

10-24-21
Pentecost 22
Hebrews 7:23-28
Worship at Percy Quin Park
Picnic follows

A Priest Forever!

In a culture like ours, it's hard to think of very many things that will last forever! Some of us who are of, shall we say, a certain age, remember when we got married, set up housekeeping, and then went to Sears or a local appliance dealer and bought a washing machine. More than likely a Kenmore. If not standard white, then avocado green or harvest gold. We took it home and expected it to last at least forty years, and the warranty on it was about that long. It might need a little service along the way, but Sears had somebody to do that, too. And at a reasonable cost. TV sets and other appliances came with the same set of expectations, and usually lived up to them. When there were problems, there was a handyman close by to make things right again.

Young adults are looking at me the same way they look at dinosaurs in the museum. They know nothing about that world. We bought a new washing machine just before we moved here almost nine years ago. The one we had was fine, but we were selling the house, and the realtor said we needed to let our trusted Kenmore go with the house, so while we lived in temporary space in Tennessee, we bought another one. We replaced it sometime during Covid. Landy came to look at it and you wouldn't believe how much it was going to cost to fix it, and the warranty was of course, long gone. The one we replaced was another Kenmore, but it was, I'm sure made somewhere other than a factory in Ohio, and I've had friends tell me we ought to feel good that we got as many years out of it as we did.

I guess they're right. We just don't think of many things that last forever anymore. Most of you know what I drive. I'll set out on my twenty-second year in that little Toyota in January, and I fully intend to drive it then. Having said that, some of you watch for me along the road back to town when we leave here today, because we all know I'm driving on borrowed time.

Most of us probably think of relationships about the same way we think of appliances. What we once thought would last forever and sustain us now usually doesn't. It really doesn't matter why or how; it's just reality. I've done weddings for more than thirty years and have a pretty good track record of seeing them last. I may not do another one before I get away from you, so I guess it's safe to tell you now that I'm not a big fan of couples who want to write their own wedding vows. I'm one of those stodgy old ministers who insist on reading them before they stand before God and all assembled and say something trite or stupid. I had a couple years ago now who insisted on writing their own vows even though we all identified more than a few red flags in their relationship we were going to have to work around. They finally agreed to bring their vows for me to see before the ceremony. They were a bit more flowery than this, but basically they said, "We love each other today, and we promise to stay together as long as we do." They went on from there, but that was the gist of it. I finally convinced them that there were several sets of vows in the Book of Worship that would do quite nicely. I went back there to do another wedding about fifteen years after they married, and they came to that wedding just so I could see that they were still married. I think they still are. I doubt that what I made them say to each other is the primary reason for that, but it couldn't hurt!

When we worship in our regular worship space downtown, we are reminded every time we enter that room of the heritage that is ours. That building has stood for a hundred years as a testament to God's presence in the heart of our community, and people have turned to it for guidance and hope for generations. We know, of course that what is First Christian Church up the

street right now used to sit there, and people turned to that place with the same hope and aspiration for several years before that space we care so much about was there. That means there was a time when there was nothing on that corner once. Several years ago when Whitney portrayed Colonel McComb in one of those historical events at the Depot, the Colonel spoke through him and declared that that spot at what is now the corner of Third and Delaware would be where his church would sit. That would have been before there was a corner of Third and Delaware, but someone along with the Colonel had the foresight to think about what could be and what would be in our community. From that hub at Five Points, history has unfolded for longer than any of us have been here.

When all that was being laid out, I imagine that some of the old growth trees surrounding us here in the Park today were already here. But much of what we see has sprung up since then. And much of what was here before the Park is long since gone. Even in a place like this, it's hard to think about much that lasts forever.

Like most of you, I hope, I have had a few friends that I thought would be sustaining parts of my life forever. Long before we knew about BFF's we all thought we had some. But very few of those relationships have lasted. I reconnected with a friend just a few days ago. We hadn't talked for a couple of years—no problem, just life. He is one of the few I can think of who will probably be a friend as long as I live. And will probably care when I don't live anymore. It's good to have that connection back. Even though it makes me think of some I thought were on that level that turned out not to be.

I was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament on a Sunday afternoon in May in 1985. Some of you weren't born then. I was ordained by the Presbytery of Indiana, which no longer exists. I still had to go back to Memphis and sit final exams and all the other things involved in graduating, but I became a Presbyterian minister that day. I still am one. There were seven other Presbyterians in my class, some Methodists,

and a few people from other denominations. Three of those Presbyterians who graduated with me have died. But they served the Church faithfully as long as they lived. Unless I do something I don't plan to do, I will continue to be a Presbyterian minister the rest of my days. By now you know that I'll continue to preach in retirement next year. Someday I'll lay it down altogether, but even when I am not able to stand in the pulpit every week, I'll still be that person. Forever. But there aren't very many things that last that long. There are very few things that last forever.

The writer of Hebrews offers us the assurance that the role of Jesus as High Priest lasts forever.

We've talked for a couple of weeks now about this High Priest business and how much we like to think it doesn't apply to us. But we know better. We know that, at our core, all is not right between God and us, and that, if we had to stand before God with nothing but what we could muster to bring on our own, we couldn't stand long. We all have those places where we don't want to stand alone, without someone to advocate for us. Most of us are not fool enough to go to court without an advocate. Most of us wouldn't try to close a real estate deal on our own or to do any other kind of serious business without someone to stand with us. When we get married, we choose someone to stand with us, not to take our place, but to support and encourage us.

