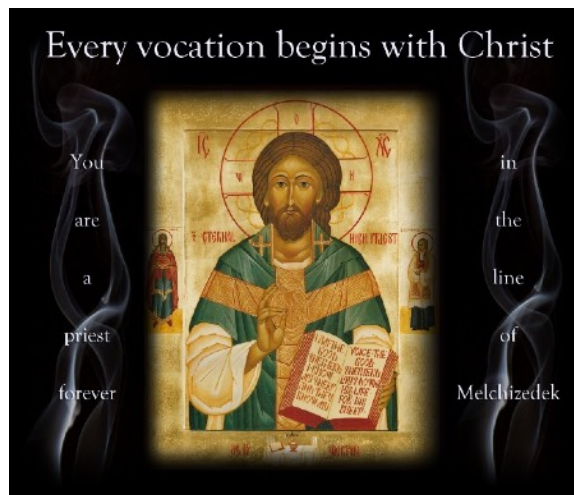


**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, October 17, 2021
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time**

“Lay Priests on Behalf of the High Priest”

**Last (fifth) of five sermons of a series entitled:
“Re-launching to Belong, Believe, and Become”**

Christian Scripture: Hebrews 5:1-10



In just a little while, we are going to invite to be dedicated many lay leaders to come forward, that is, chairs and vice chairs of various committees, boards, and teams. We are going to dedicate them as priests ‘in the line of Melchizedek’. The line of ‘Melchize-who? Melchizedek! The line of Melchizedek! Well, who is this ‘Melchizedek’ into whose line they will be dedicated?

To learn who Melchizedek is, we need to go all the way back to the book of Genesis. In Genesis, chapter 14 (18-20), Melchizedek was a king who blessed

Abram in the name of the most-high God. Yet, more important than what the king did is what the king's name means. Melchizedek's name means 'king of righteousness' and therefore Melchizedek was considered 'a priest of the Most High God' or simply, a 'high priest'.¹

Now, I know perhaps that few if any of you who I will ask to come forward actually *want* to become 'a priest in the order of Melchizedek'. After all, the role of 'priest' today has quite a few negative associations attached to it. Yet, today, I would like to nonetheless dedicate our lay leaders as 'priests in the line of Melchizedek'.

Before I do so, let us first acknowledge the pejorative associations linked to being a 'priest'. Gisela Robeck mentioned to me that the first thing that she thinks of when she thinks of the word of 'priest' is 'paganism'. Now, I do not necessarily think that paganism is bad – I am sure that a vast majority of pagans -whatever pagans are - are very good people. Yet for right or for wrong, most people conceive that pagan priests engage in what I might term to be 'blood ritual' whereby animals or even humans were sacrificed to appease gods worshipped. With the fall of the second temple by the Romans in 70AD, this practice was discontinued in the Judeo-Christian faith.

¹ Michael Astour, "Melchizedek", *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 4, ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 684.

"Melchizedek", *Wikipedia*. Found at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchizedek>, accessed October 16, 2021.

The second negative association attached to priests is sadly that of ‘sexual abuse’. I am sure you have heard last week of the report in France that revealed that 216,000 children, mostly young boys, were sexually abused by French Catholic clergy since 1950.² Yet, before we Protestants get on our high-horses, within the Southern Baptist Church it was in recent years reported that 380 church leaders in over twenty states abused over 700 children over a period of about twenty years.³

Another negative association with the priesthood is ‘patriarchy’, and thus the exclusion of women from leadership positions in the church. Patriarchy discounts and diminishes over fifty percent of the world’s population from offering spiritual leadership. Thus, patriarchy is the self-inflicted wound of humanity and the Christian church. And let us not be too quick to applaud ourselves as Protestants for ordaining women. Historically speaking, the ordination of women is only a recent phenomenon with the Protestant church – and it is still prohibited in some denominations. My mother’s generation was the first whereby women were more commonly accepted into the ministry. Yet, even a progressive

² “French Church Abuse: 216,000 Children Were Victims of Clergy – Inquiry”, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), October 5, 2021. Found at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58801183>, accessed October 16, 2021.

