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If I were to say: “*You are a priest!*” – What would you think?
Would you say: “*No, I’m married.*” Or, “*No, I’m not a Roman Catholic.*”
Or perhaps, “*I’m not that religious.*”

What if I were to clarify that everyone who has been baptized is called to be a priest – “*a royal priesthood,*” as 1 Peter 2:5 teaches us: “*Like living stones, [you] are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” And four verses later, in 1 Peter 2:9, “*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*”

The priesthood of all believers is a key teaching of the scriptures. It is a hallmark of the Protestant Reformation and a special emphasis of the Pietist and Anabaptist traditions which sparked our Brethren movement. It arises in part from Jesus’ teaching that wherever two or three believers gather – with absolutely no mention that one of them should be specially trained in religious matters – wherever any two or three believers might gather, there, Jesus said, they will find connection with him, with the Lord. All believers are to be priests to each other, conduits of the presence of the Holy God, able to inspire faith and hope and love. Are *you* such a priest?

The membership preparation book we use (*To Follow in Jesus’ Steps* by C. Wayne Zunkel) defines our priesthood in this way: “*Brethren believe in the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6, 5:10). We are to be priests (mediators of God’s love and God’s truth) to one another. We need each other if we are to discover and do God’s will.*” Did you catch the definition of a priest? Priests are “*mediators of God’s love and God’s truth.*”

That’s exactly what our passage from Ephesians 4 is telling us. The Apostle Paul is writing to the church of Ephesus about the purpose of various offices in the church – some are called to be apostles (eye-witnesses about what God has done to save the world through Jesus), some to be prophets (fore-seers of what God will yet do to save the world through Jesus), some to be evangelists (proclaimers of the good news about God’s forgiveness and redeeming grace that is getting worked out right here and right now), and some to be pastors and teachers (shepherds of the gathered people to help everyone grow up into a mature faith). Notice that none of these offices is the office of “priest.” They are all priests – they are all called to help people connect with God. They just do it in different offices/ways – they are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – all are given a particular role to play for the sake of making the rest of us to be priests – to open everyone’s connection with God – “*to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” Each one of us – whether we have an office, a special role of leadership, or whether someone in leadership is helping us – each one of us is to do our part to help others hear the truth and to help each other grow up and mature in love ... so that we connect / re-connect with the Lord.*

Are you a priest who helps others recognize truth and who helps others discover love? A priest stands between God and human beings. The priest tells people what God expects from them – i.e., the priest tells the truth about God and about God’s purposes, and the people almost always quaver as they recognize how far they have fallen short of the true way of living. But the priest is more than a prophet declaring the Word of the Lord; the priest is also a person of great compassion who wants the people to receive God’s blessing. So the priest prays to God on behalf of the people, asking God to forgive the people and to cleanse them, so that they might receive God’s love and care. The priest wants to connect people with God, because that is the only way for life to be blessed.

In the old covenant, the re-connection of people with God took place through the sacrifices of animals, believing that the consequences of the people’s sins were thereby placed on the animals – as the animals died. And the people were set free from the consequence of death and given a new lease on life.

In the new covenant, God has given his Son Jesus – and Jesus has preached to us the truth that we must repent and seek God’s forgiveness, until our very hearts are changed. And then Jesus becomes the sacrificial Lamb, taking the consequences of human depravity upon himself on the cross. More than that, Jesus comes back to send the Holy Spirit upon us, not just wiping the slate clean for us to start afresh, but filling us with a new and right spirit so that we are permanently connected to God, filled with God’s Spirit and filled with grace and peace. Jesus is the eternal High Priest who opens the Way for us to connect with God forever. And he sends us out to make disciples of all the other peoples, immersing [dunking] everyone into a full relationship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, until we obey all that Jesus has commanded and fully receive his presence with us to the close of the age. Jesus has commissioned us to be priests to everyone around us – teaching God’s truth to them and helping them experience God’s love for them – so that they might become connected with God and have Life! You *are* a priest! How are you doing in your priestly responsibilities? What are your particular tasks?

Because we believe in the priesthood of all believers, we pray for each other. The sharing of joys and concerns is a basic part of our worship time. We care about helping each other connect with God through the ups and downs of life.

Because we believe in the priesthood of all believers, we teach each other – we learn God’s truths from each other. More than just sitting in worship to hear one person’s thoughts in a sermon, we gather in small groups to share our insights about how the Lord is speaking to each of us through the scriptures and in our daily lives. Rather than using a lecture in S.S., Brethren tend to invite discussion – trying to learn about the truth of scripture from the sharing of each member of the Body. We believe that the Lord speaks through us all. Each person’s discernment is important. We learn to piece the truth together. That’s why Brethren church architecture has not placed the pulpit halfway up the wall the way that medieval cathedrals did. Indeed, in the old days Brethren preaching was done from a table on the same floor level as everyone else, and was done by several persons sharing their various perspectives on a given passage of scripture. As the membership book says, *“There are to be no first and second class citizens in the kingdom of God. We are all citizens together, sojourners together in a shared journey.”*

Every member is a minister. At the conclusion of baptism, we use the laying on of hands to portray the Christian understanding that the Holy Spirit comes upon those who humble themselves to be cleansed by God's grace. And the Spirit of the Lord gives each one a ministry.

We are called into ministry by that laying on of hands after baptism – commissioned to work for Christ and the church, to make use of the unique gifts and skills with which God has blessed us ... to continue the work of Jesus together with all others who have been baptized to be the Body of Christ with us. In the priesthood of all believers, each person's ministry is important. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 and other passages of the New Testament make clear that we dare not think our particular role is more important or less important than anyone else's role in the body. We have to function together to get God's work done – to help the world around us connect with the Lord.

