



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

THE TWENTY-THIRD
SUNDAY AFTER
PENTECOST

OCTOBER 27, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

I was reflecting on Jo's sermon last Sunday on the way home from church and ruminating on the difficulty many of us may face in realizing that in our imperfection God still loves us and wants what is best for us. And then in the Letter to the Hebrews we heard this morning, we are reminded that "the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness."¹ Roughly translated into 21st century speak, the church ordains priests who are subject to weakness – just like everybody else. And, of course, we are.

Some of our foibles and failings are familiar to everyone by now after four years in our ministry here. And we have no incentive to advertise the rest. But if our two little Scottish terriers could talk, oh, would we ever be in trouble.

Jesus knew human beings were sinners. His apostles were sinners. His disciples were sinners. But what always seemed to gall him more than anything was hypocrisy. Those high priests who lauded their virtue over all, while ignoring the rules they set for everyone else. And, of course, we stand here every Sunday on the border of rank hypocrisy when we exhort our gathered congregations not to sin. Because we like everyone else are sinners.

But there are two points to be made here. First, our sinfulness does not detract from our sacramental authority. No matter our own human weaknesses and shortcomings, even as priests, when we invoke the Holy Spirit to sanctify the bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist, when we pronounce God's forgiveness in the absolution, when we invoke God's blessing as we conclude the service, and when we anoint and lay hands on the afflicted, none of those actions is tainted or invalidated by our sinfulness.

Now in cases of notorious and highly inappropriate behavior, the Church does have disciplinary procedures that may result in our being temporarily or permanently restricted from exercising our priestly functions, just as we may deny communion to an unrepentant person known to us to be living a notoriously evil life or to those who have done wrong to their neighbors and are a scandal to other members of the congregation.²

¹ Hebrews 7:28 (NRSV).

² BCP at 409.

But the other side of the coin is this. Just as our authority is not diminished by our sinfulness, the respect due our office is equally undiminished. Our oft-quoted theologian Frederick Buechner says it as well as it can be said:

Reverend means "to be revered." Ministers are not to be revered for who they are in themselves, but for who it is they represent, just as the Spanish ambassador is seated at the hostess's right not because of his *beaux yeux*, [not because of his beautiful eyes] but because he represents the king.

Parishioners and priests may disagree. Parishioners may be aggravated by their priests. In fact, parishioners need not even like their priests. But they must respect them. Because whatever disrespect or dishonor one shows to a priest, that disrespect conveys to the entire priesthood and ultimately to Christ whom we as priests represent.

Happily, your love and support for us here is palpable and beyond doubt or question. But we are a small community in a small town, and walls have ears. Actually, we have a security system with cameras throughout our premises that actually does hear...and records it. And is readily available for us to see and hear anytime we have nothing better to do. Just sayin'.

Let me digress to share that that cuts both ways. Some time back in a parish far enough away, Jo and I were in the church sanctuary discerning how to properly comply with the then COVID protocols required by the diocese. It, too, was monitored by a security system. It became one of those discussions that send the dogs running for cover. And one of those moments that require parishioners to respect the priest as a priest in God's one, holy, and apostolic church, even if not so much for a moment as a human being and purported follower of Christ. But, again, our human mistakes, missteps, foibles, and fumbles take nothing away from the position and authority of priests and the respect that commands.

But back to the letter to the Hebrews, which describes how the world changed when God walked among us in the person of Jesus Christ. The role of a priest always in essence has been as intermediary between God and his people, his children. We all know the Jews had priests and high priests and scribes who staffed the Temple. But they were human beings. They were sinners, and they were mortal.

But, Jesus, as fully human and fully divine is the perfect intermediary. In his resurrection, he conquered death. And as a human being, he actually has walked a mile in our shoes. Jesus also speaks to God not only as human, as

one of us, but also as divine. Jesus can represent us to God, just as Jesus revealed and represents God to us.

And this is what the author of the letter to the Hebrews understands and wants us to appreciate. Religion has its very human priests, but in Jesus we have a priest who is holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. In the vernacular, Jesus has “street cred” in heaven.

Think of it this way. In a sense, when we sin, we need to lawyer up, and Christ is our advocate. Remember the clerks of the Sanhedrin, who sat on the right and on the left. And the clerk on the right announced the verdicts of innocence and acquittal. And where does Jesus sit?

In a moment, we will remember when we recite the Nicene Creed. Jesus, we profess, “ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” At the right hand. Where, like the clerk of the Sanhedrin, he will pronounce our innocence to God. Jesus is our Perry Mason – for younger souls, Perry Mason was a television defense attorney. He never lost a case. His clients invariably seemed guilty, but always were acquitted.

Imagine Jesus arguing, “Yes, I know Jim uses your name in vain occasionally, but let me tell you, it is tough being human. I’ve been there, you know I have. And, believe me, it’s sometimes really tough getting your expectations across to them. You know how hard I tried. You gave them my example, You left them the Holy Spirit in their hearts to draw them back to you. But you created them. You know how they are. Give him a break. Trust your creation. Trust what you created.”

For those too young to remember Perry Mason, let me illustrate this with a line from a slightly more recent animated feature film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. It won three Academy Awards.³

Jessica Rabbit, who was voiced by Kathleen Turner, says, “You don't know how hard it is being a woman looking the way I do.” To which Eddie Valiant, voiced by Bob Hoskins, responds, “You don't know how hard it is being a man looking at a woman looking the way you do.” To which Jessica Rabbit says, “I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way.”⁴

Sometimes, we just need Jesus to remind our father in heaven that we’re not bad, we’re just drawn that way. And like no other priest, past, present, or to come, Jesus is just the person to do it.

³ *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096438/awards/?ref=tt_awd (accessed October 26, 2024).

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