

Another day in the Hood – The Priesthood of all Believers

A message by David and Joyce Reed
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(Joyce)

A 25-year-old man named Daniel Jones has been involved in a world-wide prayer ministry. Recently he was reflecting in a posted blog: “What does it mean to be a priest?” This is what he shares:

I came across a verse in Joel which has really impacted me and made me assess the way I live my life as a priest in the Kingdom of God. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2:5, that we are God's Holy Priests who offer Spiritual sacrifices to God. In Romans 12, Paul pleads with us to give our bodies (or lives) as living sacrifices to God, supporting Jesus' teachings of dying to self and carrying our cross, so that Christ may live in us. So this has been my understanding of what it means to be a priest: offering my life as a living sacrifice and entering into God's presence (Hebrews 10:19) and interceding for others. What this verse in Joel 2:17 has done is open my eyes to both the intensity of the priestly prayer, and the position in which I carry out my duties. Listen to the verse:

"The priests, who minister in the Lord's presence, will stand between the people and the altar, weeping." NLT

Ok, so the priests (you and I) minister in the Lord's presence. Let's just stop there for a second. Did you just grasp what I just said? For centuries in the Old Testament, only a handful of people could enter in God's presence and then they risked their lives in the process. We read about God coming in fire at Sinai and Moses' face glowing, of people being afraid to go near or talk to God and of a God so Holy, that the Israelites couldn't even say His name (Yahweh) to each other. Yet we can enter into God's presence since Jesus has torn the curtain and not only that, but we are carriers of His presence! (Jeremiah 31) We carry God's presence! Wow!

. . . I had an experience of this in action while part of a team helping my friend Kelly in a place called Boys Town in Mexico. We had a prayer room set up just outside the walls of this area of legalized prostitution, drug use etc, which we prayed in small teams for 3 hour shifts over a 15 hour period. This was our place of intercession and praise in God's presence and as we prayed for Boys Town, our hearts grew more and more in love for the place and the people as we engaged with God's heart. As we met people on the streets, our hearts would be broken by their stories. And then, in prayer, God would remind us of their names and faces so that

we ministered in the Lord's presence, standing between God and his people, weeping. Our prayer requests had become personal. God would then give us a deeper love and compassion in this place of prayer, which would overflow into our time in Boys Town. Our hearts had been taken to a level above our fears and our own personal feelings and even found that God was healing our own hearts in the process! ("What does it mean to be a Priest?" a blog by Daniel Jones, Age 25, lives in U.K. danfriarjones.blogspot.com/2006)

Daniel was beginning to grasp what it means to be a priest, one who ministers in the Lord's Presence.

But where did this concept come from? And how did God first introduce it to his people?

(David)

The story of God's priesthood began a little over 3300 years ago, so settle in – that's a long time to cover so someone should order Chinese take-out. Just kidding! But we do need to go all the way back to the book of Exodus in the Bible . . .

We find ourselves in the wilderness, at the base of Mt. Sinai recently having been delivered from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Moses has received another transforming download from YAHWH and is delivering it to Israel. We are going to focus on one slice of that moment precisely, because what God did in that moment and is doing in this moment now are connected.

God said to Israel through Moses: *"If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* (Exodus 19:5-6)

This message was one of extreme transformation. God was telling Israel: "I am moving you from being slaves, to being Priests." It is God's ideal for this exodus people...a Kingdom of people brought out of being wholly consumed by slavery, to being wholly consecrated to serving God, each other, and the surrounding nations...as priests.

In the priestly role the Israelites were to be channels of God's grace and goodness to each other and the nations (Gen 12:2-3; Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:6). It was also God's desire that Israel be set apart as God's own people to manifest God's will...very unlike the world around them (Dt. 7:6, 14:2,21, 26:19, Is 62:12). To this calling

the people responded in one voice, accepting God's call to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, they declared, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Ex 19:8)

However, as the story continues to unfold, we soon see the Israelites backing away from this honor of becoming a Kingdom of Priests. In Exodus 20, while Moses is up on the mountain, the 10 commandments were given in a powerful fireworks display of thunder, lightening, trumpet sound, and smoke covering the mountain. The people freaked out. They became fearful and asked for Moses to be their mediator saying "speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." They pulled away from God, intimidated, fearing the prospect of facing God personally. So we find a need for the establishment of a line of priests instead of a kingdom of priests.

