I’ve Got You—Heb 5:5-10

For one of my classes in seminary, I attended worship at an Antiochian Orthodox church. At the Saturday evening service. Members of the church came to make private confession. You’ve seen enough movies to know about confessionals in Catholic churches, the booth off to the side, where the priest sits and hears confession through a screen. That was not how it happened in that church. There, that evening, the penitent believer and the priest knelt together at the front of the church, facing the cross. The priest placed part of his stole over the shoulders of the believer making confession. He also put his arm across the shoulders of the repentant sinner, the penitent disciple.

I want you to visualize this because I want you to hear with your imaginations and your hearts as well as your ears what Hebrews is telling us. What I saw that priest doing is what Christ does with us, for us. When we confess our sins, during our corporate confession, or personally, during the time of silence afterwards, or whenever and wherever you may be when you want to come clean, Jesus Christ is there, with you, not only putting that priestly stole across your shoulders, but also putting his arm around you, steadying you, supporting you, hugging you.

Why did that orthodox priest take his stole and put one half of it over that believer?

He was sharing the burden, beloved, even as Christ promises to be there to share our burden. And, you know, Jesus does more than merely share our burden: he bears the brunt of it; he gets his shoulders beneath it, and lifts it, even as he hefted that cross upon which he would be crucified. This stole, symbolically, is the yoke Christ invites us to take upon ourselves, to be yoked with Christ. Beloved, hard work was never so light, when we are yoked with Christ. That stole the priest shared with that repentant believer was like a yoke.

And the priest also put his arm around the shoulders of that child of God. Christ does the very same thing. Have you never felt Christ’s embrace? That priest was affirming that they were in this together, that the believer, confessing his sins, confessing her transgressions, was being supported, was being loved, was being held fast and would not be lost. The priest was communicating all those things, those blessed assurances, to that sorrowing Christian, and that’s just what Jesus does, too. Christ is always saying to us, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. It’s alright. I’ve got you.”

Yes, I caught a wonderful glimpse, as I observed that orthodox worship, a wonderful glimpse of who Christ is, who he is for us, wants to be for us, what he does for us and wants to do for us. He wants to hold us, sisters and brothers. He wants to steady us, and assure us that we are loved, that we are supported,

and that we are not alone in this. Jesus wants to assure us that we have an advocate, a friend, an ally, a priest.

There are no Presbyterian priests. We do not need any priests because we already have the only priest we need: Jesus Christ, our great high priest.

One of the goals of Hebrews is to assure Jewish Christians that Jesus is truly a priest, appointed by God. Any law-keeping Jew could very quickly point out the impossibility of Jesus being a priest, because Jesus was not a Levite, nor was he a descendant of Aaron. The only ones God consecrated to be His priests were Aaron and his descendants. The only ones who could serve in the Temple were Levites, and Jesus was not a Levite, nor was he a descendant of Aaron. Therefore, according to God’s own law, Jesus could not be a priest, and if he could not be a priest, then he could not intercede for us, he could not make sacrifice for us, he could not make atonement for us. And that’s a problem. Because if Jesus, by God’s own law, could not make atonement for us, then we are still in our sins, at enmity with God. We are dead.

St. Paul had already addressed the issue of the relationship between God’s law and the role Jesus plays for us, many times in many places. God’s law cannot be set aside; Jesus did not come to overturn or negate God’s law, as he himself attests: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Mt 5:17-18).

So the problem Hebrews is addressing is a logical problem, which is vaguely interesting in a sort of academic way, but the problem is also pastoral. You all know, in your long history together here, your shared memories and the memories that have been passed down from grandparents and great-grandparents, that your pastors have not been perfect, including this one! In some cases, they might not even have been especially good pastors. Some were here too briefly, others were here too long. Some were not especially good preachers and others were not especially good at showing and sharing love and compassion. Even your best pastors have had their shortcomings, and even your worst pastors had gifts and blessings to bestow.

In other words, a perfect pastor, a perfect priest is hard to find. That was as true in ancient Israel as it is now. If your pastor is very imperfect, how can he or she be effective? With Christ, brothers and sisters. We do not have priests because we all already have the only priest we need, who yokes us to himself and does the heavy lifting for us, who puts his arm around us to lift us up, carrying us along, to encourage us and remind us with that warm, strong yet gentle embrace that we are loved, truly, eternally loved and that, through him, with him, we are forgiven.

The only one who can make perfect atonement is a perfect priest, and the only perfect priest who ever was, and is, and shall always be, is Jesus Christ.

But Jesus could not be a priest, according to God’s own law, the very law that Christ said he came not to abolish but to fulfill.

And it was God who appointed him a priest. Jesus didn’t just decide one day that he would assume the responsibilities of a priest. He didn’t make that decision for himself. People do not take pastoral office for themselves on their own authority: God calls them, and that call becomes plain not only to the one being called, but to fellow believers. How many times I was told that I might make a good pastor! I wondered why people would say such things. God is already at work, bringing about what God has arranged.

What God has arranged is salvation: rescue from the mess of our lives—the mess the world has made of our lives, the mess others have made of our lives, the mess we have made of our lives—and oh, what a mess it is! And our denomination has just made it so much messier. They have not blessed us with more light but more darkness.

Just as St. Paul reminds us that Abraham’s faith, rather than his conformity to the law, was reckoned to him as righteousness, so Hebrews points out that there were priests of God long before Aaron or the Levites existed. We hear of the priestly “order of Melchizedek,” and we say, huh?

