

Ken Haugk, the founder of *Stephen Ministry* recalls, “While in graduate school, I taught an introductory college psychology course at a community center. All my students were [African American]. In fact, almost everyone connected with the community center was black. From the time I arrived at the center until I returned home, I rarely saw another white person.

“Going to the classroom one evening, I saw a security guard coming up the stairs toward me. He was white. My immediate response was a friendly “Hello!” He responded in kind. After we passed, I wondered about my enthusiastic greeting. The reason for it—and probably his as well—was that we were both Caucasians, surrounded by people who were not.

“Such behavior based on color indicates that there is a certain commonality or community transcending any previous contact or lack of it. There is a certain shared experience in being white, as there is a certain shared experience in being black.” \*

Talking about race is often uncomfortable and hearing about this experience of Dr. Ken Haugk is no different. But it is true that we are drawn to people with whom we share common background or experiences. We might think that common background and experiences for Jesus the one and only Son of God could be a challenge except for the unique description of him found in Hebrews 5: “*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was **designated by God** to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek*” (Hebrews 5:8-10). He was “***designated by God** to be high priest...Son though he was*” Did you hear that?

Please be warned that the following “newsy” article is dripping with sarcasm. Dateline: Riverside, CA. A church recently came up with an idea to make sure church members who display the congregation’s bumper sticker are representing Christ well: church deacons now administer a comprehensive driver’s exam before allowing anyone to slap the church sticker on their car. “We make sure church members know how to use their blinkers, merge with plenty of room, and drive the appropriate speed in the left lane,” said Pastor Jake. “Churches that just hand out bumper stickers willy-nilly aren’t doing their due diligence to ensure that the church’s name isn’t dragged through the mud by horrible drivers.” Uh huh. The church says their pass rate is fairly low. “Only about 10% of church members make the cut. So we have lots of regular attendees that we’re happy to preach to and love, but who just haven’t gotten to *bumper sticker level* yet.”

Sometimes it can feel lonely being a Christian—even at church. If you have ever traveled to a country where you didn’t speak the language you know what I mean. When you find folks who are ready to help a lost American who can’t speak the language it gives you a good feeling. I once asked a woman on a street in Cairo for help finding a restaurant. She couldn’t read the English alphabet address for the place we had on paper, but she could read the telephone number. She pulled out her cell phone and called to get directions. We learned the restaurant was about twenty blocks away and a boy of about seven or eight showed us the nearest subway station. These people did not speak English, but they were still kind and helpful.

A small percentage of the Egyptian population are Christians—maybe ten per cent. I remember riding the subway in Egypt and standing next to me (no one sits on the Cairo subway because every day over 2

million people ride it) was a young man wearing a tee shirt with the words: “*What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness and walk humbly with your God?*” I don’t know for sure if he was a Christian, but to wear a shirt with these words from Micah made me think that standing near me, someone half my age, was a brother in Christ. I felt something in common with this young man that I hadn’t felt in general on the streets of Cairo.

What we have in common here at Ken Mawr and across the country and around the world is our faith in Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Galatians:

*“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:26-28).*

We do not find our common ground in similar backgrounds or ethnicity—we may have come from the East or the West or have Italian, Hungarian, Korean or German backgrounds but that is not why we are here today. It is not because we have similar educational levels or political ideas, or social standing. We aren’t alike. We don’t think alike or even believe alike, but we are here because we all profess faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ. We are united through our baptism in the name of the Triune God. And we are one as we gather in this place for Word and Sacrament. We are one in Christ.

Tom Long, who used to teach preaching at Princeton Seminary, situates this passage in a sequence of thought that began with Hebrews chapter 4, our Scripture from last Sunday: “So hanging in the air of the sanctuary is the preacher’s ringing claim that Jesus is the kind of great high priest who carries our deepest sorrows and most honest prayers to the very throne room of heaven, where we will find a banquet of mercy and grace. But the preacher knows that he is on marshy ground here, that this is the crucial theological and pastoral issue for his or her congregation. They know without a doubt that Jesus was weak—anyone with eyes to see could know that—but is Jesus also genuinely strong enough to help?