The status of priest was first conferred by God on Aaron, the brother of Moses, and his direct male descendants, (Exodus 28:1-4, 43; 29:9) as an "everlasting office". Aaron begins the line of priests. During the 40 years in which the Jews wandered in the wilderness and until the Temple was built in Jerusalem, the priests performed their service in the portable Tabernacle (Numbers 1:47-54, Numbers 3:5-13, Numbers 3:44-51, Numbers 8:5-26). The priestly role was associated with the Tabernacle or Temple.

So instead of a Kingdom of priests, God revised his plan and set aside one man and his descendants to act as priests in the temple. These men intervened as mediators between God and the people by providing three important functions:

1. **Through the daily sacrifices, they restored the people's relationship with God.** The priestly role was most importantly one of deliverance from sin through sacrifices which enabled the people to live consecrated lives before God.
2. **Through their prayers they brought the conference of God's blessing.** Prayer always wrought the presence and power of God upon the people.
3. **Through their teaching they imparted the ministry of God's word.** God's word was the law and obedience to it was to be central in people's living.

(Joyce)

Today, there are still descendants from the line of Aaron serving as priests. We recently discovered a fascinating study called the "Cohen Study". Cohen means

Priest in Hebrew. The study set out to discover if there was a genetic link in people from different areas of the Middle East and northern Africa who claimed to be from the priestly line of Aaron. The findings are amazing in that the DNA tests have revealed a genetic marker on the DNA of the priestly family “a clear genetic relationship amongst Cohanim and their direct lineage from a common ancestor. The research findings support the Torah statements that the line of Aaron will last throughout history.” ([www.aish.com/societywork/sciencenature/the_cohanim - dna_connection.asp](http://www.aish.com/societywork/sciencenature/the_cohanim_-_dna_connection.asp))

Rabbi Yaakov Kleiman states “That our Torah tradition is supported by these findings is an inspiration for many that God surely keeps His promises. May we soon see the Cohanim restored to their service, Levites on their Temple platform, and Israelites at their places.”

This becomes very significant when we understand that Jewish tradition holds that the building of the third temple will signal the coming of the Messiah. Right now the Muslim Dome of the Rock sits on the temple mount where the first and second Jewish temples once stood. Right now, during our life-time, the priestly line is being re-assembled and the family of Levites have assembled all the furniture to fill the temple according to the Biblical directives found in the first five books of the Bible. For the Jews these actions signify the Messiah’s coming, for Christians it is the return of Christ to call home - ALL those who believe.

(David)

The line of priests is significant for Christians today because Jesus became and is the great high priest who became the perfect sacrifice once and for all. Hebrews 4 declares:

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. Let us then approach the throne of Grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

God has never set aside his calling for a kingdom of priests. For Christians, there is no longer need for animal sacrifices in a temple. God calls for a greater sacrifice, one that returns us to God’s original desire mentioned in Exodus to the people of Israel – a sacrifice of ourselves to God, given to him, as a consecrated and holy people, a nation that serves God. Through Jesus and in the apostles God revived this call. In 1 Peter 2 we read:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...But 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. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (2:4-5, 9-10)

It is not a promise for the future as it was for Israel “you shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” but the fulfillment of that promise in you and I - this present day...Let us make no mistake about God’s intent for all believers. “In Christ you are...a royal priesthood, a holy nation...”

I believe it is often the institution of the church that minimizes the believer’s perception of and fulfillment of God’s priestly call. Strangely, we still want to say to our pastors, “Hey you’re the expert, you talk to God and in so many words...tell me what God wants. What to believe, how to live, how to direct my decisions, handle my problems, how to respond to struggles...you speak to God for me and then tell me what I need to do. I can’t get that close to God.” But a middleman (or woman) is no longer necessary. In every way, Jesus has filled Moses’ role of speaking to God for us and telling us what God desires. And through him and in the Holy Spirit we are now able approach God’s throne with every confidence. It confirms and affirms our call as HIS royal priesthood.

