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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
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**Hebrews 7.23-28**  
Mark 10.46-52

## **One Priest**

“Furthermore, the former priests were many in number...”  
--Hebrews 7.23

The New Testament offers many images of Jesus. One very prominent image is that of teacher. We had a group of young people visiting our church from one of the synagogues this past week and I was sharing with them that we think of Jesus as our Rabbi. People who focus on Christian ethics often concentrate on the image of Jesus as teacher, with the Sermon on the Mount being central. When I try to visualize Jesus, this is often the picture that comes to mind: Jesus, with a group of people gathered around, teaching.

Jesus is indeed a teacher, but many other images are offered as well. While the term “teacher” suggests a certain detachment, Jesus is often portrayed as one much more in the fray. He confronts authority and speaks truth to power—both with religious and political leaders. Sometimes he causes a ruckus. Remember those tables of the moneychangers in the Temple? Sometimes the commotion he causes is much less visible, as it is in the hearts of individuals. A couple of weeks ago we heard the story of the rich young man who had his worldview turned upside down by Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Our Gospel Lesson today presents another very common image for Jesus: the healer. Blind Bartimaeus cries out persistently for healing. Jesus hears his cry and pronounces, “Your faith has made you well.” Teaching, confronting, healing—the word pictures of Jesus are many and diverse. It is part of the power and function of the Christian canon that it prevents us from settling prematurely on any one image of our own favoring. Some would like to make Jesus into a moral scold—and sometimes he leans that way—but there are many images of grace and forgiveness to balance that out. Others would like Jesus to be soft and squishy—the “you are accepted” or “I’m okay, you’re okay” archetypical Mr. Nice Guy—but that image

won't stand alone for long either. Jesus and our experience of him confronts “the very images and schemes we use to explain him... Jesus forever escapes us, as he forever ministers to us and leads us.”<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes scripture even offers clearly *false* images of Jesus, so that we can learn from these negative examples. Just before today's passage from Mark, James and John, Zebedee's sons, make their famous request of Jesus: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus makes it clear to them that his ministry is not about the granting of special favors for his pals.

One of the more unusual images for Jesus is offered by the Letter to the Hebrews. In a lengthy and dense section of the letter, the author speaks of Jesus as a priest—even as a high priest.

This is not an easy image for low church Congregationalists like us. It is a word that sometimes makes me bristle—almost physically. When someone calls me a priest, I say, “I'm not a priest. I'm a pastor.” I'm not sure what that reaction is about, but it suggests some fairly deep discomfort. Many Protestants share it. One of the key tenants of the Reformation, after all, is the concept of “the priesthood of all believers.” But I'm not sure that our discomfort is always so well-grounded in good theology.

When we reject the word “priest,” often we are rejecting the very idea of God as holy. We claim to be down to earth Christians who don't take stock in hocus-pocus. The idea of special priests and fancy ceremonies goes against the grain of our austere “New England Way.” But perhaps we've gone overboard in our critique.

The idea of priesthood is found in all of the great religions. In the Old Testament, it became a family tradition for the descendents of Aaron. It appears in the New Testament, as in today's text, and it is not used in a way that is necessarily pejorative. The ins and outs of the reasoning in the Letter to the Hebrews makes my head swim, but I think a fairly simple concept lies at its core. Because God is holy and so completely “other” from us, human beings have used priests to mediate the human relationship with God. (The letter is speaking, really, of the Old Testament practices. The idea of the Christian ministry as belonging to a priesthood is a much later development.)

Hebrews presents the idea that Jesus is the one new and necessary priest. The priesthood of Jesus is contrasted with the priesthods of old. Whereas other priests were constantly dying and being replaced, the risen Christ lives forever to intercede for us. Whereas previous sacrifices needed to be endlessly repeated, Jesus has made a sacrifice once and for all. As the text says:

...the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.... Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. (Hebrews 7.24-27)

It might be helpful to consider this idea in a metaphorical way. I had a thought about this on Friday night as I was driving a van load full of middle school youth group kids to a corn maze in Connecticut. (Theology strikes at the strangest times!) They were talking in the back about various celebrities and I realized that I had no idea who these people were. I still don't. All I know is that one of these celebrities has a house that is 64,000 square feet. I think it is somebody named Shakira, or maybe it was Shaquille O'Neal. I'm not sure.

In our culture, it seems to me, Fame is the deity and celebrities are the priests. They mediate between mere mortals and the great wealth and privilege that we are taught to crave. If we can know about them, or better yet, meet them, then maybe we too will be blessed. This priestly understanding of celebrities explains nicely why their moments of fame are so fleeting. Like the priests of old, they come and go, offering ever new sacrifices to the ravenous god of fame and wealth.

James and John, with their request to sit at the right and the left, wanted to make Jesus into this sort of priest. But that isn't who he is. Instead, he is the one priest who can help us put an end to endless sacrifice. Because he shows us God's love in a new and clear way, we can live our lives in grace and gratitude rather than in seeking and striving.

Because we need God, we need some concept of priesthood. The insight of the Reformation is not that God has been domesticated to the point that all may approach easily and casually. The “priesthood of all believers” is much more meaningful than such modern reductionism. We are all priests, not because intercession is no longer required, but because we participate in Christ, who intercedes on our behalf. I like the way Karl Barth put it: “...the work of Jesus Christ is at once the essence and fulfillment of all other priestly work but also that which replaces it and makes it superfluous.”<sup>4</sup>

Priest is not a dirty word. It is one of the manifold images of Jesus that challenges us to grow closer to God. And even Congregationalists should want to do that!

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<sup>1</sup>Mark 10.17-22

<sup>2</sup>Laura and Norman Gottwald. Shared by a friend.

<sup>3</sup>Mark 10.35-45

<sup>4</sup>*Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, page 276.