

“Humble Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
March 25, 2012 – Lent V

Hebrews 5: 1-10

Is God for us or against us? Is God seeking out retribution or reconciliation? Do we come to worship feeling guilty or joyous? In this season of Lent, we are called to examine our lives in light of the biblical witness. In that light, we can often feel inadequate, wondering what God wants from us to “make up” for our inadequacies. That desire to “make up” can often turn into fear that we aren’t doing enough to please our God. That fear can become the driving force of our faith, instead of realizing the true spirit in which God showed his love in Jesus Christ.

Tom Long writes: *The pastor who preached the sermon we call the Letter to the Hebrews felt the same terror in his own congregation. Worship had become for them “a blazing fire and darkness and gloom” (Hebrews 12:18). People were staying away from services. They had drooping hands and weak knees from the heavy burdens of their religion. The problem? At the center of their faith was a God always seeking compensation, a God seemingly incapable of satisfaction. Like ancient priests, these Christians trudged dutifully into the sanctuary bearing offerings. Week after week, year after year, they brought what they could, but without refreshment. “God, what do you want? A cereal offering, a bull, a ram? Do you want a tithe, a testimony, a guilty conscience? Do you want me to serve on four committees and run the night shelter? Do you want prayer without ceasing or a thousand signed petitions for peace and justice?”*

*No, God wants only one thing, said the preacher of Hebrews. Not an unblemished goat or a fat pledge card, not a gift to the building fund or a promise to walk across burning coals. God desires this: a fully human life, a life well lived. “The glory of God,” said Irenaeus, “is humanity full alive.” But, of course, a life truly well lived is the one thing we cannot, on our own, bring to God. So it was our brother Jesus who walked the same paths as we, experienced the same temptations as we, endured the same afflictions common to our humanity, but who never lost his bearings, never compromised his humanity. It was he who walked, as the high priest, into the great sanctuary and, on behalf of us all, placed himself into the offering plate, the one thing God truly desires: a human being fully alive . . . (“What God Wants,” Tom Long, *Christian Century*, March 21, 2006: 19).*

The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as “a high priest of the order of Melchizedek.” Who was Melchizedek? Why is someone from the life of Abraham important in this discussion of Jesus? Actually, as Rick Morley writes, he’s very important indeed.

Abram had been told by God to pick up from his land — the only home he had ever known — and go to a new place. You can't possibly imagine how big this is unless you've ever been among people who are rooted to their land through many generations. This was a big ask. In return, God said he would bless him and make him the father of many nations.

After settling by the Oaks at Mamre he was still childless. So much for "father of nations." He was in some significant struggles with his nephew, Lot. And, subsequently he found himself in the middle of a grand war. A war among many kings.

If Abraham's story stopped there, he would be a laughingstock. A sad laughingstock whose life had been completely turned upside-down by a God who had asked him to move, and who had promised him the world in return. And all he had to show for it was war, strife, and barrenness.

He won the war. And as the kings were settling the tab in comes a new figure. With a name that hadn't been referenced before, and in the narrative of the Torah wouldn't be referenced again. A figure that appears and then vanishes again with hardly a comment.

His name is Melchizedek. The name literally means "King of Righteousness." He's identified as "The King of Salem." Of course, "Salem" means "Peace." And he comes into the valley with the other kings, and he offers bread and wine — and he blesses Abram.

So, this guy is the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace, he's the High Priest of the God of gods, and he offers blessing and a meal of bread and wine.

Gosh, does any of this sound familiar? Does he sound familiar?

When Abraham is perhaps at his lowest, and his life is spinning out of control, in comes a priest-king with righteousness and peace and a sacramental meal. Unbidden. Un-asked for. He just comes.

It's no wonder that centuries and centuries later, in the wake of the death and resurrection of Jesus, that the first Christians identified this priest-king as Jesus. The author of Hebrews isn't clear on whether or not Jesus and Melchizedek are the same person, but the author is crystal clear that they are cut from the same cloth. Jesus is the High Priest in the Order of Melchizedek. When we need him, he just comes. And he comes with peace, and righteousness, and blessing, and the Sacred Meal.

It's a comfortable image, for sure. It's comforting to know that when we need Jesus the most, he'll come riding in to the valley bringing exactly what we need. Even if we forget to ask him to come. Even if we didn't realize we needed him in the first place
http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/1493?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=unbidden-a-reflection-on-hebrews-55-10.

But I tell you what: it can be so hard for some people to hear that. They have faced tragedy, adversity, and struggles, and all they can see is the "fire and darkness and gloom." They wonder what they have done to deserve this punishment from God. They question what kind of goodness God can

possess if all these bad things happen to them. They doubt that God has counted them as one of their children.

A seminary student's first pastorate was of a small church, small enough so that she set for herself the goal of visiting every family on the roll in the first six months. At the end of six months, she had almost done it. She had visited every family but one. "They haven't been here in two years," people said. "Don't bother; they aren't coming back."

She had set her goal, though, and so one afternoon she drove out to their house. Only the wife was at home; she poured cups of coffee and they sat at the kitchen table and chatted. They talked about this; they talked about that; then they talked about it. Two-and-a-half years earlier she had been at home with their young son. She was vacuuming in the back bedroom, had not checked on him in a while, so she snapped off the vacuum, went into the den and did not find him. She followed his trail across the den, through the patio door, across the patio, to the swimming pool, where she found him. "At the funeral, our friends at the church were very kind. They told us it was God's will."

The minister put her cup down on the table. Should she touch it, or should she not? She touched it. "Your friends meant well, I am sure, but they were wrong."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean that God does not will the death of children."

The woman's face reddened, and her jaw set. "Then whom do you blame? I guess you blame me."

"No, I don't blame you. I don't want to blame God, either."

"Then how do you explain it?" she said, her anger rising.

"I don't know. I can't explain it. I don't understand why such things happen, either. I only know that God's heart broke when yours did."

The woman had her arms crossed, and it was clear that this conversation was over. The minister left the house kicking herself: "Why didn't I leave it alone?" A few days later the phone rang; it was she. "We don't know where this is going, but would you come out and talk with my husband and me? We had assumed that God was angry at us; maybe it's the other way around"

(Thomas Long, Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter, CSS Publishing Co., Lima, Ohio, © 1995).

God has shown us humble grace in Jesus Christ. We are called to respond to that humble grace with lives fully lived. Hear that call today with open minds and hearts, so that you might honor the Lord each day with a life fully lived to the glory of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.