

Introduction:

Growing up, my friends and I used to play a game together called “mercy.” In “mercy” two people would put their palms together and interlock their fingers. On “go,” each player would try to bend the others hands backwards until it hurt so that the other player would cry “mercy,” at which point the game would be over. The object, really, was to be stronger than the other person and maybe to inflict a little bit of physical games. I don’t know how many of you are familiar with this game; it’s always amazing to me what things kids can come up with in order to hurt each other.

I had no concept of the word “mercy” when we played this game. I had never heard it before, didn’t know what it meant, except that when you yelled it the other person stopped. But if you think about the mechanics of the game applied to the word “mercy” it kind of makes sense: A stronger person who has the potential of hurting a weaker person choosing to relent. Google defines mercy as “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm.”

Today we are going to be talking about God’s mercy, that God in his infinite love decided that even though we are all sinners, deserving of death, he would be merciful on us and provide a way for us to eternal life through His son Jesus Christ.

God’s mercy comes through Jesus being established as our new High Priest, which is really a continuation of what the author of Hebrews has been doing in the Scripture all along. In the last couple of chapters, the author has gone through great lengths to establish Jesus’ authority and position. He began by proving that Jesus is greater than the angels. Then, he showed how Jesus is greater than Moses, possibly the most important ancestor in Hebrew History. In our Scripture this morning the author wants to prove that Jesus’ authority is greater than Aaron and the High Priests, and more importantly wants to establish Jesus as our new High Priest.

In order to understand what it means for Jesus to be our high priest, we are going to first look at the qualifications of the Israelite high priest, all of which Jesus mirrors. Then we will see how Jesus not only mirrors these qualifications, but is ultimately superior to the Israelite high priests. After that, we will discover that it is through Jesus our high priest that we receive God’s mercy.

But before I begin, I want to say something about the book of Hebrews. I love the book of Hebrews because it gives us such a rich insight into the character of Jesus. However, it is a very difficult book to fully grasp as Gentile, protestant Christians. First of all, it was clearly written to Jewish-Christians deeply rooted in their history, and many of the things said would have been extremely challenging for them to hear. Jesus higher than angels? Than Moses the author of the faith? Than Aaron, the direct line to God? How could that be? For us, we don’t have those same connections, so it can be more difficult to really grasp the audacity and importance of what’s being said. Second of all, the author uses common Jewish practices, specifically those of sacrificial rituals, to relate to the audience what it is that Jesus’ life and death does for us. We don’t have those same practices. We don’t really understand those

practices, and unless you are well versed in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, you don't necessarily even know what those practices are.

So it may feel, at times, that listening to these Scriptures is more like a boring history lesson than something that actually has meaning in your life. I would encourage you first to recognize that as a part of the Church of Jesus Christ, we are inheritors of the Israelite History, and their lives and faith can offer great guidance to us in our lives and faith. Secondly, I would encourage you to put yourselves in their shoes and consider what life might have been like to follow these sacrificial laws before Jesus, and how challenging and freeing it would be to shed these sacrificial laws after Jesus.

So, what did it mean to be a High Priest in Israelite religious culture?

Qualifications of the High Priest: One of the primary roles of the priests was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people, and the most important time he did this was on the Day of Atonement. Atonement, in the Biblical sense, had to do with God forgiving sins through the giving of ritual animal sacrifices. The consequences of the peoples sins, as established by God from the time that Adam and Eve took and ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, is death. God, wanting to make a way for his people back to him, created a sacrifice system by which the death of animals would take upon itself the guilt of the people. The high priest was the most important person in the tribe of Israel because it was only through him that the people could be made right with God. What then were the qualifications of a high priest?

Empathetic: Because he comes from the people and because he is sinful himself, he can offer genuine mercy from a real understanding of what they are/have/will go through.

Hebrews 5:2-3 ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

Called by God: High Priests were called by God. Aaron was originally called by God to be Moses' companion to Pharaoh in Egypt, and then he and all of his descendants were delegated as priests, as chosen by God.

