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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Amos 5:6-15, Hebrews 4:11-16, Mark 10:17-31

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

The theme of this morning's sermon is that our Lord Jesus sees us accurately, but also sympathetically. He perceives the truth about us, inside and out, but he sees gently, with understanding of our frame.

In this congregation sitting before me, there might be someone who is feeling low -- someone whose heart is not at peace, whose soul labors on, but is weighed down. Sorrow besets the person, or guilt troubles the conscience. Money troubles might be grinding you down; fear over some medical diagnosis might send shutters through your mind. Worry for the children might leave you sleepless and haggard. And temptation might be searing the soul of someone who sits here perfectly calm on the outside, but almost trembling with forbidden desire inside. And if none of these struggles should beset us now, tomorrow is another day, and they might come a blowing on us then. So, let us gather this morning's text to ourselves and keep hold of it like treasure: We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness.

DISCERNMENT

This morning's reading from Hebrews Chapter 4 displays extremes of emotion. There are strong shifts of mood, with words that cause alarm at one moment and wonderful comfort the next. Our reading opens with words that summon us to self-examination and could well put fear into us. The Word of God, our text says, is capable of violent discernment:

¹²For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12, RSV)

Those unjust persons we read about in our First Lesson, for example, were being sifted and weighed and understood by the Word of God all along their wicked path.

⁷O you who turn justice to wormwood, and cast down righteousness to the earth!... you trample upon the poor and take from him exactions of wheat... I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins -- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate. (Amos 5, RSV)

They might have thought that no one saw them. They took their bribes discreetly, they distorted justice precisely and quietly, by inches and ounces -- nothing too outrageous as to have provoked protest. They fiddled with their weights and measures, giving unfair return for the hard-earned money of the poor. They turned aside the needy in the gate when they thought no one saw them do so, only, the Word of God did see them! And the Word of God pierced them “to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow,” and discerned the thoughts and intentions of their heart.

In a recent Psalm class, we looked at Psalm 139 -- a majestic Psalm speaking of the Lord’s intimate knowledge of us:

¹O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me!
²Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up; thou discernest my thoughts from afar.
³Thou searchest out my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.
⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether. (Psalm 139:1-4, RSV)

We noted that many of grew up with the conviction that even if no one else saw us, still the Lord did. He regards us and notes everything about us. And in our class, we wondered what our land would be like if the young no longer grew up that way? What will become of our land if the younger generations no longer believe, perhaps because no one ever told them, that the Word of God sees and understands them through and through?

So, that is the nature of the first part of this morning’s text. The Word of God perceives us with an almost violent discernment. This part of the reading could well frighten us and should frighten us away from sin. Sin hurts our neighbor, works to ruin our own souls, is reliably perceived by God, and is well worth forsaking.

A DIFFERENT TONE

But then the tone of the passage changes strongly in a new direction, in a more gentle direction. In the second half of our reading, we learn something new and important about this Word of God who discerns us so very well. Why, he is our

Lord Jesus Christ. He is our great High Priest. Moreover, he sympathizes with us, though he perceives us ever so accurately:

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Because I rather like being a pastor and the priestly office, let me lift up how wonderful it would be to have this kind of a high priest. Imagine you go to such a one for private confession. The pastor asks you:

P Are you prepared to make your confession?

R I am.

You begin your confession as the prayer book instructs:

I confess before God that I am guilty of many sins.
Especially I confess before you that...

As you make your confession, be pleased to think to yourself that you are sitting or kneeling before a *pastor* -- not before an executioner. It is not the job of a pastor to bring down a parishioner. It is not the office of the pastor to rip and tear and destroy the one who has come to give a confession. His job is to listen sympathetically, to enter into pastoral conversation over the sin, and to grant the absolution to the repentant soul.

So that is the job of the pastor. But not all pastors are good at hearing confessions. They might mean well, but they happen not to have a sympathetic heart or they are just too naïve. They have too little experience with sin and the ways of humanity. So, they occupy the office of priest, but they are not so good at their priestly work.

Not so with our great High Priest! Our text invites us to approach the throne of grace with confidence "that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." We can approach that throne because on it sits a great High Priest who has been where we are, only without sin.

JESUS HAS FELT OUR WEAKNESSES

Our text says that he able to sympathize with our "weaknesses." Indeed he can! For Jesus knows about weakness, not just in theory, but by experience. If you feel hunger, he knows the hunger and homelessness that haunts poor people, for he himself was a poor man who "had no place to lay his head."

