

Texts: Heb. 4:14-5:10; Luke 23:32-43

Subject: Jesus the Great High Priest

Theme: Word of Boldness: Jesus Hears Us

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 28, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What does it mean to have *boldness*? Is it to go forward and not shrink from a challenge? Is it to be without fear? Is it to blaze a trail? Is it to speak truth to power? One definition reads: *willingness to take risks and act innovatively; confidence or courage*. That's a pretty good image to work with.

I was never the risk-taker. I've never been the guy riding motorcycles or pulling daring stunts. Although, when I was a kid in South Florida, we used to sneak onto a nearby golf course. It was a part of a local senior living community, so if the security guards saw us, they'd chase us down and escort us off the premises. We weren't trying to cause trouble. We were good kids. It was summer time, and we had nowhere to be. If the clubhouse was open, we might go in to play a game of pool. Maybe we'd pick up a stray golf ball along the way, but what we were really after - was a dip in the canal.

Along the fairway, there was an old melaleuca tree that leaned out over the water. We called them paper trees - you could peel off the soft bark and write on it. It's also called a tea tree. They were an invasive species in Florida - like teenagers on a golf course. All the kids would climb up and jump off - into that nasty canal water. Were there alligators in there? Probably. But we didn't worry about that. The drop was about 15 feet, but once I climbed all the way up, it felt like jumping off the high dive. At age 12 or 13, and with three or four other boys there, I wasn't going to climb back down. I didn't feel confident. I wondered how I got up there in the first place. I remember just closing my eyes, taking a deep breath, and launching from the top of that tree into the air, falling for what seemed like forever, and dropping down like a rock into the murky water below. It was awesome! I didn't get a second chance though, as we had to high tail it out of there on our bikes shortly after. We'd been spotted!

The kingdom of heaven is like: jumping out of a 15 foot tree into unknown waters, unsure what lies beneath, but knowing that God's grace is with you wherever you go, *and love covers a multitude of sins* (1Peter 4:8). The author of Hebrews writes to a church in need of a little more confidence, a bit of assurance, and a rescue from fear, to encourage them to hold fast to faith that Jesus is greater than their fears, has given them everything they need, and has opened a way for them, as the pioneer of salvation. Jesus is named as the great high priest - the one Son of God who has ascended to be with the Father in heaven to do what a priest does for the people, who gives mercy, and grace in our time of need.

When I began to think about ordained ministry, I prayed every night that God would lead me. I still pray that way. I could never have gone down that road by my own power, and so often I asked God to just show me the way to go, to lead me through the Word, to give me a Spirit to be a leader in the church. At times I didn't feel like I knew enough, about the Bible, about the church, history, philosophy, - you name it - that anyone would see me as their spiritual mentor or that I would have the words to say when called upon to preach or teach. Oh, I was confident in a lot of things - I knew I could learn quickly, could improvise, could create, and come up with lots of ideas. But to be a pastor? (Like a priest?) Others saw gifts in me. That was not always what I saw for myself. But I've found that I don't have to know it all. Others know things too. I don't have to have all the experience of someone who's been in the church their whole lives, I just have to listen. And I will make mistakes, too - God knows, we all do.

Jesus is the one who knows all our thoughts and feelings. Jesus hears us when we pray, and since Jesus has become one of us, is the one who has taken on sin and death itself, and has risen in glory, we have a savior - a great high priest who knows every challenge, every bit of suffering, every pain and illness, and trouble - Jesus knows what we go through and makes it right.

There's nothing we have to do to earn this precious gift. We are saved by grace through faith. The Augsburg Confession - an important read for everyone who considers themselves a Lutheran Christian, says that we are "freely justified for Christ's sake,

through faith, when [we] believe that [we] are received into favor, and that [our] sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins." Jesus does it for us. You might think you're not a risk taker, you might not be the most confident at times, you may even be afraid, but that is totally fine. Jesus knows how you feel. Jesus is the one who can sympathize with each one of us, who has experienced the reality of life as fully human, and welcomes us into eternal life with Him.

Jesus sympathizes with us. Jesus hears us when we pray.

Knowing that He has done all this for us, we can respond with boldness. This was passed on to me, from a mentor, and a pastor for whom I have a great deal of respect, and I stumbled on it last night, as I keep several copies around, this one was inside the cover of the Bible I use most often and keep in my office.