They are well aware that Jesus was a fellow sufferer—every passerby who looked up at the cross could see that—but the question for them was whether this weak and suffering Jesus is also truly the divine Son who, in ways that eyes cannot see, stands in graceful glow at the beginning and the end of time, and in the middle of time is even now redeeming the creation and bringing the children of God home” (*Hebrews. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 65).

Jesus was not born into a priestly family. The first “*priest of God most high*” was Melchizedek. Yet, God has chosen Jesus—designated him—to fill the space as mediator between God and humanity. High priests, in Hebrew religious practice, offered sacrifices for the unintentional sins of people and for their own sins. As humans they could understand and deal gently with the mistakes and failures of others. Jesus, as a “weak” human being as verse 2 talks of the priest, was equipped to understand human creatures. And Jesus as God’s Son—his chief representative—forgives human creatures.

The Chi Rho (Greek letters that look like an English X and P) is a third century symbol for Christ. In our Scripture this morning we see that the word of God is centered in Christ. Indeed, as Christians, our real center is in Christ, our unity is in the Lord; the unity of the entire Bible is found in Christ. The Old Testament points forward to Christ, the Messiah who would bear the sins of the world and be put to death. Hebrews 5 shows how the writer of that book went back to the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, to

find a “type” of Christ in a king and priest of Salem named Melchizedek. He used those Bible passages to explain his message. It’s called a Midrash—the Bible interpreting itself by using other Bible passages.

We Presbyterians use the same principle in interpreting the Bible. We do not have any one authority designated to interpret the Bible for us—not a pope or bishops or professors of the church, not church governing bodies, not even biblical scholars. All of these can offer insights but stand under the authority of the Scripture itself not above the Scriptures. Nor do we hold to a doctrine of individual discernment and judgment. The Bible is not subject to the ideas and ideals of any individual.

Thomas Jefferson tried to expunge all the parts of the New Testament he disagreed with to construct a Jesus that he found acceptable and in whom he could believe. He literally cut those passages out of his Bible. But we are not called to delete the parts of the Bible we don’t understand or don’t like. We do not sit in judgment upon the Scriptures. They sit in judgment upon us. But if we hold to the principle that the Scriptures interpret themselves, then we will find that the absolute center of the Scriptures is Jesus. We understand what the Scriptures are telling us as we look to Christ and see in him the love of God, the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting, offered to us through his only Son.

When we see Christ at the center of the Scriptures, it humbles us. We have a suffering Lord who loved us enough to take our sins and tell us that “by his stripes” we are healed. The divisions that we humans have between us and God and between us as fellow fallen creatures, are reconciled in Christ. We are people of the book, a book that tells us that God is love; that proclaims faith as the way to abundant and eternal life not by anything that we must earn; that tells us we are one people no matter who we are, because of *whose* we are.

According to news reports, identity theft is on the rise in our day. I got a little taste of that, or of how it might begin, when the other day our Admin Assistant Vicki told me she got an email message from “Rev. Dr. Karl McDonald” that said: “URGENT: Where are you now? Get back to me as soon as you can.” Of course, it wasn’t from me or my email address, which is what tipped her off. Bob Downs received the same email, so I wrote to him saying that it was a phishing scheme but the email he was reading was from *the real me!*

Listen again to the description of *the real Jesus* from Hebrews 5: “*Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek*” (5:8-10).

- He is high priest in the order of Melchizedek \* (who like Jesus did not inherit the priesthood even though he was a Son).
- He is at the center of the Bible.
- He is at the center of the church.
- He is in the center of our hearts and lives.

He is this and so much more because he was *designated by God*. Amen.

\*From a sermon by James D. Kegel (<https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/hebrews-51-10-christ-center-kegel>).