Hebrews 5:4 ⁴ And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.

Intercessor (go-between) between people and God: The High Priest functioned as the intercessor between the people of Israel and God. He did this through prayers and petitions, through interpretation and teaching of the law, and most importantly through sacrifice.

Hebrews 5:1-Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins

Day of Atonement: Leviticus 16: One of the most important holidays to the Israelite people was the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. It was on this day each year that the high priest offered a sacrifice on

behalf of all of the people of Israel for the forgiveness of their sins in order to make them right with God. Leviticus 16 outlines what the priest was to do on this day.

i. High Priest makes atonement for himself and his family-slaughters a bull.

ii. Makes atonement for Tabernacle using bull's blood.

iii. High Priest makes atonement for the people-slaughters a goat.

iv. High Priest confers sin to the scape-goat, sends it out into the wilderness.

+Understanding OT Biblical atonement, even though it's not something we practice today, is extremely important because Jesus became the substitute for the goats in God's ultimate atonement plan for the world.

Transition: The problem with the priestly sacrificial system was that it was always temporary. Each and every time a person sinned they became guilty again, and again took upon themselves the consequence of death. The only way to get out of that consequence was to transfer that guilt to another living creature. And this cycle of sin and sacrifice happened over and over again for the people of Israel, returning to the high priest to make atonement for them. But God was not content with this solution; he wanted to create a bridge, once and for all, between Him and his people and over the river of sin and death. And so he sent Jesus to be the ultimate and final High Priest.

+So then, what does it mean for Jesus to be our high priest? As I said earlier, the author of Hebrews outlines how Jesus' qualifications mirror those of the Aaronic High Priest but are ultimately far superior.

1) Qualifications of Jesus the High Priest:

Empathetic: We do not worship a distant man-in-the-clouds God that is so powerful that he never felt human pain or suffering, never knew what it meant to struggle against the temptation of sin. We worship a God who loves us so much that he would condescend his own greatness in order to be with us, to experience what we experience, to show us a different way, so that we might be reconciled back to Him. Jesus, as our high priest, can fully empathize with the human struggle to resist sin and its monstrous pull. However, Jesus is superior to the high priests, because although he was tempted by sin, he never gave into it.

Hebrews 4:15 ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.*

Called by God-Like the High Priests, Jesus did not assert himself into the role of High Priest, but rather God called Him into that role, and in His obedience he followed. However, Jesus was far superior because he was not only called into this role, but God also called Him His Son, a distinction and honor that no other high priest was ever given.

Hebrews 5:5 *In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."*

Intercessor (go-between) between people and God: Jesus, like the priests, prayed to God on our behalf, petitioned God for mercy for us. But unlike the priests, he was both the high priest and the sacrifice.

Hebrews 5:7-10 ⁷ *During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.* ⁸ *Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered* ⁹ *and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him* ¹⁰ *and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.*

Each and every year, the high priest would have to offer a sacrifice on behalf of himself, his family, the holy place, and the people. And until Jesus came, this practice would need to go on until the end of time. Though the high priests were empathetic, called, and intercessors, they could never fully absolve the people of their sins. Jesus, on the other hand became not only the perfect priest, but also the perfect sacrifice. And his blood had the power to wash away the sin of His people forever.

"Here we are coming to closer grips with the great characteristic conception of Hebrews-that of Jesus as the perfect high priest. His task is to bring the voice of God to man and to usher men into the presence of God. The high priest at one and the same time must perfectly know man and God. That is what this epistle claims for Jesus." -William Barclay

So, if Jesus is our High Priest, empathetic, called by God and our intercessor, what is it that He does for us as high Priest?