Listen Lord: A Prayer from God's Trombones by James Weldon Johnson

O Lord, we come this morning Knee-bowed and body-bent

Before Thy throne of grace. O Lord—this morning—

Bow our hearts beneath our knees, And our knees in some lonesome valley.

We come this morning— Like empty pitchers to a full fountain,

With no merits of our own. O Lord—open up a window of heaven,

And lean out far over the battlements of glory, And listen this morning.

This gifted poet claims the reality that we have nothing to offer this great high priest Jesus, we are empty. We need God's grace, and the mercy of Christ to make us whole. Have you felt your "hearts beneath your knees" at times? Your "knees in some lonesome valley?" Johnson continues:

Lord, have mercy on proud and dying sinners - Sinners hanging over the mouth of hell,

Who seem to love their distance well. Lord—ride by this morning—

Mount Your milk-white horse, And ride-a this morning—

And in Your ride, ride by old hell, Ride by the dingy gates of hell,

And stop poor sinners in their headlong plunge.

There on the cross, with two others next to him, Jesus prayed, Father, forgive them". One of those broken men believed in him, and asked Jesus to "re-member him" into the Kingdom. There in the hour of his death, Jesus welcomes this man into eternity. He performs every rite and ritual there with just a word, and does what this man could not do for himself. This crucified savior takes on the role of priest and provides something like last rites, an anointing welcoming him into heaven.

That any of us humans would take on the role of priest is a risk. But that is what we are. You thought it was just me? No, I'm talking about you, people. You are a part of the priesthood of ALL believers. You are in Christ, you are the redeemed, made new, forgiven and freed to serve. Think about that - you sinners, you rebels, outsiders, and untouchables - all of you - are welcomed into paradise through the cross of Christ. You have a lifetime of experience, and you too can sympathize with the human condition, are not without struggles and have faced down tragedy more than once. You've seen the difficulty of breathing oxygen, of living on this planet, of having a heart, and a body. It's not easy stuff. You are then called to share your faith, to lead others though the Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit to know the One who has given you grace, mercy, and eternal salvation. His name is Jesus. Say His name: Jesus!

See, you are a priest too. You might not have the funny dress, or the letter of call signed by the bishop, I do - that just means you've asked me to be *your* pastor, your priest, and it is a high calling. And I always covet your prayers, but I love to read this one, as the poet continues:

*And now, O Lord, this man of God, Who breaks the bread of life this morning—
Shadow him in the hollow of Thy hand, And keep him out of the gunshot of the devil.*

*Take him, Lord—this morning— Wash him with hyssop inside and out,
Hang him up and drain him dry of sin. Pin his ear to the wisdom-post,
And make his words sledge hammers of truth— Beating on the iron heart of sin.*

*Lord God, this morning— Put his eye to the telescope of eternity,
And let him look upon the paper walls of time. Lord, turpentine his imagination,
Put perpetual motion in his arms, Fill him full of the dynamite of Thy power,*

Anoint him all over with the oil of Thy salvation, And set his tongue on fire.

Be careful what you pray for! That is boldness!

And why shouldn't we be bold? Shouldn't we be bold to speak the name of Jesus? To call upon Him in every need, to name him as our great high priest, the pioneer of our salvation, our brother and friend?

Another definition for boldness: the quality of having a **strong, vivid, or clear** appearance Think of artwork, the *bold* blue ocean against a pink-orange sunset. Think of music, like a Bach prelude, or the bold hallelujah chorus of Handel's *Messiah*. Or poetry, with the words that describe what we so often cannot, one last time, from James Weldon Johnson:

And now, O Lord— When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow—

When I've been called everything but a child of God—

When I'm done traveling up the rough side of the mountain— O—Mary's Baby—

When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death—

When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet—

Lower me to my dusty grave in peace,

To wait for that great gittin'-up morning—Amen.

We have been given so great a gift, through this great high priest Jesus, who hears us and names us: forgiven, found, and faith-filled; who calls us out of our lives of comfort, to share the grace of God with *all* in need; to speak the *name above all names* with **boldness** to the powers principalities of this world that trade in fear, hatred, pain, division and death; to confidently state that we are God's own beloved, freed from sin to love and serve our neighbors, along with the priesthood of all believers. Now. Today. Tomorrow, and until we see him face to face, on "that great gittin'-up morning."

I invite you this week to pray with boldness. To jump in the water and run if you have to. To discern what bold new thing God is doing in your life, and share it when you're ready. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.