What are some of the ways in which we work at functioning together like that – working together as a body in the church? I see us do this when we deliberately choose a cross-section of church members to serve on a committee or ministry team, and when we have various members lead devotions for such meetings. We get at this when we have a variety of people leading worship or children's time. It is important to experience the diverse wisdom and the spectrum of spiritual experiences of our members. It is crucial that we validate and incorporate each person's own particular way of connecting us with God.

Some of you know that I am spending one day per month this school year in spiritual guidance training led by a couple Mennonite spiritual directors at the Jesuit Center. We are reading several books. One of them is a wonderfully poetic book by John O'Donohue entitled *To Bless the Space Between Us*. I just want to quote a couple sentences from this month's reading (p.132), which remind us that each of us must do our unique part in God's work: *"There is something special that each of us has to do in the world. If someone else could do it, they would be here and not us."* [repeat the quote]

Got that? There is something special that God has placed you in this world to do – in your family, in your workplace, in this congregation, in this community – *"If someone else could do it, they would be here and not [you]."* As O'Donohue goes on to say, you must pay attention to this unique calling – to your ministry – so that (in O'Donohue's words – p. 133) you can *"come into rhythm with the deeper longing of your heart."*

The next part that I am going to say is something that not all Brethren agree upon. But it is something that this congregation and the Annual Conference of our denomination believe, even if some congregations around us have not understood scripture the same way. In this congregation and in the teaching and practice of most of the Church of the Brethren, *women* are called to share their gifts and skills, the same as men. There was a time when only men were presumed to be called by God to preach and lead the whole church. But over time we have begun to realize that the scriptures show us how God has worked mightily through the preaching and leadership of women – through women who did good work as priests, connecting people with God. In Luke 2:38 the prophetess Anna spoke about the infant Jesus, she spoke about him *"to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."* In Mark 16:14, we hear the Risen Lord Jesus rebuke his disciples *"for ... their stubborn refusal to believe those [the women] who had seen him after he had risen."* You see, Jesus had given the women the task of proclaiming to the disciples the good news that he was raised from the dead. Jesus called them to be his spokespersons, his preachers. We know that the Apostle Paul did tell the church in Corinth that women should remain silent at church, probably because of the ignorance of uneducated women in the culture of that day – but we also hear Paul speak clearly in

Philippians 4 about Euodia and Syntyche as *“women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel.”* If you are interested in learning more, ask me for a copy of my Bible study about the role of women in the church – the membership class will receive a copy at our next lunch session.

This is important. We do not limit the priesthood of all believers to just the males. We believe the prophecy spoken by the prophet Joel and quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-18) is true – that the Lord God has poured out his Spirit on all people, such that our sons *and our daughters* will prophesy; the Spirit is poured out on *“both men and women.”* That’s what the Bible declares. So we must pay respectful attention to all believers. God speaks and acts through all who truly believe. Men and women alike are given the role of priesthood to connect us with God.

The priesthood of all believers teaches us to be willing to receive from each other, to learn from each other, to listen to what God wants to say to us via our fellow believers. And in this week of Prayer for Christian Unity around the world, we remind ourselves that we are to listen not just to fellow Brethren or American Christians, but to Christians around the world. That may be hard on us, because fellow believers in third world countries want to wake us up as to how our patterns of using everything in sight for our own wants and needs instead of sharing freely with the rest of the world – how our lack of concern about them is seen by God. Hearing God’s truth from foreign believers can be painful. We have a long ways to go toward building up the whole body of Christ around the world, until we all mature and attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, as our scripture today admonishes us to do.

How can we best help everyone everywhere learn to connect with God and receive the full blessing of Life with God? This week’s “Wired Word” lesson – which may have been discussed in a couple S.S. classes this morning – asks us to consider what means we think are appropriate for trying to connect people with the Lord. The Wired Word lessons take newspaper headlines and open up discussion about what we believe the Bible means. Today’s lesson is about the Denver Bronco’s quarterback Tim Tebow, who is very public about his faith in Jesus, most notably by kneeling in prayer on the football field during games - “tebowing,” as it is being called. *“His signature prayer pose has been widely copied and mimicked, praised and ridiculed. His willingness to publicly and unapologetically witness about his faith has led some to debate how and when Christians should witness that plainly and that openly”* (Wired Word for 1-22-12).

The Wired Word asks whether praying before a meal in a public setting is similar to a Tebow prayer at a game. It seems to me that in both cases, it makes a huge difference whether the praying gets done in the right spirit. You can’t bow to pray in a restaurant and then bark at the waitress or leave a stingy tip. Not if you want to connect people with God. Our witness must be congruent with our living. I learned from the Wired Word lesson that Tim Tebow takes time to connect each week with someone who is suffering or injured or dying; he flies these people and their families to a Bronco’s game, puts them in a nice hotel, buys them dinner, gets them pregame passes and good seats, visits with them just before kickoff and after the game, and more – and he does this for road games and home games alike, whether he is performing well or not. At least that’s what an ESPN commentator says about him. I expect Tim Tebow lets these people know that he is doing this because he loves Jesus. How do *you* let people know *why* you do what you do? Do you deliberately connect your faith with your actions?

At the memorial service for Dennis Wampler this past week, his daughter shared that it was Dennis and Sharon’s prayer that the ways in which they faced his death might serve as a testimony to others. What kind of testimony are you making by the attitude you have and the

actions you take in response to the struggles of your life? Is it visible to others that you are connected to God?

You *are* a priest. Each one of us is called to be a priest. All believers are to be priests to each other, conduits of the presence of the Living God, able to inspire faith and hope and love.

I invite you to spend a moment in silent prayer ... to ponder:

Lord, how do you want me to help the people around me connect with you?
How can I helpfully share your truth, Lord, and your love – which are so important in my life?

Silent Prayer

Hymn 416 *For Christ and the Church*