For generations, and in some traditions still today, that's the role the High Priest played. He was the one who stood between us and God, the one who offered sacrifice on our behalf, the one who prayed to God for us, the one who interceded for us. The writer of Hebrews believes as we do: that all of that changed when Jesus came into the world to be the once and for all sacrifice that God ordained. No longer do we have to wonder if we have done enough or been enough to satisfy what God requires. We cannot do enough. We cannot be enough. But we don't need to, because Jesus has already offered the sacrifice that God accepted.

The former High Priests, faithful as they were, well-intentioned as they were, were people like us. Your pastors, this

one and all who have gone before me and all who will come after we, have all been flawed. We may have degrees you don't have. We may have credentials from Presbytery you don't have, but we are people just like you, people who have sin of our own to atone for, people who have issues of our own in our lives to deal with. That's a part of what makes our Protestant understanding of the priesthood of all believers so important to us. I can pray with you and for you, and you can pray with and for me, and together we can pray for the needs of one another and of the world around us. And all those prayers go directly to God's ears, regardless of who prays them. Granted, we all know the power in having someone else pray for us. But down deep we all know that our own prayers are just as effective as anyone else's.

Imagine the power in believing that Jesus prays for us. Forever.

I've told you before about a little lady in a church I served while I was in Seminary. She was a widow who lived alone. The first time I visited in her home, I had one of the most humbling experiences I have ever had. The local paper had run a little story as they usually do when I came to be the pastor of her church. And they had my picture that someone at the church had given them. And Miss Mary had that picture and that article propped up on the salt and pepper shaker on her kitchen table. When I asked her what that was all about, she said she kept it there to remind her to pray for me every morning while she ate her breakfast. She barely knew me. But she prayed for me every morning. I don't for a minute think I was the only one she was praying for. She had a family. She had friends. She had her own needs. But she prayed for her pastor. I don't know about you, but that made me want to be sure and behave myself. If her prayers could work on me like that, imagine what our lives would be if we thought that every hour of every day, Jesus sits at the right hand of God and prays for us. Advocates for us. Serves as a High Priest for us. Reminds God that we belong to him on those days when our behavior and our attitudes don't do a good job of that. Reminds God that he has promised to love us even on those days

when we don't deserve it. Jesus does that. Every day. And will forever.

Miss Mary is the lady I've told some of you about before. I made a reference to the Blues Brothers movie in a sermon once, something about their commitment to see their work through to raise money to pay the taxes on that orphanage. Those of you who know that movie know that Jake and Elwood Blues said they were on a mission from God, and I talked about how our lives could be like that, on a mission from God.

Miss Mary went to the video rental place back when there were such things and rented that movie. She came to church the following week horrified. Horrified that I would recommend such a vile movie as an example of how we ought to live. I asked her if she still prayed for me and she said she didn't just stop at breakfast anymore. She prayed for me at lunch and supper too! And I was grateful.

Jesus is the High Priest we all must have. The one who prays for us. The one who reminds God of his promise to love us and who reminds us of our promises, too. And he will do that forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

Merciful God, powerful and wonderful, yet always present to us and never far from us: we are grateful for all your gifts to us, for life and love and the promise of life and love without end which is ours in Jesus Christ. We thank you that your Spirit lives within us and calls the best of us from deep within. That same Spirit prompts this and all our prayers. Your faithfulness to us calls us to believe we can be faithful to you and to one another. So we lift to you our cares and the joys of our hearts, the burdens and worries and the happys and the wonders in which we live each day.

We pray for the sick. For all who seek to be healed and for all who work to heal them. For those who have struggled so long they don't know where to turn. Help them to turn to you and to us as signs of your hope and presence. We pray for all who are

broken and who want to be mended and for those who have been broken for so long that they aren't sure they know what wholeness looks like. We pray for all who mourn and who look for comfort and, especially, for those who have grieved so long they have lost their grip on hope. We pray that those who insist on waging war would learn the way of peace, that leaders who thrive on power would seek to find wisdom and that any who feel forsaken or left behind might be gathered in and that we would hold the door open for them so they can come in. We pray for consolation for the sorrowful, for encouragement and hope for the poor, but also for jobs and opportunities to provide hope for themselves. We pray for all who deal with anxiety and apprehension.

We pray for children who trust and for youth who challenge and for adults who never quite make it past that challenge into confidence. We pray for all who venture out into new starts and for some who are nearing the end of their journey. We pray for all who face hard choices and for some who live with painful consequences of choices they have made. We pray for people who are consumed by bitterness and fear. And for some who are just drained, almost empty, not capable of feeling much of anything.

We pray that we who are your Church might reach for the potential you see in us and seize opportunities to change the world, beginning with our own community. We pray that the whole Body of Christ might gain strength from all its diverse parts and that our common ministry might be something we do with joy and thanksgiving instead of only out of obligation or even hope that it might redeem us. Comfort us with the assurance that our redemption is complete in Jesus Christ, and we can know joy in this life as we prepare for greater joy in the life to come.

We pray for the courage to follow Jesus, Good Lord, for the faith to trust his promises to be with us wherever you call us to be. Help us to see your kingdom as not just coming, but as alive and real among us even now.

We pray for all the things you call us each to pray for. And we pray for those for whom no one prays, and we seek to find ways to let them know that we love them and all people with the love of Christ. We say all of this, O God, to say that we pray all these things in the name of Jesus who ceaselessly prays for us, and who taught us to pray together 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.