

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 24, Year B, October 21, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "We Are All Priests"
Hebrews 4:12-16

I have a confession to make: I am not really a 'priest'; and I need to add that Jeff is also not really a 'priest', and that the person you will call as your next Rector, whoever she or he may be, will undoubtedly not really be a 'priest' either; I don't mean to suggest by this that those of us who go by the title of 'priest' in the Episcopal Church have all somehow received our divinity degrees improperly; no, the problem lies in the very word 'priest' itself

'priest' is a term used across many religions where it has as its basic connotation a person who is an intermediary between God and the people; it inherently includes the understanding that no person who is not a designated 'priest' can have direct access to God; that means that everyone else has to have some kind of priestly go-between acting on their behalf in order to get their wishes expressed to God and in order to receive benefits in return from God; I'm not an expert on Roman Catholic theology, but my understanding is that the term 'priest' does carry that connotation for the Catholic understanding of the church's, 'via its priests', necessary involvement as a go-between to God in the religious life of its parishioners; but this understanding of 'priest', even though we use the same word, does not carry over into the theology of the Protestant Episcopal Church

let's look into some history and background of 'priest' as a go-between; in the Old Testament we read of how only the priests were allowed to enter the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem; how only the priests were allowed to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people; after the destruction of the Temple Judaism itself no longer continued to have priests; instead, to this day, it has rabbis, which means 'teacher'; a rabbi is not a priestly go-between; in the New Testament the priests are the bad guys; we hear about the decisive role the priests play in the betrayal, arrest, and sentencing to death of Jesus (Matthew 26:59); so rightly, Jesus does not look kindly on these priests and the role they play

there are positive uses of the term 'priest' in the New Testament too, where

for instance, it is applied to Jesus; in our Hebrews reading today we are told that “we have a great high priest;” Jesus is my priest and your priest; and there are other places where the term ‘priest’ is used in a much wider sense; 1st Peter (2:9) says, addressing all the faithful, so that includes you and me, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood;” also the book of Revelation (1:5-6) says that “Jesus Christ [has] ... made us [again, you and me] to be ... priests serving his God and Father;” according to these passages, all Christians are priests, you and I alike, and we all have the same priestly responsibility of proclaiming God to the world; and we all have direct access to God; so I am not a priest who is a go-between to God or to Christ or to the Holy Spirit for you, but I am a priest among all of you other priests!

so why does the Episcopal Church even use the term ‘priest’?; in the New Testament the people who lead congregations are called elders; the Greek term for ‘elder’ is ‘presbyter’; that word is the origin of the Presbyterian denomination; only by a quirk of the English language, this term ‘presbyter’ over the years got simplified into the word ... (you guessed it) ‘priest’; so English has one word which expresses two very different Biblical concepts: the priestly go-between and the elder; the order of ministry really should be called ‘presbyter’ or ‘elder,’ not ‘priest’, in order to avoid the confusion between the two; and there is another New Testament word that works just fine for my role: pastor (see Ephesians 4:11)

Jesus, and you, and I—all Christians—according to the Bible are priests; while I and other Episcopal ‘priests’ serving in the church are better called presbyters, or elders, or pastors; my relationship to God is on the same basis as yours is, Baptism; my relationship to the church, through ordination, is instead more of a job description: to be a leader, a helper, and a spiritual guide to the church community; all that is very similar to what a rabbi does in the Jewish community; and, by the way, there is no such confusion with deacons or with bishops; those titles are the same as in the New Testament; the deacons were and still are servant ministers; bishops were and still are the overseers of ministries

does this make you feel like you’ve just gotten a promotion?; it should!; we do not need any go-between to get to God; through our prayers, through our praises, through our carrying out of God’s will, each of us establishes for ourselves a relationship with God and a ministry for the world; and

since our focus today is on the Worship Vestry Commission, let us be attentive to what we're doing as we worship and celebrate together what we have in common through loving and serving God, as God's priests

[later, from the altar] as a footnote to my sermon, some of you may be wondering if I'm not about to offer a priestly sacrifice on your behalf at this altar; but please notice that the entire Eucharistic Prayer, in every version of it, is throughout in the 1st person plural; I speak most of the words at the altar, but everything is in terms of what "we" together, are all offering to God