What does Jesus our High Priest offer us? MERCY

Hebrews 4:16 ¹⁶ *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Christ, as our high priest, offers us the opportunity to receive the mercy he gives us through his sacrifice. Through his mercy, though we are deserving of death, we may receive forgiveness for our sins forever. Pope Benedict XVI, as quoted by the current Pope Francis, said that:

"Mercy is in reality the core of the Gospel message; it is the name of God himself, the face with which he revealed himself in the Old Testament and fully in Jesus Christ, incarnation of Creative and Redemptive Love. This love of mercy also illuminates the face of the Church, and is manifested through the Sacraments, in particular that of the Reconciliation, as well as in works of charity, both of community and individuals. Everything that the Church says and does shows that God has mercy for man."

Every one of us is in need of God's mercy; we all live less than perfect lives, driven too often by our sinful nature that tells us to do wrong even when we want to do right. No matter how long or short you have been in the church, whether you are a concrete worker, doctor, or pastor, you need God's mercy. There

is a reason that the High Priest, who if any Israelite could possibly have been sinless, it would have been him, had to offer a sacrifice on behalf of himself: He was a sinner too!

One of the reasons that I deeply respect Pope Francis, the new pope of the Catholic Church, is because of His deep, public humility. He shared with an interviewer that while visiting a group of prisoners, he spent time reflecting on how he was no better than they, how he just as much deserved to be on the other side of those bars! This isn't to say that he did anything illegal, but rather it was a recognition that his sinfulness and their sinfulness put them all in the same position before God; sinners in need of mercy.

So, how do we who have received God's great mercy respond?

Our Response: Because Jesus offers us mercy, we are to offer mercy to others.

I occasionally listen to NPR, hoping that it might make me more culturally aware. The other night I was scanning through channels and I tuned in to an interview with a Professor at a Dominican University, discussing Pope Francis' declaration of a Year of Jubilee from December 2015 to December 2016, focused on mercy. In this year of mercy, Pope Francis hopes for the church to meditate on Christ's mercy for us and to practice His acts of mercy in the world, by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, counseling the doubtful, comforting the afflicted, forgiving sins, etc. In his papal bull announcing this year of Jubilee, Francis wrote,

"It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples."

Along with this declaration, an interview with Pope Francis about his understanding of God's mercy was released in book form called "The Name of God is Mercy." I downloaded the book for my kindle and have been eagerly devouring it. Francis' understanding of God's mercy is a breath of fresh air in a world bent on unforgiving justice. And what's awesome is that throughout the interview, he shares stories of his life and people he encountered who really helped to shape his understanding of the breadth of God's mercy. He tells the story of a priest he knew that had the role of hearing the confessions of other priests. This priest had a reputation for being extremely forgiving, perhaps even too forgiving and not punitive enough to those who confessed their sins to him. When Francis asked him about this, Enrico Pozzoli replied:

'Lord, forgive me if I have forgiven too much. But you're the one who gave me the bad example!' "

Where do we learn the most about mercy? We learn from God, who is merciful to us in spite of the fact that we will again and again let Him down.

The theme Scripture for the Year of Mercy is **Luke 6:36**: "Be merciful just as your father is merciful." This is God's calling to us. In his mercy, he gave us a High Priest, Jesus Christ, to die on behalf of our sins

that we might be forgiven and return to God. What right, then, do we have to deny mercy to others? While man's mercy may have limits, God's mercy is limitless.

Remember our working definition of mercy: "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm."

In what ways have you shown mercy to those over whom you hold some kind of power? In what ways have you denied mercy? How can we as a church learn to better live into the mercy that God has called us to?

I want to close with one final quote from Pope Francis in "The Name of God is Mercy."

To follow the way of the Lord, the Church is called on to pour its mercy over all those who recognize themselves as sinners, who assume responsibility for the evil they have committed, and who feel in need of forgiveness. The Church does not exist to condemn people but to bring about an encounter with the visceral love of God's mercy. I often say that in order for this to happen, it is necessary to go out: to go out from the church and the parishes, to go outside and look for people where they live, where they suffer, and where they hope.