

In our reading today, Jesus is identified as a priest in the order of Melchizedek. In ancient times, Israel was comprised of 12 tribes. The Levitical priests, who served in the Temple, came from the tribes of Aaron, Levi, and Zadok. The point of this section of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is superior to the Levitical priests. He’s not like them. He’s a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Just out of curiosity, by show of hands, how many of you are familiar with the story of Melchizedek? I suspected not too many hands would go up in the air for that one. Allow me to introduce you to his story, because he is biblical character everyone should know.

In order to make this introduction, we need to talk about the concept of priesthood. Putting aside our understandings and experiences with modern day Catholic priests, a priest is someone who mediates between God and humans. Priests work to accomplish God’s purposes in the world. They pray for people. They share the Word of God. They bless.

There’s a school of thought that Adam and Eve were the first priesthood. God created a garden called Eden. God places two humans in the garden to be the very image of God, to work together as one with God to tend the garden, in a sense, functioning as priests.

Unfortunately, the priestly humans were seduced by a serpent. They rebelled against God and were exiled from the garden. But that wasn’t the end of the story. The promise was made that one day a descendent will come and restore humanity as royal priests.

Fast-forward in the book of Genesis, God chooses another couple named Abraham and Sarah. God promises to give them a great number of descendants as well as all the blessings of Eden. But the blessing wouldn’t be just for them. The blessing would flow through their family out to all the nations. That makes Abraham’s family like a priesthood.

It turns out Abraham was not the promised one that would restore all of humanity as a royal priesthood, but when Abraham returned from a difficult battle and passed by the

city of Shalem, which we think is short for Jerusalem, a king comes out to meet him. We're told this king, who was also a priest, served the same God Abraham did.

We don't know where he came from, but he provided a great feast for Abraham and his men. He blessed Abraham and Abraham gave him one 10th of everything that he had. That King and priest was Melchizedek.

We know Melchizedek was a special priest, because he's mentioned in Psalm 110. It was a psalm recited at the enthronement of a King. It describes the majesty of the king sitting at the right hand of God. The enthroned king would sit at God's right hand, and God would say to the king, "You are priest forever in the order of Melchizedek."

The author of Hebrews wants us to know that Jesus was superior to the Levitical priesthood. On account of its human origins, the Levitical priesthood made mistakes. There's a story of Jesus turning over tables in the Temple. The Levitical priesthood sometimes got in the way of God's work.

Melchizedek didn't come from the tribe of Aaron, Levi, or Zadock. We don't know anything about his ancestors. It's almost like his origins are otherworldly, maybe divine. In fact, towards the end of Mark's gospel, the Levitical priests question Jesus. By what authority do you forgive sins, and heal, and restore people? That's our job. We come from line of Aaron, Levi, and Zadock."

Jesus answered, "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand in power." That's a reference to Psalm 110 in which God says to the king to be enthroned, "Sit at my right hand" and God also says, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

When I was being interviewed by the search committee here at First Parish, I relied on my credentials. I had a degree from the Boston University School of Theology. I was ordained in the United Church of Christ. I was a member of, and vetted by, the Fairfield West Association. We tend to rely on our credentials.

Jesus did not have the credentials of a Levitical priest. He did not come from the tribe of either Aaron, Levi, and Zadok. He was a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Not only is Jesus superior to the Levitical priests, but he did what Abraham could not do. He did what Moses couldn't do. He did what King David could not do.

The argument made by the author of Hebrews is that Jesus restores the relationship between God and humanity, thereby restoring humanity as a royal priesthood. Jesus is the one promised, after Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden, to restore humanity to its true vocation.

That has implications for each one of us! Our High Priest is Jesus. Our priesthood is not about human credentials. It doesn't matter to which tribe we are born. Our age doesn't matter. Any lack of theological training is no obstacle. In the order in which we serve, our baptism is our ordination. Jesus is our High Priest and he is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

You might have come to worship today, because you like the music here at First Parish. Your hope may have been to fly under the radar. You don't want to get too involved. You don't want to be too invested in the church's ministry. But I want to suggest that to follow Jesus is to be part of a priesthood.

In this place, we don't leave ministry up to the pastors. Every one of us is to work with God to tend to the needs of the world, to pray for and with others, to feed people as Jesus did, to offer forgiveness as Jesus did, to restore people to the community as Jesus did.

I think this idea is best expressed in the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers. The Priesthood of all Believers was one of the ideas that drove the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. Before the Reformation, it was thought that the grace of God could only be administered by an ordained priest. You would go to the priest to confess your sin and receive absolution. The priests alone had access to the Bible.

When the grace of God can only be administered through the clergy, it gives clerics an awful lot of power. You may be familiar with the term "indulgences." Prior to the Protestant Reformation, the teaching, which is not found in the Bible, was that when a person died, they went to purgatory, a holding area between earth and heaven. They couldn't escape and find their way into heaven until the clergy prayed for them. How did you get a priest to pray for you or your loved one? You paid. One priest actually became famous for a jingle. It went "as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

In the 1500s, a lot of people rejected that kind of thing. The reformers rejected this notion that the grace of God has to be administered through ordained clergy. The

reformers argued that changing a baby's diaper is a holy task. They taught that feeding the poor was just as holy an activity as preaching a sermon. Teaching women and children to read, making the words of the Bible available to everyone was a holy vocation.

The doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers means that your hands and your words are for blessing others. It means it's your task to make your neighbor in the pew feel welcome. It's your task to pray for and with other people. It's your task to build up the church. Whether you operate the livestream, or set up for coffee hour, or support the Sunday school program, or sing in the choir, what you do on Sunday morning is just as holy, as what I do on Sunday morning.

But don't take my word for it. The New Testament letter of 1 Peter is thought to be a letter that was circulated among a series of Christian communities in the last quarter of the first century. Speaking to ordinary people, the author wrote, "But 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" (1 Peter 2:9).

Do me a favor. Pull out the insert from your worship bulletin. Look at the page with this week's calendar of events and go to the bottom. Who does it say are the ministers at First Parish Church? It says: "All the members of the congregation."

You have all the credentials for ministry Melchizedek had. In hundreds of years, the people sitting in these pews might not know your story, just like most of us didn't know Melchizedek's story.

But we're members of a royal priesthood and we have a mighty High Priest. He's not like any other priest. His credentials are not of human origin. He was designated by God a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.