If you have stood at the graveside and wept for a loved ones, Jesus has done the same, for he wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

If you are heartbroken over some betrayal, he knows of such a thing, for one of his own dear friends betrayed him. Another denied him. Take it to heart if someone close to you has denied you and acted as if you did not ever exist.

If you are fearful, he too has known fear -- fear so profound his sweat fell like great drops of blood onto the ground.

If you know pain, he has known it beyond what we are likely to know, for he was killed on one of this world's cruelest instruments of torture.

If you know guilt, he does too. It is all bound up with that profound saying about our Lord that he "bore our sins":

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we
might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you
have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24, RSV)

Perhaps that was his deepest suffering, that on the cross, he covered himself in sin, our sin, so much so that his heavenly Father turned away and could no longer look upon.

So, if you know abandonment, so did he, so that he cried his cry of dereliction: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

And if you know temptation, take heart and think to yourself, "My great High Priest has known this temptation too. However hot it might be, he has known it too, for he was tempted in all ways such as I am, only he did not sin." It is a fascinating thought: Let your own temptations be the measure of your Savior. If you have known a temptation, he has known it too. Aye, and he has known it with equal intensity to you. Yet he did not yield. And we do not need yield either.

Jesus never did such a thing. He suffered temptation, but he did not yield to it. Nor we would want him to have sinned, for sin could only have hurt him and coarsened him and made him less sympathetic to us.

OUR INFIRMITIES

It is a immense thought, really, to consider that our risen Lord Jesus knows *our* weaknesses. Note the personal nature of our text:

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with
the feeling of *our* infirmities; but was in all points tempted
like as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, KJV)

It would have been wonder enough if the apostle had spoken of Christ's sympathy with all those of his day, with every suffering soul he encountered. That would have been vast sympathy in its own right. But the apostle leaps ahead to his own generation and to his own congregation, and through his inspired words, to you and me too. We have not a not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of *our* infirmities.

And why not? Why should this not be so? For the Jesus who touched the leper and healed him or touched the blind man and restored his sight is the same living Lord Jesus we follow. This same resurrected Jesus could say to the persecutor Saul, “Why does thou persecute *me*?”:

³Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. ⁴And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵And he said, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting... (Acts 9:3-5, RSV)

Saul, of course, had not thought he was persecuting Jesus but rather the Christians of Damascus. But in touching them, he touched Jesus – so firmly does Jesus identify with his people. So, in our day and age, this same Jesus takes very personally the weaknesses and infirmities we feel. He feels them in his own bones and nerves. He feels our sorrows and our temptations. His vast sympathy takes in you and me too.

COPY SUCH SYMPATHY IN OUR OWN LIVES

Let me close with this thought: Our life in Christ bids us to imitate the sympathy of Jesus toward our neighbors. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord warns us against condemning others. He warns us that we shall be judged by the same standard we use to judge others:

¹Judge not, that ye be not judged. ²For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. (Matthew 7:1-2, KJV)

The more positive way to put this is, “Let us be people of mercy toward others. Let us have mercy toward others, as Jesus has mercy toward them and toward us.” He feels the weaknesses and the sorrows of others. Let us try to feel them too – even the weaknesses and the sorrows of those who annoy us or oppose us or hate us.

I fear that that was what ailed the rich young man in today’s Gospel story. Jesus bid him give to the poor, but his heart did not go out to the poor – at least not enough:

“You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21, RSV)

But this, the young man would not do. He was not enough touched with the infirmities and the weakness of others. And so he sadly turned and walked away.

GIFTS OF SYMPATHY

You and I have gifts of sympathy to share with others. Some of us have skills and strength of body and energy to help others in physical ways. Some of us have gifts of intellect and leadership and administration. Some of us have the ability to bring people together and to coordinate gifts and needs. Some of us have are gifted with a sense of humor and can lift the spirits of those who are downcast. Some of us have material resources that can be used to support people and programs for those who need help. Some are good at listening and bringing understanding and consolation to those who feel alone and abandoned. And some of us are especially gifted as people of prayer who bring the needs of others to the throne of God.¹

The RSV way of translating our text is fine:

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses...

But I still like even better the old King James Version:

For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities...

That is what I am after: that you and I should follow the example of our Lord Jesus and actually let ourselves be touched with the feeling of the infirmities of others, for there are lots of such struggling folks in this world, and the God, who loves us most tenderly also loves them, even our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.

¹ For the most part, I lifted this fine paragraph, from my wife Carol's sermon for this morning.