

“If You Only Knew”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Hebrews 4:14--5:10
August 4, 2019 - Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Melchizedek. It's a Hebrew name that means “righteous king” and we find him in chapter 14 of the book of Genesis. He's a king and a “priest of God Most High” and he blesses Abram before the covenant with God. He gets a shout out in Psalm 110, and then he was never heard from again...until the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament.

The book called “The Letter to the Hebrews” isn't really a letter and isn't necessarily “to the Hebrews.” We don't really know who wrote it, or when, or to whom. We think it was written sometime in the second half of the 1st Century, probably around 65 A.D. It seems to have been written to some folks in Rome, perhaps Jewish Christians who were considering leaving the faith after experiencing persecution.

What we know for sure is that it's a long sermon — it calls itself “a word of exhortation” at the end — written in this very sophisticated Greek. Hebrews forcefully argues that through Christ, we have direct access to God. It uses vivid Old Testament imagery to try to revitalize the Word of God for its readers.

In this morning's reading, listen for the references to the high priest, and Melchizedek, and Aaron - Moses's brother. But listen even more for how this image is used to describe Jesus. Listen for God's Word to us from chapters 4 and 5 of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made complete, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Lutheran pastor David Lose tells about the time he preached a sermon all about God's grace and how God wants so desperately to draw us into God's love. As he stood in the “good game” line at the door of the sanctuary, a young woman approached and shook his hand and said, “Those were beautiful words, Pastor, but I don't think you'd say them if you really knew me.”¹

¹ David Lose, “Beginning and Endings” at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1564>

When I am talking about this congregation, I usually lead with my experience of how the default setting in this place is to not expend time or energy judging each other. I tell new people that y'all have been through too much of real life and experienced too much of the judgmental church to turn the critical eye on one another. I believe that your strong tendency to be gracious fills the air with a holy scent that is attractive to visitors.

And yet, even in a place where we actively work at leaving judgment of others to God, we fall into the trap of judging ourselves before giving God a chance. We watch our language to make sure that we don't overstep our bounds in throwing around condemnation and guilt. But we can be really good at heaping it all on ourselves.

I wonder if, like the woman in the handshake line, you've ever sat here and thought, about your neighbors, or your pastor, or your God:

"If you only knew. If you only knew what I've done. If you only knew what I've thought about doing. If you only knew the things I've said — out loud and under my breath! If you only knew the twisted thoughts and ideas I didn't invite, but that just appeared in my mind. If you only knew about the ones I did invite! If you only knew how I was barely hanging on! If you only knew, you wouldn't look at me with such love, such care, such warmth."

I wonder if you've ever sat here and thought, about your neighbors, or your pastor, or your God:

"If you only knew what I have failed to do. If you only knew how I've left people hanging. If you only knew how I've disappointed you."

On Wednesday night, Amber and I saw the musical *Matilda*, staged by Red Mountain Theatre Company at the Dorothy Jemison Day Theater at ASFA. The kids were absolutely amazing. But the loudest character in this adaptation of Roald Dahl's 1988 book is Agatha Trunchbull, the sadistic, unpredictable, rage-filled headmistress of Matilda's school.

When Christians manage to wriggle free of the earned-on-our-behalf reputation of being judgmental, we still tend toward knowing a merciful and gracious God for everyone else, and a completely different one for ourselves. The God we know for ourselves often bears a striking resemblance to old Miss Trunchbull. Many of us were taught — with love and a sincere lack of malice — that you need to be careful because God knows everything you do and say. And so does the clergy. And so does your mom. Every off-color, inappropriate, or interesting thing we've ever thought has landed on the desk of a principal who loves to dole out punishment.

That's not what we find in Hebrews. Whoever wrote these words knew a God of mercy and grace. They knew a God who does know about the thoughts and struggles and actions — the good, the bad, and the ones that are only problematic because of a society bent on shame — but not because your house is bugged and God sifts through your brain's recycle bin looking for offense.

Instead, it is because this God both created us good and knows our weakness. It is because we have this high priest in Jesus — this bonkers idea that God didn't want to be apart, separate, aloof, but *with*. God tore through the heavens to know and to feel as we do. God tore through the heavens to embody and express and experience great love. God tore through the heavens knowing that the cost of doing such *with-us business* would be to experience everything we struggle with, all the way to violence and death.

This is the part of the sermon where I had to go in and edit, for the umpteenth time since I started preaching from this pulpit, because there was another mass shooting in the United States, this time twenty dead yesterday in El Paso, Texas in an act of white nationalist terrorism. And *this* is the part of the sermon I had to go in and edit again, because there was another mass shooting in the United States, overnight, this time in Dayton, Ohio.

There is plenty of judgment to be found in the Bible, and most of it comes from the prophets who are enraged with empty thoughts and prayers from the powerful that fail to manifest any justice for the vulnerable among God's people.

I have no use today for politicians who tweet their thoughts and prayers while being the leaders of a great and powerful democracy who claim that there is absolutely nothing that can be done about the scourge of gun violence. I have no use today for politicians who demand that these shootings not be politicized while they still wait out the politicization clock on the shootings in Gilroy, California and Elkhart, Indiana and Southaven, Mississippi and Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin and Uniontown, Pennsylvania and Chicago and Washington, D.C. and Columbus, Ohio. To be clear, those were just some of the shootings that occurred since we worshipped last Sunday.

What I have use for today is a God who is not above such horror and suffering, a God who is not amused when we shrug our shoulders and proclaim the ancient prayer: “That’s just how the world is!” I have use for a God who demands sacrifice, but flips over the holy altar when what we bring as offering is children and innocent bystanders. I have use for a God who demands boldness at the throne of grace.

If you only knew how much you were loved. *You. Yes you. Don’t look at your neighbor — they’re loved — but maybe you’re the one who needs to hear it today.* If you only knew the depth of such love, you would approach the throne of grace with boldness to match.

If you only knew how much you were loved, you would find no shame in who you are and only appropriate shame for what you might have done. Sometimes I think we hang on to guilt like leftovers in the fridge, letting it fester and grow green fuzz, all because we are too afraid to ask for forgiveness. But Hebrews wants us to be bold where we have gone astray, bold to say, “I messed up. I claim responsibility, I seek forgiveness.”

If we only knew how much we are loved, we would be bold to talk about the things that the church is afraid to talk about. We would talk about the things that scare us, like bodies and the complexities of relationships and emotions that are way too complicated to be expressed in pithy sayings on coffee mugs.

If we only knew how much we were loved, we’d be bold to speak about that love. We wouldn’t just say “God’s love is soon big” up and out, where it can’t hurt anybody. We’d say it to our neighbor, looking them square in the eye, right where it’s uncomfortable and awkward. We’d say: “You are a child of the God of steadfast love. You are forgiven. You are wonderfully made. And so am I.”

If we only knew. If only it had been told to us. If only we had a way to proclaim it. If only it were the beating heart from which our entire theology, our church, our worship, our hymns, our very lives receive their strength.

You are beloved and forgiven and cherished and invited and given strength beyond your imagination and given grace in your weakness. The great high priest knows all of this about you. May it be so that you come to trust him on this one. Amen.