

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 18, 2009

"THE MISSING LINK"
By Mary Anne Biggs

Hebrews 5:1-10 ~ Mark 10:35-45

Years ago our church in Texas hired a consultant to teach us how to grow our congregation. We were considered a mid-sized congregation because we only had about 750 members. Everything is supposed to be bigger in Texas and that goes for Methodist churches as well. This guy had all the answers ... "First find where people itch; then find a way for the church to scratch that itch," the consultant advised. "The church is here to meet people's felt needs," he said. Really, really ... that's what church is supposed to be about? I got the feeling that he believed that we could control God into increasing our membership if we played our cards right. As if we could control God. This is not a God we can reduce to bumper stickers and catchy slogans ... this is not a God who follows *our* suggestions ... much less those from arrogant consultants. This is not the puny God of the televangelists whom you can buy off with a donation and control with a credit card. In fact, this is not a God that any of us can control at all.

We need to get a glimpse of this vast Mystery from time to time to put ourselves in perspective. Realizing that God created a universe 360 billion years ago ... that we are just now seeing light that left stars at 186,000 miles per second when Jesus was still walking the shores of the Sea of Galilee ... reminds us that *we* are not the center of God's existence. It reduces to the level of the absurd our ridiculous musings about God ... our violent arguments about God ... our presumptuous pronouncements in God's name ... as if we could ever approach understanding who God is.

A God that big is terrifying. "*You cannot see my face*" God warns Moses during the Exodus, "*for no one shall see me and live*" (Ex 33:20). Who can approach such a Mystery? How can we talk to that cosmic sized God about our little problems and worries and sorrows, and expect to be heard, let alone helped? I don't want to reduce God to my size, but I need some way to link with God at the level of my personhood. I need some mediator who can connect me with the cosmic, eternal Presence.

Of course, that's where Jesus comes in. "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to God's self,*" declares Paul, "*and God has given us the ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Cor 5:18). As you know, long ago Israel's priests had mediated the presence of the awesome God to the people with fear and trembling as they stood before the holy of holies in the great Temple in Jerusalem. The author of Hebrews ... writing in the days after the Temple has been destroyed ... announces that Jesus is the perfect high priest who links us with the one eternal God. Jesus is the missing link who connects this feeble, suffering, mortal humanity with the ultimate, almighty, eternal God. "*Every high priest chosen from among mortals,*" says Hebrews, "*is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently*

with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness." This is what a priest does. A priest mediates ... a priest intercedes ... a priest connects the people with God and God with the people. A priest represents God to the people ... always reminding them of the limitless love and specific demands of the Almighty. And a priest represents the people before God ... because the priest understands the frailty and suffering of the people.

Jesus himself suffered, the author of Hebrews reminds us. *"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death"* (Hebrews 5:7). Jesus' human suffering is purposeful. It makes him tenderhearted and compassionate because he knows how it feels to be slandered and betrayed ... ignored and misunderstood ... hungry and tired ... tortured and killed. In Jesus, the eternal God understands what it feels like to be merely human. In Jesus, we meet a God we can understand well enough to connect with ... to follow ... to love. We must pause and reflect on a Cosmic God who understands what it means to suffer and be mortal. This means that no problem ... no pain ... no harsh circumstance ... no challenge is beyond the compassion of God.

During Dietrich Bonhoeffer's imprisonment at Buchenwald Concentration Camp,

the Nazis guards were extraordinarily cruel to their prisoners. As time crept by in these deteriorating inhumane conditions, the prisoners naturally lost hope and fell into desperation. One night in the camp, as a group of prisoners despaired of having any future at all, the one they had nicknamed "the prophet," began to preach. He told them that the Messiah lived just as they were living now:

You relegate him to the heavens, but He is here among us. You imagine that He is safe, sheltered from danger, but He has come to be with the victims. Yes, even He, He better than anyone, knows the sorrow that consumes you. He feels the fist that smashes into your face. The darkness that engulfs us engulfs Him also. It is He, here and now, who urges you not to give way to despair.

In a prison camp ... in the hospital ... in the prison of our own mortal soul ... the cosmic, eternal God is with us through the Messiah, through the Christ ... as close to us as the air we breathe ... present even in the pain and sorrow we feel.

Jesus is our priest, but this identity is both unique and typical. I mean, no one is so effective a priest as Jesus because no one else so perfectly combines the human and the divine in one integrated self. But Jesus' priesthood is also "typical" because he is the model of what we are supposed to be. *"You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:42-45). The followers are called to be like their leader. And our leader, Jesus, is not about power or glory or victory over enemies or the abuse of underlings for his own gain. No, Jesus is about service and sacrifice and suffering with and suffering for those whom God places in his care.