³ Kate Shellnutt, “After Major Investigation, Southern Baptists Confront Abuse They Knew Was Coming”, *Christianity Today*, February 11, 2019. Found at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/february/southern-baptist-abuse-investigation-houston-chronicle-sbc.html>, accessed October 16, 2021.

denomination such as ours have never had a female President. John Dorhauer, our current General Minister and President is the ninth (or tenth, depending on how you count) consecutive *male* president since our formation as a denomination in 1957.⁴

The last negative association with priests that I wish to highlight is that of ‘hierarchy’. Jesus was not very impressed with hierarchy. Remember he told the disciples who fought over rank that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” (Matthew 20:16)? Remember when Jesus proclaimed that it is children who best revealed the kin-dom of God and it is to them that it primarily belonged (Luke 18:16 and Matthew 19:14)? Protestants tend to judge our Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ for their rigid hierarchy. Yet, Methodists and Episcopalians, also have hierarchical polities that were inherited and are maintained – not to mention many fundamentalist evangelical churches whose governance models are essentially ‘cults of personality’.

I believe that all Christians should agree in principle to strive to join the ‘priesthood of all believers’ (inspired by I Peter 2:4-5). The doctrine of the

⁴ Fred Hoskins & James E. Wagner, co-presidents (1957-1961); Ben M. Herbster, president (1961-1969); Robert V. Moss, president (1969-1976); Joseph H. Evans, president (1976-1977); Avery D. Post, president (1977-1989); Paul H. Sherry, president (1989-1999); John H. Thomas, general minister and president (1999-2010); Geoffrey A. Black, general minister and president (2010-2015); John Dorhauer, general minister and president (2015-present). Anthony Moujaes, “The Reverend John Dorhauer Named Candidate to Become UCC’s Ninth General Minister and President”, United Church of Christ, February 13, 2015. Found at: https://www.ucc.org/dorhauer_general_minister_president_02132015/, accessed October 16, 2021.

‘priesthood of all believers’ “states that all believers in Christ share in his priestly status; therefore, there is no special class of people who mediate the knowledge, presence, and forgiveness of Christ to the rest of believers, and all believers have the right and authority to read, interpret, and apply the teachings of Scripture.”⁵

If I were to choose a new title for this sermon, it would be plagiarized from The Rightest Most Reverendest Reverend Jack Bixby – with that title, did I just violate the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ doctrine?! If I could choose a new sermon title it would be a tenet that Jack taught me. Listen to this: “We are all embedded in the ‘household of faith’”.⁶ What does Jack mean when he says we are ‘embedded in the household of faith’?

Let me share with you the wisdom he shared with me: “The conundrum about priesthood for me is the whole notion of being ‘set apart’ as somehow different, special, unique, even elite, wiser than wise. Our [Congregationalist] tradition wants to identify *all of us* as ministers/priests. Priests/clergy are no different than anyone else...no smarter, no wiser, no better. They are just fellow seekers who may have a slightly more specialized educational experience. Many other branches of the Christian community have invested more authority in

⁵J.V. Fesko, “The Priesthood of All Believers”, *The Gospel Coalition*, no date provided. Found at: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-priesthood-of-all-believers/>, accessed on October 16, 2021.

⁶ The Reverend Jack Bixby, email to The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper, email, October 16, 2021.

priests/clergy. Any authority we as Congregationalists have must be earned, and is not conferred".⁷

So, lay leaders, what kind of priests are you to be? As I review this sermon I wrote, I pray that may you be:

Christian priests

Moral and upright priests

Male, female, and transgender priests

Gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual priests

Humble priests

And last but not least, genuine and sincere priests with faith that seeks understanding.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, "Amen!"

⁷ The Reverend Jack Bixby, email to The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper, email, October 16, 2021.