

10-17-21  
Pentecost 21  
Hebrews 5:1-10

## **Designated!**

Some of us remember when we were younger and one of our friends would get too bossy. A common response to those times was to ask that person, “Hey, who died and left you boss?” Sometimes that brought them down a peg, and sometimes it made things worse. But what we want to know is pretty clear: on whose authority are you trying to tell me what to do?

The authority of the school yard or the neighborhood is one thing, but that same question comes up in all kinds of other situations in our lives. Every group has those who hold legitimate authority and those who self-proclaim themselves the leader, and they usually retain that role until someone figures out how they got there. My years working in the hospital were the most stratified I have ever spent. I worked in the education department, and we provided services for every other department in the hospital, so for the first three weeks I worked there, literally all I did was sit in my office and read policy and procedure manuals so I would know who was in charge of what and how the whole organization worked. Or at least how it was supposed to work. After those first weeks, when I began to get out in the hospital and make contacts with people in all those different departments, I figured out pretty quickly who was really in charge. The Physical Therapy department had a director who was Ph. D prepared and fully credentialed to run things. But there was a therapy aide who really ran things, and everyone, including that Ph. D knew it. In our own department, we had another one of those Ph.D.'s who was the one whose office door said he was in charge, but the day the main secretary lost her contact lens and six of us were standing there waiting for handouts for our class to

come out of her computer, all of us but him knew who was in charge that day!

Being in charge is one thing. Knowing who's really in charge is usually another.

The whole idea of a High Priest is more than a little foreign to most of us. As Protestants, we hold firmly to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the idea that we all stand before God on our own and access God's grace and power without need of one between God and us. In that education department in the hospital years ago, that secretary's name was Carol. So far as I know, Carol didn't go to church. One of the things we did was send information about community health education programs the hospital was doing to lots of different people in town. Back in that day, Carol had to run all those mailing labels and stick them on envelopes—thousands of them sometimes. One of those mailing lists was for churches in that community. Lots of different kinds of churches. Lots of different titles for people in them. Some of you who came to us from the Catholic or Episcopal Church are more familiar with some of those terms than others of us are. Some of those people were the Reverend this or that. Then there were others who were the Most Reverend this or that, and even some who were the Very Most Reverend this or that. Some of us were helping Carol with one of those mailings one day (trying to stay on her good side since we all knew she was the boss). She picked up one of those sheets of labels and looked across the table at me and said "Bob, you go to church! Tell me what makes this guy any more reverend than this one?" I was as Presbyterian then as I am now, so I didn't try to explain church pecking order to her!

In Jesus' day, the High Priest was a big deal. Every year, someone was appointed to serve as High Priest. He would have been the Very Most Reverend if that term existed then. The writer of Hebrews gives us a little glimpse into that person's life and work when he says that the High Priest is in charge of things pertaining to God on behalf of others and that he offered gifts and sacrifices for sins. Even so, the High Priest also had sins of his

own to atone for and to repent of. No one just popped up and said, "I declare myself the High Priest!" There was a definite order that led some to that office. It all started with Aaron, the brother of Moses way back in Exodus. And the descendants of Aaron had served as Priests ever since. That's the way God ordained it all. All those in that line offered prayers and sacrifices and gifts of atonement for people who sought forgiveness and reconciliation with God. The High Priest was the one who was able to go into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. Only he. And only that one day a year. People waited all their lives to be High Priest.

Even so, there was a continual need for that office because sin continued to be pervasive, and people continued to be controlled by it. Day after day, season after season, the Priests made sacrifice on behalf of the people. And year after year the cycle continued. There never seemed to be a way to achieve the peace with God and with themselves that people have always sought.

Then came Jesus. And, at least in the minds of people like us who follow him, all that changed. In the faithful life, the sacrificial death, and the glorious resurrection of Jesus, the power of sin to control us has been defeated. Jesus, then, becomes the Great High Priest who offers sacrifice that is effective to cancel the power of sin to control us. But he did not declare himself to hold this office. It was God's intention all along that the role of the priest would be superseded by Jesus himself. So Jesus did not go to the Temple one day and nudge the High Priest from his place at the altar and say, "I'll take it from here!" In his baptism, we hear God speak and say that Jesus is the Son and that we should listen to him. Both the assertions that the writer of Hebrews makes tell us that it is God who declares Jesus to be the High Priest we all need.

The term this letter uses is designate.

I will never completely understand the designated hitter rule in baseball. I know how it works: the team designates someone to bat in place of the pitcher, who usually can't hit very

well. I'm a Cubs fan, so that means I follow the National League where we don't use the designated hitter except in inter-league play. This year, my Cubs should have designated somebody to hit for everybody since we didn't seem to have many who could. But we traded everybody away and gave up on the season about half way through. But where the designated hitter rule applies that's how it works—you get to put someone who can hit in the place of someone who probably can't. But you can't just wait and see how it's going one day and pull somebody out of the dugout to fill that role. You have to designate a hitter to bat for the pitcher. That designated hitter still plays out in the field, but he always bats in the pitcher's spot in the lineup. Or at least I think that's how you American League people make it work.