All of which is to say that you and I ... who are called the "Body of Christ" ... are also priests like Jesus. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God describes the goal of the covenant with Moses the Hebrew people at Sinai. *"Indeed, the whole earth is mine,"* God says, *"but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation"* (Exodus 19:5,6). God chooses the Hebrew people ... not to be the only people with whom God will connect, excluding all others ... but in order to connect with the whole world through them. God wants them all to be priests ... carriers of the presence of God to all nations and all peoples. In the New Testament, this same goal is applied to the new covenant in Christ, as 1st Peter tells the early church, *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy"* (1 Peter 2:9-10).

The Reformers called this universal Christian vocation "the priesthood of the believers," and set it over against the attempts of a few powerful, elite clergy to control the church. Over against these arrogant gate keepers who said that only they had the right interpretation of scripture ... only they could say who was in and who was out ... only they could control the church and dole out access to God ... the "priesthood of the believers" remembered that God democratized the church long ago. Jesus alone is our connection with God. No one else can interfere with that. And as Jesus is our priest, so every one of us who follows him has a connection with God and can help others connect, too. But this spiritual freedom from oppressive preachers, as important as it may be, is actually an incidental, secondary meaning of "the priesthood of the believers." The primary meaning of the "priesthood of the believers" is that God has called you and you and you, and you in the choir and you in the back and even me also to be priests in the world. Your mission is to bring the presence of the cosmic eternal God to every person you encounter. You are their contact ... the missing link that makes an impersonal ultimate Power of unimaginable magnitude personal and accessible to mere mortals like yourself.

A while ago I shared with you about going with my friend to the Baptist church when I was a child for their VBS because it was always quite a production. Well, another thing I didn't want to miss was their big revival each summer. It was spectacular. After lots and lots of hymn singing a traveling evangelist spoke and invited everybody there who wasn't a Christian to come forward and meet Jesus. I was only a child and figured that if I was Catholic I might not be Christian (I know better now) so I walked down that long aisle in front of all those people. I was pretty scared, but not because the place was packed. I was scared because I thought I was *really* going to get to meet Jesus and shake his hand. Yep, I was totally convinced that he was going to be there, live and in person, as advertised. Needless to say I was more than disappointed that the only hand I got to shake that evening was the preacher's. But that is no longer the case. I shake hands with Jesus each Sunday morning when I shake your hands.

The church is Christ in the world carrying God's love to all people and serving God's children wherever and whoever they might be. The church, you priests right here, are the missing link ... where people meet Christ ... where people connect with the immortal invisible God. At least that's our mission, to be priests to each other.

These are your priests. This is your flock. This is your Christ shaped community. We know God is bigger than any one person ... more than all the human community combined. But we cannot connect all by ourselves to this gigantic God of space and time. We connect to God through our priests, through Jesus, the Christ, who is God with us ... and through the living and breathing Christ we meet in each other. It is not the priesthood of the believer, but the priesthood of the believers that mediates the presence of God. We would not be so foolish as to deify one person, however holy and good. We cannot point to one person alone here in our church today and say, "This is Christ." But we can point to the church as a whole, all of us together, and say, "Christ is among us; God is in this place," can't we?

John and I went to the Powwow this summer in the UP. The one word we heard again and again as a form of greeting was Boohooz. John had the opportunity to inquire what that word meant when he met one of his fellow colleagues who teaches Ojibwe culture at Watersmeet and I love the story. It is said that a man ... Boohooz was a prophet ... not Jesus ... but like Jesus. He helped name the animals and plants, then he left. He promised that he would come back and return to the People – but he would not say what he would look like. The story stayed with the people for generations upon generations, even to this day. So when you are greeted you are actually being asked “Are you Boohooz?” ... because anyone you meet may be Boohooz.

Today I invite you to greet each other with the same expectancy. Let the Jesus in you recognize the Jesus in others. I invite you to become his agent ... to accept his call to be a carrier of the infectious love of God. I ask you to think of those persons who have been God's priests to you and of those people who have no other link except you to the love of God. Step by step ... step up ... and step out. Others will be Jesus for you when you need Jesus, but I am saying to you today, you be Jesus. You be Jesus. We need you to be Jesus with us in this place. May we pray?

Eternal God,

How could we really know you or even understand a little about you if it weren't for our brother Jesus? How would we know that you know what it is like for us here, how love gives us life and causes us to suffer at the same time? So today, we thank you for Jesus, our priest, our link to life and eternity and to you. And we thank you for every one of his followers who has shown us his love by being priests to us, too. And we thank you for the church, even with all its human frailties, which has carried the gospel down through the years to us. Now help us, in this place and with one another to be priests ourselves like Jesus, that the world might know you and rejoice, in Jesus' name. Amen.