

Warning: The following “news” 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 new 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. Pastor Jake said, “We make sure church members know how to use their blinkers, merge lanes with plenty of room, and drive the appropriate speed in the left lane. 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.” Ah...OK...Right! The church says “Only about 10% of our 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.”

Anyone here reached “bumper sticker level?” I’m doubting your own pastor would pass the driver’s exam! Truth is, sometimes we feel lonely—even at church. If you have ever traveled to a country where you didn’t speak the language, you know what I mean. It’s a huge relief when you find folks who are ready to help a lost American who can’t speak the language. 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 restaurant written on a 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, so a boy of about seven or eight showed us the nearest subway station. None of these people spoke English, but they were still kind and helpful people.

A very small percentage of the Egyptian population are Christians—maybe 10%. I remember riding the subway in Egypt and standing (no one sits on the Cairo subway because over 2 million people ride it daily) next to me 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 couldn’t know for sure if he was a Christian, but to wear a shirt with the words of the prophet Micah made me think that someone half my age, standing near

me, 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.

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!" and he responded in-kind. After we passed, I wondered about my enthusiastic greeting. The reason for it—and probably his also—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 most certainly a shared experience in being black."

It may make us uncomfortable talking about this experience of Dr. Ken Haugk, but it's true that we are drawn to people with whom we share a common background or experience. We might think that having a common background and experience with Jesus, the one and only Son of God, may be a challenge except for the unique description of him found in Hebrews 5. Listen again to verses 7 & 10: "*During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission...and was designated by God to be high priest.*" He was "designated by God to be high priest...Son though he was." Even if we don't think we need one, let's understand that Jesus is designated by God to be our high priest!

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, Welsh, or Korean 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 don't necessarily think alike, but we are here because we all profess one faith in one Lord. We are united through baptism in the name of the Triune God. We are one as we gather here to receive 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 in Hebrews chapter 4, our Scripture from last Sunday: “So hanging in the air of the sanctuary is the 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 find a banquet of mercy and grace. But we know that we're on shaky ground here, because this is a crucial theological and pastoral issue for our congregation. We know without a doubt that Jesus was weak—anyone with eyes to see knows that—but is Jesus also genuinely strong enough to help?

We 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 (and for us) is 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 creation and bringing the children of God home” (*Hebrews. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 65).

Jesus has a genealogy, but he was not born into a priestly family. The first “*priest of God most high*” was Melchizedek. Melchizedek, whose name means “king of righteousness,” was a king of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of the Most High God whose sudden appearance and disappearance in the book of Genesis is somewhat mysterious. God has chosen Jesus to fill the space as

Mediator between God and humanity—*the source of eternal salvation* (v. 9). High priests, in Hebrew religious practice, offered sacrifices for the unintentional sins of people and for their own sins. Verse 2 tells us how the high priest is equipped to understand other human creatures. As humans they could understand and deal gently with the mistakes and failures of others, “*since he himself is subject to weakness.*” Jesus the high priest—God’s chief representative—not only understands but forgives human creatures.

The Chi Rho (Greek letters that look like the English letters X and P) is a third century symbol for Christ. In our Scripture today 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 looks back to the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, where we find a “type” of Christ in a certain king and priest of Salem—named Melchizedek. Some of the earliest biblical accounts tell us that kings often served as priests. The writer of Hebrews uses 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 one single authority designated to interpret the Bible for us—a pope or bishop or professors of the church, not church governing bodies, not even scholars. All of these people can offer insights but stand under the authority of the Scripture itself—not above it. Nor do we hold to a doctrine of individual discernment and interpretation. The Bible is not subject to the ideas and ideals of any one individual. The authority of Scripture comes from God himself.

I think I’ve told you before that Thomas Jefferson tried to remove 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 some passages out of his own 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 on the Scriptures. The Scriptures sit in judgment upon us. When we hold to the principle that the

Scriptures interpret themselves, we will find that the absolute center of the Scriptures is *Jesus*. We will understand what Scripture is 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 God's only Son.

When we see Christ at the center of Scripture, 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 estrangement we humans have between us and God, and between our fellow fallen creatures, are all reconciled in Christ. We are people of the book, a book that tells us God is love; that proclaims faith as the way to abundant and eternal life not by anything that we earn. This book tells us *we are one people* no matter who we are—because of *whose* we are.

According to numerous reports, identity theft is on the rise nowadays. I got a little taste of that when someone received an email that looked like it was from me saying, "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 finally tipped him off. I reached out to this individual to tell him it was a phishing scheme, but he should know that the phone call I made 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 (even though he was a Son).
- He is at the center of the Bible.
- He is at the church's center. And...
- He is at the center of our lives.

He is this, and so much more, because he was designated by God to be our "Great High Priest." Glory to God! Amen.

*From a sermon by James D. Kegel