

Fourth Sunday after Trinity: Romans 12:9–21

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Christians are priests in a priesthood. You are all priests, baptized into the royal priesthood of Jesus Christ. Your old self has been crucified and buried with Christ. Your new self has been raised and glorified with Christ. You have lost your life to Christ, and so you have gained your life forever. You no longer live, but Christ lives in you. You have the mind and the will of Christ. And even though your old self, the “old Adam,” what the apostle Paul calls your “flesh,” resists and struggles against it, your identity is not with the Flesh but with the Spirit, not as sinner but as saint. You may call yourself a poor, miserable, sinner, and rightly so. But God in Christ declares you to be a saint, holy and blameless, covered in the righteousness of Christ. You’re priests – born, anointed, washed, consecrated, holy.

Priesthood happens in a real, fallen, and broken world where your best efforts often go unappreciated and unrecognized and where much of it lies hidden behind day to day drudgery. It’s easy to lose your bearings and to forget who you are in the midst of all the noise that surrounds us, all the demands and expectations that are heaped upon us, all the mixed and conflicting signals the world puts out that get scrambled in our heads to the point where we don’t really know who we are anymore, and so we let the world, the culture, the marketing people define us and tell us who we are.

Priests need to have a vision of what their priesthood looks like, and the apostle Paul gives us such a vision this morning, a description of what the life of the baptized looks like in the world. He begins with a broad description that gets lost in translation. Our translation has it all in the form of imperatives, which make them sound more like commands and less like the description that they are. So permit me to recast them a bit so we catch it. This is what life in the priesthood of Christ looks like:

Loving unhypocritically; hating the evil, clinging to the good. Loving one another with brotherly affection; outdoing one another in showing honor. Never flagging in zeal, being aglow with the Spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in your hope, enduring tribulation with patience, persevering in prayer.

That's closer to the way Paul says it. He's speaking to the new man here, the new you in Christ, and describing what a priest to God looks like. You could pick each one and look at it, but I think it's better here to just take in the composite picture that these words paint. Who wouldn't want this? Isn't this what all the self-improvement, self-help, self-oriented spirituality is trying to achieve? Isn't this a description of how you would like to be?

Don't you want to love openly and honestly without hiding behind some mask? Don't you want to hate evil and cling to good? Wouldn't you like to love and be loved by those around you with brotherly affection? Wouldn't it be great if we tried to outdo each other in showing honor, kind of like two Japanese men trying to out-bow one another? Can you imagine our congregation if we never got tired, were always aglow with the Spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in our hope, enduring trial and tribulation with patience? Don't you want to be constant and persevering in your prayer? Of course you do! And of course that's what we all want!

This is how we already are in Christ. We are those things because Christ Himself is all of that. And the only reason we don't see more of that going on in our own lives and in our life together is that this old Adam of ours keeps getting in the way – our pride, our ego, our self-centeredness – it all gets in the way of who we really are in Christ. And so we need this constant reminder before our eyes as those who have been joined to Christ in His death and life. This is what the Christ-life looks like. And this is what your life looks like in Christ.

When we hear these things not as imperative prescriptions but as declarative descriptions, we are being reminded of a very important reality: these things are ours now. They correspond to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are not governed by the Law and the Law cannot produce these things. You can't reach deep down and conjure up unhypocritical love and unflagging zeal and patience in tribulation. They are there because God is at work in you, both to will and to do His good pleasure.

Baptized priests have an infinite storehouse of these virtues available to them. Perhaps you have noticed this on some occasion when you were really stretched in some way, when your faith in Christ was really challenged in some manner, and you actually met the challenge and couldn't quite explain how you did it. I've heard people say that. "I don't know how I made it through that thing, but I did." And it's precisely in those moments that you realize there is something going on that is far bigger than you, and the spiritual resources available to you as

a baptized believer are far greater than we generally think. I'm afraid that far too often, we are like someone who has millions of dollars but never visits the ATM machine and is always walking around with empty pockets. The apostle Paul could say, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me." He can say that because he knows that in Christ he has an infinite storehouse of spiritual resources at his disposal.

So don't ever say, "I can't love" or "I can't forgive" someone. You may as well admit it. You don't want to love and don't feel like forgiving that person. And you need to recognize that this is the old you in Adam talking, that sin-riddled self-centered old Adam who wants everything his way and who gets in the way of your priesthood.

You are priests to God in Christ. Priests bless their neighbor, even when their neighbor is persecuting them. This is rather unique to a priest of Christ. Christ Himself blessed those who persecuted Him and prayed for those who crucified Him. "Bless and do not curse them." Cursing comes easy to the old Adam. It is far easier to say "Damn you" than to say "bless you," especially when that person is your enemy. The old Adam wants revenge, he wants his pound of flesh. But the new man in Christ simply says "Leave it to God. Let Him sort it out."

Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. "As far as it depends on you." That's realistic. There are those who love turmoil and agitation, who prefer war rather than peace, who like to stir up trouble and division. And that's at work in each of us too. Don't be numbered among them. You are priests to the King of peace, the One who reconciled all things, including you, to the Father, the One who made peace by His blood.

It's easier to deal with pollution by dilution. Eliminating evil from this world would involve eliminating ourselves. We aren't competent to sort the weeds from the wheat, and as fascinated as we are by "good and evil," we are not in a position to purify the good. Refining is God's business not ours. The priest to God in Christ is not about the business of purifying the world or ridding society of evil. The priest of Christ deals with the pollution of evil by diluting it with good. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him drink. In effect, you are heaping burning coals upon his head, but the fire is from God and it's a refining fire. God doesn't wish to destroy your enemy; He wants to save him.

Don't be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good. Evil is not something in and of itself that you can fight against. Evil is the perversion of good; it is good used against God. If we wanted to rid the world of evildoers, we would have to rid the world of ourselves. If we tried to rid the world of evil, there would be no world left. When we return evil for evil, we multiply evil. But when we return good for evil, when we bless instead of curse, when we forgive instead of take revenge, when we extend the hand in blessing, we're doing God's work according to His agenda.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself and doesn't count their sins against them. He has made us His ambassadors to the world and the church is His embassy. God is making His appeal to the world through His priesthood, through you. And the message of His ambassadors is this: God is at peace with you in Christ. Now you be at peace with God. God made Christ on the cross our sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God.

You are priests to God in Christ. You are Christ to your neighbor and to the world around you. Not in the sense of dying for the world. Christ alone does that. But in the sense of blessing the world. You have nothing to lose. You're declared dead already, and alive to God in Christ. The dead have nothing to lose in this life. And you already have eternal life and every spiritual blessing in Christ. That's your priestly freedom to bless as one blessed by God.

In the Name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Romans 12:9-21 / Proper 17A / 31 August 2014", posted 2014-08-31 (<https://htlcms.org/2014/08/romans-129-21-proper-17a-31-august-2014/>).