In the Presbyterian Church, we have an office that we call Designated Pastor. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, congregations are not able to call a pastor under normal circumstances, so the Presbytery offers them some people to consider, and they agree to take one of those people for a limited term while they work through whatever issues got them to that point. At the end of that agreed upon time, the congregation can search for another pastor or keep that one, but, at least at first, their pastor is designated to them by the Presbytery. The congregation doesn't have the full freedom to search as they usually do; they take someone the Presbytery recommends, and they agree to work together to see how it works out. This is, as you might imagine, a less than desirable situation, but one that is sometimes necessary. In our tradition, people don't just step up and declare themselves pastors, and congregations don't just pick someone without consultation. Like all things Presbyterian, there is a process at work. And that process usually does work. That process will unfold over the next several weeks and months for you here, and, at the end of it, it will result in another pastor standing where I stand today. I don't know who that is yet, and you don't either, but God does, and God is already working through the process to reveal who that needs to be and when it needs to happen. Your Session will meet today and will be

reminded of how that process works and what all the steps in it will be. And when that process is complete, the Presbytery will send representatives to participate in a service of installation, a time when that group that provides oversight and support for ministry in this region will designate your new pastor as the one who will lead this ministry into the future God will reveal to you.

We use the term designated in other ways that are important. For the most part, when you give to the Church, you give as you are able and you trust the Session to determine how to use your gifts and those of others to keep things rolling in ministry. That works in the vast majority of cases. Sometimes, however, people choose to designate their giving to particular causes. More often than not, this designated giving is what we sometimes call second mile giving, that which is over and above our regular support which pays the staff and keep the lights on and supports the general program of the ministry of the church. Not always. Designated giving happens when people only want their offering to go for a particular thing. Sometimes memorial gifts work that way. If a faithful church member dies and was a big supporter of a particular ministry, say the choir or youth ministry or a particular mission, sometimes, that person's family will ask us to designate any memorial gifts that come after the death to that cause that was important to that person. In our case, we always honor those designations if they are made, and if they are not then those gifts go to the Property Fund which helps to maintain this facility that means so much to all of us. Sometimes designated giving can be a problem. If money is set aside for a purpose that the church no longer supports or fulfills, then that money generally can't be used for anything else. To designate is to limit the use of those funds. So we try to be careful about designated giving.

Jesus was designated the High Priest that all Christians need, the one who atoned for our sin once and for all, the one who set things right between God and us, the one who achieved salvation for us by his own perfect sacrifice. And, once he had done this, as we read from this same letter a couple of weeks

ago, when he had made this perfect purification for our sins which we could not achieve on our own, he sat down at the right hand of God. His work was complete.

Our salvation is a completed act. When we gather to worship week after week, it is not in an attempt to achieve what we seek, not an attempt to find peace with God who is not yet satisfied. We do not gather to offer sacrifice after sacrifice that never seems to get us where we want to be. We gather to give thanks and praise to God who has redeemed us once and for all through Jesus Christ.

I've told you before that the highlight of worship for me every week is not the sermon. I know it's not for some of you, either, but most people think that's what preachers like best because it's the part we have the most control over. I love what I do behind this pulpit, and I hope that it is helpful more often than it is not. But my favorite part of worship comes over there by the font when I get to be the one to remind all of us that in Jesus Christ our sin is forgiven. When I splash around in that water and speak that truth to all of us, it is a joyful and hopeful thing, a time we can celebrate together. We are able to participate in that celebration because God decided to accept the sacrifice Jesus offered, because God designated Jesus to be our High Priest, to accept his sacrifice as sufficient for our salvation.

There are still far too many people who don't know this, people who spend their lives trying to be good enough, trying to be faithful enough, trying to be what God requires of them. And far too many of them never achieve the peace you and I are called to know. Our primary responsibilities are to find that peace in our own relationship with God, to live out of that peace in our own lives and in the lives we share with others and to help others find that peace too. That peace is available to us not by constant striving but by faith in the glorious mystery that somehow God designated Jesus as the one who would achieve it for us. That peace is what we gather here week after week to experience. It is here for the taking today. Don't leave without it. Thanks be to God. Amen.

## Prayers of the People

Good and gracious God, we know that when Jesus lived among us, he prayed, sometimes quietly and alone and sometimes loudly and with great passion. Some of those prayers are recorded in Scripture so that we can know them and be inspired by them.

Some of them are lost to us, but the idea that Jesus prayed for those he loved, including us, calls us to be faithful in our prayers for ourselves and for one another. We give you thanks that when Jesus prayed, he cried out to you, confident that you would hear him and guide him as he faithfully responded to your call. We come to you with that same confidence today. We are your children, and we have come to believe that when we cry out to you, you will answer and that you will guide us faithfully as we attempt to follow the One you sent to be our guide.

We pray for the Church today, both local and universal. We pray for this congregation as it anticipates a time of transition. We pray for its leaders and for the one you already know will come to join them in leadership here. Give us always both humility and courage as we walk in your way. We pray for the leaders of our nation and the nations of the world as they face challenges that seem unsurmountable, but which must be addressed and resolved. Give those who lead the courage to walk in peace and in confidence. Give us who follow wisdom to do what is right.

We pray for all who are in pain today, for those who are in hospitals and other places of care. For those who care for them and for those who wait with them for healing to come. We ask that you send healing and deliverance so that these we love can be restored to health and vitality.

We pray for those who face death and for those who face it with them. Help us to offer comfort and presence to these in their time of need and to remember that we will depend on those gifts to sustain us someday.

We give you thanks for all the gifts you shower upon us as individuals and as your family of faith. Help us to use your gifts for the common good and not hoard them. Help us always to

remember how freely you have shared with us as we consider how to share with others.

Hear the prayers we offer now in the privacy of our own hearts about issues that touch our lives....

We are sustained by your presence, O God, as all who have gone before us in this place have been, and we long for that day you have promised when we will join them and the faithful of all the ages around your table of blessing at the end of the age.

Your faithfulness to us is great, Loving God. Hear us now as, in faith, we pray as Jesus taught us to pray when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.