



## THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS

1 Peter 2: 9-10

*(Since spoken communication differs from written, some of the grammar and syntax of this transcript may seem awkward in written form. To keep integrity with the spirit of the original delivery, the transcript seeks to stay close to the exact words spoken.)*

One of the things I loved about living in New York City (I lived in New York when I was a much younger man) was free Shakespeare. Every summer some of my friends and I, at least once a summer, would take half a day off on Friday, get a place in the line, get some wine and cheese, play hacky sack, and do some reading and talking about the play. In some ways waiting for free Shakespeare was about as much fun as the actual experience of it. I read a news story a couple of years ago in the *New York Times* that because it took so long to get a ticket, people did not want to bother with the waiting and were starting to pay people to wait in line for them. This was creating a little bit of controversy. I mention this little vignette, this image, in the content of the subject at hand for this morning, the subject I'd like for us to reflect on, which revolves around the question, what does it mean to be a priest? I think that this metaphor, standing in line for something that's free, might be useful in that exploration. We'll be stretching that metaphor, hopefully not to the breaking point, but I'm going to use it to full effect, I hope, today.

So what if we thought of the religious life as like waiting in line for something that's free. Actually I think in that sense it's not a bad metaphor. It's what we do in Advent, isn't it? It is the content of the religious life. It's the waiting; it's what we do while we wait for something that in the end is free. Now imagine that if that's the business of the religious life, this waiting on line, imagine that there might be people there everyday to help those on line. Maybe we go just once a summer but they are there every day, they are there all the time, and their job is to facilitate the waiting. Maybe they are hotdog vendors, or jugglers, or storytellers, or what not. Their job is to facilitate our waiting.

Well, if today we are reflecting on what it means to be a priest, and we're doing that as we reflect on the ancient Levites, let me remind us of something that probably we learned in our Sunday School lesson as a kid, that the nation of Israel was organized into tribes, twelve of them, named after the ancient patriarchs and one of those tribes was set apart from the others because it had a special function. The Levites were different from the other tribes because their function was to facilitate the religious life of the whole nation, of all the people. They didn't participate in the agricultural life, they didn't participate in the economy in that sense, but they

were supported by the other tribes because their job was to facilitate the religious life of everyone else. It was from the Levites that the class of priests came, those who did service in the temple. So that when you came to the temple, you could practice your faith.

Now one of the temptations inherent in this system that has in it religious professionals, clergy if you will, is that people can start thinking of those folks--the Levites--as the ones who are really doing the religious stuff. We're dealing with God so that you don't have to. Instead of facilitating the religious life of others, they're doing it all for you. I mean like paying somebody to wait in line for you. And if we can stretch the metaphor a little further, the ultimate abuse of that system or deterioration of it might be something like this: The only way you're getting into that line is through me because I'm in charge of the line. If the system broke down that might be what it looked like. You're not getting into that line unless I say so.

During the Reformation some of the reformers like Calvin and Luther saw that the system had broken down because it was acting in such a way that people were saying the only way you're getting to God is through me, through the priest. And they said, "No way," because they took this Scripture from 1st Peter to heart. They said, "No, we're all to be holy people, we're all priests serving God and there is only one high priest--Jesus--and he made the sacrifice once and for all for us so we have direct access to God. We don't need anybody standing between us and God as a mediator because we're all priests, we're all Levites."

So what does that have to do, then, with this Sunday which we call Levi Sunday? We wear our Levis, we reflect on the tribe of the Levites and we remind ourselves too that our work is also our worship. It's a reminder that all of us are Levites. All of us are priests. The church I used to serve in Palo Alto, on the masthead that listed the staff, the first line read like this: ministers--all the members. So we are all priests and all called to do service in the name of our God.

Now a brief word as I conclude here today about what we're doing today. We're doing service, again as a reminder that we ought not to make too big a separation between our work and our worship, what we do out there and what we do in here. In here is a preparation to see all of our life as an opportunity to glorify God. But today we're going to be doing service. Not a lot, just little bits, which together make a significant impact. But it's a reminder, too, I think, that it's our responsibility. These are service projects for organizations like Trenton Area Soup Kitchen and Crisis Ministry of Princeton and Trenton, organizations that are caring for the poor and needy around us. And I hope that it's a reminder that it's the job of everyone to care for our neighbor. This is important, I think. It's really important that we as a church are not just writing checks to those folks who are caring for the needy, caring for our neighbors. It's our job. Let the projects and the work that we do today be a reminder that we're not paying somebody else to stand in line for us in that sense either. It's our task, not only to be in service to God but also in service to our neighbor. And so as you go forth from this place today, realize we are all Levites, we're all priests and our religious work is to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to visit the imprisoned, to comfort the sick. That's what we do while we're waiting in the line.  
Amen.

January 30, 2011

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