Yeah, Melchizedek, you know, the guy who brought bread and wine to Abraham just after he had won a huge victory against some marauders. Oh, him. Sure. We read in Genesis that this Melchizedek was king of Salem (that is, Jerusalem), and that “he was priest of God Most High” (Gn 14:18). This priest of God Most High blesses Abraham and blesses God: it’s worship! The first time the word priest is used in Scripture is in reference to Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is not a Levite, he’s no son of Aaron, yet he is a priest, and priests do not become priests of their own will, but are called according to God’s will. People make messes. God makes priests. God makes pastors. We do not need priests or pastors according to law. We need pastors and priests according to God’s call. Some of the most powerful and committed foes of Jesus, in his day, were the priests. Being a priest, being a pastor, does not always mean being a friend of Christ! Priests according to law have a very bad track record of obeying that law, obeying God’s teachings.

Rampant among our Presbyterian clergy right now is the inclination to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong, what really pleases God and what displeases God. We’re being told if something is right for you, then it’s right, and if something is wrong for you, then it isn’t right. If you want to do something, you can, and if you don’t want to, you don’t have to. That’s helpful! There’s faithful pastoral guidance!

Our clergy are demonstrating that they are captive not to God’s Word but to the word of the times. By a two to one margin, your teaching elders are saying they prefer their understanding of God’s Word over the way every generation up to today has understood God’s Word. Sixty-seven percent is a significant percentage! I never thought of myself as being a member of a minority until now, and you know what? I don’t like it.

Where the priests, the pastors are confused, the people become confused. That cannot end well, as Scripture attests over and over. Just read 2 Kings 17. Beloved, in Jesus Christ, we have a priest who is not confused. He is not confused because he “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). Uh-oh. Did you hear that? There’s that word, again, that pesky word that keeps popping up, everywhere we read in Scripture, that word we maybe never quite heard before, quite so clearly, in the midst of our confusion and distraction: obedience. I’m kind of getting tired of that word, God help me!

Let me soften it a bit; it’s a hard word to have to swallow day by day. We hear this word obedience, and sort of squirm in the pews, frown a bit, and briefly tune out, but what Hebrews is getting at is this: conformity to God’s will, placing oneself under God’s authority, rather than trying to stumble through life upon your own authority, making up your laws for life as you go, or as your mood changes, or as the times lead you, or as the world progressively enlightens your mind.

Beware Progressive enlightenment! The world is in rebellion against God, and always has been. We were in rebellion against God, until we came to know Jesus Christ. We all take orders from someone, beloved. All of us obey something in this life. What’s the authority in your life? That’s a serious question, and it requires some candid introspection. In Jesus Christ, God gives us the option of obeying one who really does have our best interests at heart, who really does love us, who really is there to guide us truly and surely.

Jesus tells us this, Jesus shows us this; Jesus proves this to us through his own life, his terrible death, and his magnificent resurrection. The way to life is through obedience: conformity to God’s will, accepting God’s authority over our lives, a bit more, each day, day by day. That obedience, that conformity, and that acceptance are only possible through faith, which is entirely the gift of God.

Lent is the time when we reflect most deeply upon Christ’s humanity. Yes, he is fully God, and he is fully human. Because he is fully human, he felt temptation, just as we feel it: he saw how alluring it could be, how reasonable it could sound—just as we do—yet he did not go that way. Through his perfect faith, the gift of his Heavenly Father, Jesus learned to conform his life to God’s will, trusting God completely, trusting God’s Word over man’s words. And it didn’t make him popular! Let’s never tell ourselves that conformity to God’s will was easy for him as a man. It was not.

Those forty days and nights in the wilderness with no food, it was not. There in Gethsemane, it was not. There on the cross it was not. Conforming our lives to God’s will is not easy—every inclination in us urges us not to, whispers to us that we can be faithful people and do what we want, believe what we want, have whatever values we want. The worst is when we hear that whisper telling us it’s okay with God, too. Brothers and sisters, it isn’t so.

Jesus is “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:9). For all who obey him. Not for those who do not obey him. Don’t kid yourselves. Don’t dream fantasies. Scripture could not be plainer. For all who conform their lives to God’s will, God’s Word. Not for those who do not conform their lives to Christ’s example, his example of reverent submission, his example of perfect conformity. So what hope is there? None of us will ever achieve perfect conformity in this life! None of us obey Jesus the way we should!

We have every hope, because we have Jesus, our great high priest, our perfect priest. What does a priest do? He is a mediator between God and people: a bridge. Jesus is our bridge. We cross over, safely, surely, securely, on the work he has done for us. A priest offers up sacrifice; Jesus has made the perfect sacrifice for each of us, and for everyone—all who put their faith in him, not just with their mouths, but with their hearts and every yearning, with their minds and all their will.

A priest prays for his people, and oh, Jesus prays for us, makes continual intercession for us. A priest brings us before God, sharing our burden, yoking himself to us, getting his shoulders beneath the weight that’s crushing us, lifting it from us. A priest holds us fast in his arms, assuring us that we are in this together, that we are supported, we are loved, that we are forgiven, held fast, and that we shall *not* be lost. Jesus, our priest, the only one we need, says to us, in the holy hush of our penitent tears, “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. It’s alright. I’ve got you.”

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!