

## Scripture

### Hebrews 7:23–28

23 Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

26 For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

## Sermon:

As the seasons change and it gets colder outside I find myself repeating a certain pattern of behaviour – closing windows. That in itself isn't odd or strange; I think it's a fairly normal reaction as the mercury drops, especially once the heat is turned on and the warm air inside becomes something that I have to pay for.

Where it starts getting strange is that on some days I close the same window several times. I feel a chill, so I close the kitchen window, then the dining room. I wander through the house closing bedroom and change-room windows, then settle into a chair somewhere.

Some time later, again I feel a chill, so I get up to investigate. I go and close the kitchen window, then the dining room. I wander through the house and close the bedroom windows, the change-room, the basement. Again.

Some days this routine repeats itself several times. Now, it's not that I'm going crazy, it's that Kyoungsoo thinks differently than I do. While I am trying to keep the cool air outside, Kyoungsoo considers the chill in the air an invitation to air out the house. Perhaps Noah and I smell a little worse than I'm aware and the house needs it – I don't know.

What I do know is that we are working at cross purposes. We're doing a dance in which we follow each other around the house, opening and closing windows until we finally fall into bed in the evening exhausted and confounded.

A great deal of energy has been expended, along with some frustration, and nothing has really been accomplished. This particular example is fairly trivial – nothing is really being won or lost here – there is nothing significant at stake. But this scenario of doing the same thing over and over again to no effect is something that we see played out in many areas of our lives all too often.

It can be a very serious problem, leading us to become stuck repeating the same behaviours, hoping against hope that somehow this time will be different. Every one of us knows that feeling. And it's not just us. Creation itself groans because it has been subjected to futility, futility being that same cycle of effort without effect, expenditure without result.

Paul writes that all of creation, including ourselves, are in bondage to this deadly cycle; that on our own we are unable to break free. Without God we are without hope.

The writer of Hebrews also makes this point. He was looking back over generations of priests and comparing them to Jesus, who is our high priest, the only one able to make an effective intercession for us. He comes to the same conclusion, namely that our own efforts are doomed to frustration and that without Jesus we have no hope to break the cycles that we are caught in.

The author of Hebrews writes 'the former priests,' that is, all the priests before Jesus, 'were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office.' Quite simply, the author is saying that the previous priests were not terribly effective in the long run because they kept dying. Death can be a significant handicap to ministry.

Downstairs in the welcome area are pictures of the past ministers of St. Paul's. Let me quickly point out that not all of them are dead – there are a few pictures of people we still know and love – but most of them are no longer with us.

This is a humbling thought for me. In the long run - thinking in terms of decades - between myself, Reverend Shaw, Reverend Cruickshank, Reverend Bailey – it makes little difference. We each take our turns loving and feeding this congregation, and we each bring our own particular gifts and liabilities with us, but eventually our time will be over and another will take our place. Without intending to denigrate at all any of those who have come before me, ultimately we are interchangeable. Our ministries and our intercessions have limited scope because we ourselves are limited beings.

Not so with Jesus. While priests and ministers come and go, Christ holds his priesthood permanently. Jesus always has been, and always will be. Jesus is able to save those who approach God through him for all time, because he is always alive to make intercession for them. I know God promises eternal life to us, but there is a permanence to Jesus that is substantively different that what belongs to us. This sets Jesus apart as the priest to end all priests.

There is something else that the writer of Hebrews notes about the way that priests work. He writes of the priests of old sacrificing day after day. This brings us back to the bondage and futility that I spoke of earlier; of opening and closing windows, doing the same things over and over again to no effect.

God instructed the priests to sacrifice on behalf of the people; this is why they did the things they did. One of the reasons for these sacrifices was to cover the sins of the people. It's important to be clear on this point; the sacrifices did not *cleanse* the people from sin, they *covered* the sin. The Hebrew word used is *kaphar* which is the same word used in Genesis to describe Noah covering the ark with pitch. It's a pasting over top.

We see this covering after the very first sin when God covered Adam and Eve's guilt and shame with the skins of animals killed for that very purpose.

The problem with animal sacrifice is that it only provided temporary relief for persistent problems. It didn't solve the problem fully. This is why Paul wrote that 'if righteousness [i.e., being right with God — being forgiven] is accomplished through the law [which is sacrifice], then Christ died for nothing.' If sacrifice was already an effective remedy for sin, then there would be no need for Jesus to come to earth at all, much less die.