You and I are God’s priesthood and we are endowed with every part of the responsibility to be priests to each other and to this world...to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. In very personal terms it means that you are my priest and I am your priest, and we are the priest for those not here. We are God’s representative to each other, and we are each other’s representatives before God. It means we are to speak to God about each other, interceding before God for each other, seeking and asking for God’s guidance and blessing. (some quotes from Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the people of God by Greg Ogden p.18)

This is the priesthood of all believers, and every day is another Day in the Hood! We can not forget that God has also sent us into this world as priests – to proclaim his praises and bear witness to the light.

- We fulfill a priestly role in the daily ministry of the word - intervening for others. When we encourage each other with God's word we are performing our priestly role. When we offer God's word to direct or re-direct someone's life we are performing our priestly role.
- We fulfill a priestly role in the daily ministry of prayer - intervening for others.
- We fulfill a priestly role as we daily consecrate ourselves fully to God and serving him in every aspect of our lives. When we visit the sick and the prisoner, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take care of the homeless, the orphan and the widow, the abused, the addict, the outcast, the forgotten, the oppressed. (Jack Haberer is pastor of Clear lake Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas Message "the Priesthood of all Believers")

(Joyce)

Let me close with this story that illustrates how you can be used by God as a priest to someone else:

Sue Mallory tells the following story of her experience in her church in California:

Joe began attending our church shortly after he was diagnosed on the downhill slide toward death from AIDS. In our crowded sanctuary he might have gone unnoticed, except that we have some gifted people among us who notice people like him. They approach and welcome strangers in ways that feel natural and real. They joyfully exercise the gift of hospitality.... Under their attention, Joe didn't stay a stranger long. He found a spiritual home.

Partly because of my own medical history, I became part of Joe's life. Joe signed up for the membership class. He was enthusiastic, but he didn't show up. That's when the advancing stages of the illness became known to some of us.

Because we had purposely decided that people who needed long-term care were not to be among the direct duties of the pastoral staff in our church, I accepted the task of keeping track of Joe's needs and making sure we met them as well as possible. I sought training in dealing with AIDS patients. I took on the task of taking Joe the class material for membership so that he could join the church. In the process, Joe and I became friends. Joe and I had a wonderful time of spiritual sharing and mutual growth in the following weeks. He became a member of our church. His spiritual life blossomed even as his physical health deteriorated. Our relationship grew. The flow of goodness went both ways.

During one particularly stressful day of my own, I got an urgent message that Joe was dying. I immediately called the church to alert one of the pastors. They were not available. I left messages for them at every number and on every answering machine I could reach. I hurried to Joe's home.

When I arrived, I met several of Joe's friends, who had gathered to be with him in his final hours. I prayed with him, and we sat quietly for a couple of hours. At one point I was called to the phone, hopeful that it was one of the pastors. Instead, Joe's sister was calling from a distant airport, on her way, and concerned that Joe not be alone. I assured her that he was with friends and that his church family was supporting him in prayer. During all of this I was keenly aware that my time was limited and that the pastors were not showing up. Each telephone ring brought a moment of hope, but no clergy materialized. I stayed as long as I could. When the time came for me to leave, I prayed with Joe again. I realized he was at peace and that he wouldn't be alone. I returned to my own ailing mother's bedside.

I found out later that Joe died about fifteen minutes after I had left. His departure was peaceful, but I was upset. Why hadn't any of our pastors made it to his bedside? When I had a free moment later in the evening, I called our senior pastor, Charles, at home. He waited patiently, allowing me to vent my frustration over his absence, then said quietly, "Sue, I called Joe's house when I received your message. The person who answered assured me that the minister was already with Joe. That was you, Sue. Why should I go when God had already provided someone to minister to Joe?"

Do you believe that you can be a minister, a priest, just like your pastor? (Adapted from Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church: Serving Together to Transform Lives* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001, p. 13-15.)

Let me remind you again of the verse in Joel 2:17 that you heard at the beginning of this sermon: "*The priests, who minister in the Lord's presence, will stand between the people and the altar, weeping.*" God will place people and situations on your heart & in your life that call for a priestly function: to share his Word, to intercede on someone's behalf, to walk alongside a person in need. When that happens—and it will—you don't need to pick up the phone and call me or David, or some other pastor you know. You need to examine your heart and say, "Okay, God, what do you want me to do? I don't feel qualified. But in you, my weakness is made strong."

Let's pray . . .