimidated on *the days of* or *the days after* or *the days yet to come*, for that is the way of Jesus, the way that he showed us, the way that he calls us to follow. It is not an easy way, but it is a faithful way and a path that we do not walk alone, for we go with the company of saints to inspire us and the priesthood of all believers to support us and with Jesus Christ to redeem us, to save us, to love us without end, to inspire us to persevere in faith, hope, and love – for that is what he did for us. And that is what we can do for him and for the world – not in theory, but in practice, this day and all days! Amen

1. Thomas G. Long*, Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1997, pp.84 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas G. Long*, Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1997, pp.85 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1997, p.89 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)