

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 18, 2024

Day of Pentecost, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

[Psalm 104:25-35, 37](#)

[Acts 2:1-21](#)

[John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15](#)

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The great scholar of liturgy Aidan Kavanagh used to love to say, “The church does not *ordain* people to priesthood. It *baptizes* people to priesthood.”

Now I suppose it depends on what you think the word *priest* means. A lot of people might think a priest means a religious professional or someone who goes around in funny-looking clothing. But let’s go deeper. At its heart, a priest is someone who goes before God on the world’s behalf; and who goes before the world on God’s behalf. A priest is a human being, someone from this world, who brings this world before God, to offer it to God, to sanctify it, to pray for it. And who also speaks God’s message to this world, a message sometimes of challenge and judgment, but always of blessing and yearning and love and grace.

The Hebrew Scriptures have a lot about priests in them; priests who lead the Temple worship and make offerings on the people’s behalf and pronounce God’s blessing. The New Testament also has a lot about priesthood in it but it uses the term only in two ways.

One is of Jesus. Jesus is our great High Priest, the one who has truly brought us to God and God to us. And the second way is about the church, all Christian people everywhere; everyone who has been baptized into the Body of Christ and is therefore part of him shares in his priesthood. The church does not ordain people to the priesthood, it baptizes people to the priesthood.

Now the church has all kinds of members in it with different callings, to serve in different ways. One of those ways is by being a pastor, or what the early church called a *presbyter*, or elder. And very early on the church noticed there is a kind of priestly quality to sacramental leadership within the church, and started calling those leaders priests as well. Which is all very well as far as it goes, but it's absolutely secondary to the fundamental priesthood of all the baptized. And then over the centuries most of the church forgot that basic fact and started using the word only to refer to ordained leaders and not to the whole baptized people of God at all, which is where we got all those ideas of religious professionals and funny-looking clothing that have messed us up so badly. So if you take nothing else away from this sermon, take this: if you are a Christian, you are a priest. You are called to bring the world to God and God to the world. You are called to offer your whole life and your neighborhood and your neighbors and your work and your relationships and all things to God as a holy offering. And you are called to bless it all in God's name.

And today is Pentecost and it is the day the church first took up its priesthood. The day the Spirit empowered Jesus' disciples to be not just his disciples but *him*, his living presence in the world.

Today we are baptizing two new human beings into their own priesthood. And we are [joining with Robert who was baptized as an infant but today is claiming that priesthood for himself for the first time and] we are all renewing our own baptismal priesthood, the gift of the Holy Spirit that was breathed into us when we were first united with Jesus.

We are doing it today in the midst of a troubled world: brutal wars raging; political dysfunction; economic and social malaise; a threatened climate; polarization and declining institutions and an epidemic of loneliness even in an age that promises constant connectivity. But that is nothing new for the church. The Body of Christ has always taken up its priestly calling in a troubled world. The Roman Empire the first Pentecost happened in was also a place of brutal violence, crushing economic exploitation, smoldering nationalisms, ethnic tension, and all the rest. It was a place of profound differences.

At Pentecost God chose not to remove those differences but to revel in them. Pentecost is a day of unity, but not unity through being the same but unity in diversity. When the Spirit sent the disciples out into the streets the miracle wasn't that everyone suddenly understood the same language—the Latin of Rome or the Greek that was the international tongue of the day or the Hebrew of the Torah or the Aramaic of the common people. The miracle was that everyone understood the good news in their *own* language. Parthian, Median, Egyptian, Phrygian, Arabic, Hebrew—no matter the language, no matter the race, this is a God who doesn't flatten people into a single common identity but comes to people in their own identity and lifts each one up as holy. A priesthood of every family, every language, every background, every nation.

And God has the same promise for us today. In this century, in our own time, a time of so much fear, God is still building this community of love across every difference of race, every difference of gender and sexuality, every difference of religion, every difference of age, of class, of ability, not by wiping out our differences but by reveling in them as sacred manifestations of the infinite creativity of the Holy One.

Bonnie and Max today take up their priesthood and join this sacred Body. May we stand with them as part of an ever-growing fellowship where there are no outsiders, no outcasts, but only precious children of God, different and unique, priests of the new creation through Jesus Christ.

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Pre-8:00 Check in with Robert about renewal
9:15 Baptism rehearsal
9:45 Dove kite rehearsal with Kendalls or Amanda
9:55 “On the Day of Pentecost” rehearsal with choir
Post-10:15 Library conversation with Sharon

Announcements:

- Trinity Sunday
- Wed May 29, 6-8 pm: “Roots of the War for Palestine”
- Sat Jun 1: Pride Parade and Festival, contact Allan at rainbow@inc...