Instead, these sacrifices serve as a constant reminder of the presence and effect of sin; whenever we sin, something dies. Day after day, repeated sacrifices by ever changing ranks of priests reflected the persistent nature of our sin, of the death that results from our inability to follow God's law of love.

In living this cycle we discover that we are trapped in sin, since the consequences of our actions never go away. Intercession must be made again and again because whatever covering or relief we gain through animal sacrifice can only be temporary. In this closed system we remain bound by our past actions; there is no real possibility of transformation, and therefore there can be no permanent release, no forgiveness, and therefore no transformation.

If sin can only be covered and never removed, then we would be bound forever by the consequences of a single action. The effect of unforgiven sin is to cripple us by trapping us forever in the past, both the perpetrators and the victims. Victims of sin live with fear, resentment, scars – they are forever bound to their victimizer by feelings of trauma.

The victimizers are bound by guilt and issues of self-worth as sinners. Sin creates a poisoned relationship between victim and victimizer, and that becomes bondage. Both parties have to carry the effects of that sin around with them and no amount of covering up will ever change that. Sacrifices cannot heal those wounds.

This is why we need our permanent priest who does not sacrifice innocent animals in an act that can't truly take away our sin. Jesus, our eternal priest, sacrificed himself as a way of breaking the cycle of sin.

Most of us are sinned against, and we sin against others. That is the way of things here on earth. Not so with Jesus. He was sinned against, but he chose not to sin in response. He took our sin upon himself without passing it along to anyone else.

What is more, he forgave those who sinned against him. He forgave them as they were killing him, and he forgave them when he was resurrected in victory. Forgiveness has a power that animal sacrifice never did.

Animal sacrifice attempted to put our sin onto another creature; to send it away out of sight. Forgiveness doesn't really factor into it.

What makes Jesus' sacrifice effective is that Jesus didn't put our sins on some animal, he took our sins upon himself; he took the whipping, the mocking, the betrayal, the murder. And the same Jesus who bore those sins pronounced forgiveness. This part is important. Forgiveness comes from the one whom we have sinned against.

A goat can't forgive you. A ram can't forgive you. Thinking that God would forgive us because we hide behind a bloody pelt seems foolish. The bloody pelt only serves to remind us that we do in fact have blood on our hands. We can only be forgiven by the one whom we have sinned against.

That forgiveness sets us free. Both victim and victimizer. Through forgiveness we find that we are no longer bound into our poisoned relationships, we are no longer defined only by our past trespasses.

We are able to let go of past pains – forgiveness is not saying that past transgressions are ok, or that they don't matter. They do. But forgiveness is a declaration of freedom, saying that we refuse to be forever tied to the horrible acts of another, that we refuse to continue to be victimized by that past crime.

When we seek forgiveness for ourselves through honest and sincere repentance, we also gain a freedom – the freedom to make new choices. Just because we have sinned in the past does not mean that we are forever doomed to make that same choice. We all know the dangers of labelling kids in school as troublemakers – often they never outgrow the label because they think that's all that they are. The same is true of us as adults.

Forgiveness teaches us that we don't have to continue to be troublemakers, liars, or thieves. We can be transformed by the love of Jesus and become kingdom ambassadors of peace rather than agents of destruction. We can contribute to the body of Christ rather than tear it down.

But we can only do that through the intercession, prayers, and power of our permanent priest, the one who always lives to make intercession for us.

And we cannot access the new life that comes as a result of forgiveness if we continue to cover up our sin through sacrifices. We no longer kill animals, but we sacrifice in other ways. We cover up abuse with gifts, we make promises that we know we won't be able to keep, we blame other people and circumstances and try to put our sin on them.

No. We need honest repentance, an open and vulnerable accounting of our trespasses in front of the one who is able to forgive. Often that may be the person we have offended, but that is not always possible. Sometimes that person is no longer reachable – sometimes our offense is so great that contacting the one we have hurt would only cause more pain. But the one who is always able to forgive is the constant presence that is Jesus, against whom we have all transgressed.

Jesus, who is good and forgiving, and abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon him, is our one and only high priest, the one who lovingly intercedes for us, who will never turn away anyone who comes to him with a sincere heart.

So let us stop our cycle of futility, of doing the same things over and over again. Let us instead come to Christ and be made new, and live from this day forward as peacemakers and encouragers in a world that so desperately needs us in these roles.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.