

Sermon "Building Bridges To Eternity"
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"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Jeremiah 31:31-34

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee"; as he says also in another place, "Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek." In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 5:1-10

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. he who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him. "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing by heard it and said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all me to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die.

John 12:20-33

What makes a group of people into a civilization? There are many responses. Some scholars say language and its uses, others development of a political system, still others say religious and social

customs -- culture, if you will. One of the most interesting I've heard, and it's tied to architecture in general, is whether or not bridges were built.

While I think civilization is the result of a combination of many things, I to this hour. Father, glorify they name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I wfind the bridge idea fascinating. The experience of the Romans sticks in my mind. They were able to conquer the known world not only because they had an incredible political system, but also because they had engineers who could build roads, aqueducts and viaducts (bridges) to support their expansion.

Closer to home, think about the early history of Milwaukee with the three little sections of what is now downtown each laid out with a different plot plan. None of the streets lined-up with the others' so that travel between them was quite difficult. Even when bridges were finally built, concern for the independence of each community was so great, the bridges were often mysteriously burned down. Now we see bridges which tie all the various parts of the area together...and even one that goes nowhere.

Bridges can tie a people together and lack of them can isolate them entirely. This truth has made it into the realm of popular expression on relationships; when someone cuts off ties we say, "Well, he's certainly burned his bridges." Now the President, who never misses a chance to pick-up on an available metaphor, keeps talking about "building bridges into the twenty-first century." (Lest you think I'm making a political statement from the pulpit, you ill gloneed to know that I consider myself a Whig -- our last president was Franklin Pierce.) Well, as I read those readings from Jeremiah, the writer to the Hebrews and John all I could think about was bridges...not to a new century or even a new millennium, but to eternity.

God built the first bridge to eternity when he created our world. Willfullness on our part destroyed that bridge and brought alienation not only from God, but from each other. Thus, the whole record of Scripture is God's attempt to reestablish the bridgehead to eternity in his creation.

The covenant was the next means that God used to rebuild the bridge. The giving of the ten commandments gave principles for conducting one's life in such a way as to bridge the gap not only with God, but with one another. The covenant, God's agreement to be God for us and we to be his people, was experienced through human mediators. First through Moses and then through the development of the whole priestly class.

It's important for us to understand the meaning of the word 'priest.' In Hebrew cohen, priest, is one who stands before, which implies standing before God, a mediator. The Hebrew 'cohen' was translated into the existing Greek iereus (from which we get words like 'hierarchy'), which designated one who handled holy things. This would be taken into Latin as sacerdos. The chief, or rihigh, priest (archiereus) was referred to as pontifex -- bridge builder. Later the title was taken by the Roman emperors who were known as pontifex maximus (chief or great bridge builder). Gradually all this terminology would find its way into Christian usage, bishops became known as 'pontiffs' and the Bishop of Rome took the title pontifex maximus formerly reserved to the emperors.

The 'high priest' was, for all of his loftiness, still from among the people. As the high priest's access to God was limited so, too, was that of the people. In the fullness of time God chose to build the bridge the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied: a law written not on tablets of stone, but the human heart. In the new covenant God offers the opportunity to know him in an intimate manner. As Jeremiah said, "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord." The new covenant was written first in the flesh of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who came into our world to be the new priest of the new covenant.

This new high priest was also one of us, as the writer to the Hebrews says earlier, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been

tempted as we are, yet without sinning." But this new priest brings a difference, he knows us, knows us only as a human that Christ could come to know us, and only as God that he could save us.

This means, as the writer to the Hebrews says, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." The word 'obedience' comes from the root "to listen." Christ became the source of salvation, as Hebrews goes on to say, because he listened deeply; first to his Father and then to our needs, our shortcomings, our fears, took them on himself, identified them with himself in order to transform them and us. Thus, in Christ God bridges the gap not only between himself and alienated humanity, but the gap within us as well. The longing, the searching, the need for inner peace which fills countless shelves with "how-tos," "self-help," and "motivational" texts and tapes, and the pockets of those who write, speak, promise to give something only God has. The new covenant and its new priest point us to the truth that the way to peace lies within us, if we open ourselves to the God who is waiting there.

As the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies in order to produce, Jesus died to show us the way to life and the wonder of God's transforming presence within us. The way to peace, to life, then, begins with knowing to move beyond self (the Scripture and all great spiritual writers say, "dying to self"), to cross the bridge to a new and deeper experience of God's presence in the here and now by building bridges to others.

One of the things the Reformation sought to restore, and which we often forget or misunderstand, is the priesthood of all believers. We take it to mean that now each individual can stand before God and handle the holy by him or herself. If that is our conception, we've only come part way. Christ, the great high priest, the mediator of the new covenant built a bridge between God and humanity, and bridges between each human being. It is for this reason, as John writes, that Christ was "lifted up...to draw all people" to himself. We are alone, isolated no more. To be a believer, to participate in Christ's priesthood is to continue the bridge building, to continue connecting people with God and people with people....building bridges to eternity.

There's a story told about a man who built a rope bridge across a very deep gorge. Once it was built, however, no one would use it. Finally, the builder came back and gathered all the townspeople. He asked them, "Do you believe this bridge will hold my weight and let me cross back and forth?" "Oh, certainly," they said. So he walked back and forth across the bridge. Then he said, "Do you think this is secure enough for me to wheel a wheelbarrow full of bricks back and forth?" "Without a doubt," they all agreed. So he piled a wheelbarrow full of bricks and wheeled it back and forth. He dumped out the wheelbarrow and looked at the crowd. "Now, after what you've seen, do you think I could put a person in this wheelbarrow and take them across and back safely?" "Oh, yes!" they said. "Who will be the first to go?" And the crowd was silent.

The bridge builder has come into our midst, he has shown us the way we must walk, to cross the bridge to eternity. Others have put themselves in his barrow, now it's our turn. Who will cross the bridge? Who will help to build it?