

Priesthood of All Believers: Part 1

King of Glory Lutheran Church

Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry

August 31-September 1, 2024

Year B: James 1: 17-27, Psalm 71:1-6,17-18

<sup>17</sup> Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

<sup>19</sup> You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, <sup>20</sup> for human anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup> Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup> For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup> But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

<sup>26</sup> If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

<sup>1</sup>In you, O LORD, I take refuge;  
let me never be put to shame.

Psalm 71

<sup>2</sup>In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;  
incline your ear to me and save me.

<sup>3</sup>Be to me a rock of refuge,  
a strong fortress, to save me,  
for you are my rock and my fortress.

<sup>4</sup>Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,  
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

<sup>5</sup>For you, O LORD, are my hope,  
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

<sup>6</sup>Upon you I have leaned from my birth;  
it was you who took me from my mother's womb.  
My praise is continually of you.

<sup>17</sup>O God, from my youth you have taught me,  
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

<sup>18</sup>So even to old age and gray hairs,  
O God, do not forsake me,  
until I proclaim your might  
to all the generations to come.

God's grace and peace to you this day through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

This sermon begins a two-part series on what Martin Luther calls "The Priesthood of all Believers." In 1520, Martin Luther began preaching that laymen and laywomen did not exist to serve the 'higher' calling of the clergy (priests and bishops). Indeed, all people regardless of their class, were of the same stature simply based upon their baptisms.

Through baptism, each person knew what it meant to obey God and serve those God had put around him or her. There was no 'higher' ethic in being a monk, priest, nun or bishop. There was no 'lower' ethic in being a peasant or potter. All Christians were of the same status. As it reads in 1 Peter 2:9, "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."

For Luther, clergy have a specific calling in ministering to God's people within the church. Laity have a specific calling to minister to God's people outside the church in all the places and spaces lay people found themselves; as fathers and mothers, as teachers, or doctors, as lawyers or engineers, as neighbor or custodian, or author.

This teaching leveled the playing field between priests and people. It empowered the common people of the day to believe they were just as important to God's work in the world as those they saw wearing robes up on the altar. As Lutherans today, we believe the same. If this is a new thought to you, I'm inviting you to believe the same.

Case in point. A pastor asked the children why he wore the white plastic collar around his neck. One boy answered, "It repels fleas and ticks for a year."

Does this call from God to share the love of Jesus – to be priests wherever we are, whatever we are doing – does this call end at a certain age? Psalm 71, which we read responsively indicates that perhaps this song was written by a senior. Verse 9 and verse 18, reference old age and gray hairs.

It's clear from this Psalm that the author has led a long life, not without its challenges. The 'enemies' are not described, only to say they've been present. Yet, the psalmist declares the Lord his hope, his rock, his teacher. God has been this person's teacher from youth. Therefore, while sitting in his rocking chair and walking to the store with his cane, it is his calling to yet, 'proclaim your wondrous deeds.' Each stanza of this psalm ends with declarations of praise which 'do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come.' (verse 18).

In June, Vivian Davila was elected Bishop of the Caribbean Synod. It was not a position Dávila expected to be in at this stage of her vocation. She has served as pastor of Iglesia Evangélica Luterana Sion in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, for 19 years. "I had told my congregation in early summer that I was planning on retiring in September, so we were moving toward that," she said. Being considered for bishop "never entered my mind," she said. "I had an idea of what was required and what our needs were. But I never thought that that would be my task." When her name was entered on the ballot for bishop, she prayerfully considered it. "And then I thought, 'Well, let God be God,'" she said.

<https://www.livinglutheran.org/2024/08/a-ministry-of-revitalization/> A clergywoman continuing to proclaim God's goodness well into her years of white hair.

Another faithful ELCA couple, retired seniors, for years has offered, 'Family Camp' at their ranch for their grandchildren. Parents are not welcome. Only all nine grandchildren. Together with grandma and grandpa, they spend a week fishing, playing games, learning Bible stories, making smores around the camp fire, singing crazy church camp songs and sleeping out under the stars.

One example, a female priest. The other, grandparent priests. Both proclaiming God's love to future generations.

To find your congregation of listeners, simply look around at your spheres of influence. Like the tribes we were talking about last weekend: your family, your neighbors, your neighbors kids. You might not have a workplace anymore, but your grandchildren need to hear about Jesus. For his highschool graduation, one of the gifts I gave my nephew was a list of all my favorite Bible verses. I had underlined them in his Bible, too. He not only holds the Good News of Jesus Christ, but also the core of my theology in his own Bible.

*In 'Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith', Anne Lamott writes: "It's funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox full*

of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty bent old tools — friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty — and said ‘do the best you can with these, they will have to do’. And mostly, against all odds, they do.”<sup>i</sup>

We’ve all said, growing old is not for sissies. Another way to say it, ‘The Lord saves the hardest part for last.’<sup>ii</sup> But for any age person, to remember we are all part of the priesthood of believers with the tools of friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty we’ll make it. God is not done with you, or done with me yet. This indelible and invisible cross that graces our foreheads doesn’t fade with overuse. To the contrary, perhaps it only shines more brightly, the more we tell the goodness of the Lord.

James says, ‘Don’t just be hearers of the Word, be doers of the Word.’ For those of us with gray hairs, I know we’ve served this congregation or others for many a year. We might feel our time of ‘doing’ service is over. Luther and the Psalmist would voice to the contrary. In your spheres of influence, to your ability, your call extends beyond one hour of worship each weekend. Our call extends beyond only hearing the Word.

When we return to indoor worship on September 15<sup>th</sup>, we will have a new sign-in sheet called “Connections.” There will be a line for ministry volunteer opportunities. I’m challenging each of us, no matter our age, to a short-term volunteer ministry regularly. Perhaps its Bible study. That’s a ministry! Maybe it’s ushering once every six weeks. Serving on the altar guild, or learning the sound board. Coming with me to a youth event to encourage young people. Giving a children’s sermon. The church needs us. Our families need us. We are all ‘baptized priests’ called to proclaim God’s goodness through word and deed.

Why? Because it’s a great day to be the Church! And we are the priesthood of all believers! Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lamott, Anne. Travelling Mercies; Thoughts on Faith. 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-psalm-711-6-2>