



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Renewing our Promise

October 28, 2018

Text: Hebrews 7: 23-28

Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save* those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 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. 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 for ever.



Sermon:

You may remember a novel that was turned into a movie, as so many novels are these days, but this novel was called the *Da Vinci Code*. It's a fictional story about a Harvard professor of iconography—religious iconography—who attempts to solve a murder involving a mysterious society that we know very little about.

When I first read the book, I was fascinated by the complicated connections that the professor found between seemingly disparate signs and symbols—paintings by Leonardo Da Vinci, complicated mathematical equations, geographical locations—all of these things were found to have secret information hidden within them. According to the novel, they all had information about Mary Magdalene and her role in the history of Christianity. Now, Brown himself says this is a work of “creative

fiction.” Fiction, okay? I have no idea how much of this book was true, but it wasn’t the story itself that caught my interest this week. It was the use of symbolism in that work. As I started studying this passage from Hebrews, I thought again of how complicated everything was in Brown’s book.

Reading the book of Hebrews about the priestly cultic rituals of ancient Israel felt a lot like reading Brown’s reflections on ancient and mysterious societies. Of course, there isn’t as much suspense in the book of Hebrews—at least not for me—but there is a similar sense of intrigue. We can’t make sense of the New Testament passages, such as Hebrews, without knowing something about the priests of ancient Israel. I think it would help first to clarify their purpose. Their concern had to do primarily with the purity of the people—whether by means of circumstance or by conscious choices—the people of Israel were constantly behaving in ways that rendered them impure. They believed that their impurity repelled God or even repulsed God, so the job of the priests was to make daily offerings of grain, burnt incense, or animal sacrifice in order to restore purity.

More importantly, though, in order to restore reconciliation between God and the people. One could fall into a state of impurity simply by going about a normal day—sort of sets you up for failure, right? You could do a number of things that might make you impure—touching a dead body, developing a skin disease, or entering a menstrual cycle—all of these things were considered states of impurity. You really couldn’t avoid impurity in those cases but you could rectify that through a ritual bath and perhaps a burnt offering made by the priest could cleanse you of those impurities. Consciously committing idolatry or bloodshed, however, or sexual transgressions, made one morally impure. It was a different level of impurity, and that could not be rectified by a simple ritual. Moral impurity could only be remedied by a process of atonement. Have I lost you? Right, think of Dan Brown—with his complicated symbols and complicated ancient practices.

In ancient Israel, the Day of Atonement was one of the holiest days of the year. On that day, the high priest would enter the temple and make special sacrifices—first, for himself and his family, and then for the whole of Israel. This is how it would happen: the priest would choose two goats—one would be offered on the altar as a purification offering to God and one would be set free in the wilderness, carrying with it on its back, symbolically, all of the iniquities of the people. The sacrifice of these goats would symbolically atone for a whole year’s worth of moral impurity. Here’s where it gets even trickier. In the case of the purification offering, it was believed that the lifeblood of that animal would cover the impurity of the people. It would extinguish the death grip of immoral behavior by consuming it with the very essence of life—the lifeblood of one would symbolically conquer death of the whole.

Sound familiar? Perhaps now you can see why I'm leading you through this elaborate world of priestly cultic practices. The New Testament language of atonement relies heavily on ancient practices which we 21st century Christians really don't understand. We talk a lot about atonement, but most of us know next to nothing about the ancient practices or the origin of those concepts. We might not use the word atonement, but when we talk about the *saving grace* of Jesus, that's what we mean. For us atonement means being reconciled **through** Christ to God. In seeking atonement, we seek a solution to the cosmic problem of our separation from God.

In today's passage from Hebrews, we are told that Jesus provides the solution that we seek. Jesus, who is greater than not only the priests but then the sacrifices that they offer covers our sin and bridges the gap between us and God. Unlike human priests, Jesus is holy and blameless and permanent, because he lives forever. Jesus is the better sacrifice, says the book of Hebrews, because unlike the goat, he literally embodies purity. He literally is the essence of life, as such Jesus is the guarantee of a superior and more enduring promise between humanity and God.

I came across a beautiful story about a young man who has taken the idea of making promises very seriously. After the death of his father, a young man named Alex Sheen, decided to do as his father had taught him, and so he started committing himself more rigorously to the promises that he had made to others. This is what he said: "In the United States and in many other places in the world, it is almost a cultural expectation that promises will be broken. Society needs to be reminded that promises still matter and that those we make and keep and those we choose to dishonor, define who we are."

And so Alex Sheen started handing out small promise cards that were imprinted with the words, "Because I said I would..." People who receive a card write a promise on it and carry it with them as a reminder. Now, I'm sure that some of the folks who filled out a card followed through with their promise, but just as many failed to do so. The idea is that we have a tangible way and we need a tangible way of reminding ourselves of our commitments. The ritual sacrifices made by the high priests reminded the people of Israel of their promise to lead holy and pure lives before God. It also reminded them of God's promise to forgive them when they failed to do so, but those sacrifices did not truly repair the rift between them and God. They patched the rift, but only for a short term. Jesus, on the other hand, made the perfect promise and affected the perfect fix. In his living, he taught us to love unconditionally; in his dying, he showed us how to give everything in the service of truth. And in his rising he conquered death and fully reconciled us to God,

Across the global church today, many are celebrating this as Reformation Sunday—a day when we commemorate the Protestant Reformation and the protest of Martin Luther against certain doctrines and practices of the church. It is also a time when we

renew our promise to be a prophetic church and to be the presence of Christ in this world—clearly a presence that is deeply needed. Jesus made the most perfect promise to bless us with life in God—Jesus lived with the constant and steady presence of God and offered that to us, and we respond with a promise in return. We are called to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel, and we promise to do so. We have been reconciled to God through Christ, our high priest, and in response we live a life that reflects the love of Christ.

I'm taking a class this fall on the history, polity and theology of the United Church of Christ, and for that class I've been studying the UCC statement of faith. It's not a typical creed, as I've learned—not like the ones I grew up with or perhaps you may have grown up with—at least creeds that you have heard. It's not a statement to which you must pledge allegiance; instead it's a reflection on the nature of God, and it's structured around the deeds of God rather than the actions or convictions of the believer. A theologian named Shinn, who has written about the UCC statement of faith, has said that “a belief that is unspoken is incomplete, and a belief that is well spoken becomes a power for life and action.” To embrace a statement like this one is to renew our promise to live as people reconciled to God. It is like a promise card, or a ritual practice to help us remember who we are. And so I invite you to reflect today on your own promise to God, to yourself and to this church as we conclude our stewardship season.

Amen.



The Rev. Patty Fox, Pastor