

Just this past week, I was talking with someone outside of the parish, when they asked me: “Now, just *what are you?*” Well, I’ve wondered that too! But what she meant was...what *word* should she use to refer to me in my position as a *clergy person*. It is a fair question and I know it can be confusing. We’ve all been around enough to know that clergy are called different things in different churches.

Baptists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans most often tend to use the word “pastor”... meaning one who *guides* others. Methodists tend to use the word “minister”...meaning one who *attends* to the needs of others. There are some other words like “presbyter”, “elder”, or “parson” that are variously used. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians use the word “priest”. And since the Episcopal tradition has often drawn people from many traditions, I might be called any of the above. But I do prefer to use the language of *priest*, because that is the language that is common in the Diocese of Western NC where I was ordained...and it is actually the word that the prayer book most often uses...for “what I am.”

But of all the words for clergy...“priest” might be the most tricky...not because of what it actually means...which we will get to shortly...but because of negative associations that have attached to the word. Some people associate the word “priest” with a clergy person who wields *absolute spiritual authority* over other Christians...and has some *exclusive access* to the divine that just anybody else cannot have. Some associate some kind of *otherworldly perfection* to the word “priest”. While, on the other hand, tragically, some nowadays can’t help but associate the language of “priest” with *abuse*.

But the word “priest” is important. And other distinctive words that Christians use...matter. The Church is supposed to be a community *where we take words very seriously*...because it has been the experience of our tradition that God...*communicates* to us through words...especially the words of the Bible...but also potentially the words of our prayer book, the words of hymns, the words of other Christians, and very possibly the words of any other human being as God may so choose. We should then, of all people, be careful with words...*guardians of words*. It is possible to say that part of the *struggle of the Church*...is the struggle to understand and receive *our own special words*—for the distinctive truths they name...words to *help*...and not to *harm*. But also, part of the *mission of the Church*...is to be vigilant about how words are used in our society...such that words should be truthful...words to help...and not to harm.

*So, I invite you...to a rediscovery...of the word “priest”. And I want to advocate for...disentangling the idea of “priesthood”...from ideas of power and privilege...by recovering the word as applied to Christ...and then the Church as a whole...and finally...people like me. |*

When the New Testament book of Hebrews talks about Christ as being like a “high *priest*” it emphasizes how...as a priest... “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears” for his disciples and the whole world. This is the *priestly* role of Christ...and it is inseparable from the *servant* role of Christ.

Priest...servant...these are special words we use in Church. They are holy words from our Holy Bible and our prayer book. And yet, once again, they can so quickly be completely misunderstood or ignored. Take the disciples James and John...they approached Jesus and flat out told him: “Teacher, we want you to do for us *whatever we ask of you*.” And what did they want? They wanted the *power* and the *privilege* of being the “right and left-hand men” of Jesus’ when, as they supposed, Jesus would achieve worldly power against the Roman Empire. Poignantly, Jesus responded: “You do not know what you are asking.” And Jesus went on to say that it is the way of the world *to desire such power over others*. “But it is not so among you...whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came...to *serve*...” It wasn’t the first time Jesus had tried to tell them this. But it is hard to sink in.

I believe I understood it...when I was preparing to be ordained a priest in The Episcopal Church. But, for all of us, being Christian is a steep learning curve...where it takes a lot of time for us...variously understanding and

misunderstanding...succeeding and failing. But if I did not fully realize what I was getting myself into...becoming a priest...then I was definitely helped along...*when I was lying face down...on a stone...church floor.*

There is an old tradition for the ordination of a priest...that before the bishop and other priests lay their hands on you, and pray for you, and bless you to become a priest...that before that happens...well...what happened to me...was that...I was assisted in getting down on my knees, in my robe, and then lying prostrate on the stone floor of St. Mary's Church in Asheville NC...in front of the altar...with my arms spread out...cruciform...and my face to the floor... |

*Priests...are not supposed to be about power and privilege. And neither is the Church. The reason that there can be people like me—priests—is because of people like you. According to 1 Peter 2:9, the Church itself is a “royal priesthood” of servanthood. It is the priesthood of the Church itself, given by Christ, which makes priests possible.*

When I remember that stone church floor of St. Mary's Church...I recall that it was difficult to lay like that face down...and it was awkward...and humbling. But I also remember...that while I laid on that floor...the congregation was warmly *singing*—it was a traditional, ancient Christian hymn “Come Holy Spirit.” And they were singing it for *me*...and for *themselves*. It was *beautiful*...And then I was *helped* up from that floor...to be *blessed* by the bishop...and other priests there...and that congregation. |

*Our shared servant priesthood in Christ for each other and the world...is a difficult thing. It can be hard for the Church to believe it is actually real...much less the world. It can be hard to believe that amidst the chaos and cruelties of the world...that Church and our servant priesthood hardly matter. It can be hard to believe that this humbling way where we try to truthfully acknowledge our own brokenness and sinfulness is actually God's idea for how the world will be saved...But it can also be precious and beautiful...warm and welcoming...gathered as we are...to keep praying...joining with Christ our high priest...who ceaselessly prays for us and this whole world...so that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*