

**"What Makes Jesus So Great?"**  
**Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday of Kingdombtide**  
**Lectionary Year B**  
**October 18, 2010**  
**Text: Hebrews 5:1-10**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

The word "great" is used a lot. It is no doubt overly used and misused, because many things that are labeled as great are not so much in reality. Take movies for example. Here is a list of some of the more well-known films with the word "great" in their titles. I believe you will recognize as I read the list, that not all of the movies are what you would call great ones:

*Great Balls of Fire, The Great Bank Hoax, The Great Caruso, The Great Dictator, The Great Escape, Great Expectations, The Great Gatsby, The Great Imposter, The Great Lie, The Great McGinty, The Great Mouse Detective, The Great Muppet Caper, The Great Outdoors, The Great Race, The Great Santini, The Great Scout and Cathouse Thursday, The Great Train Robbery, The Great Waldo Pepper, The Great White Hope, The Great Raid, The Great Buck Howard, The Great Debaters, and The Great New Wonderful.*

There are some exceptional movies in this list to be sure, but not all of them are all that memorable. It takes more than having the word "great" in the title to make a great film.

Our passage of scripture from Hebrews for this morning is the continuation of a particular description of Jesus that began in 4:12-16,

the lectionary epistle reading for last Sunday. In that passage, Jesus is referred to as our "great high priest." So I think it is a fair question to ask, "What makes Jesus so great?" What is it about him that makes him great? On the basis of what the writer of Hebrews is saying in these two passages, I would like to suggest that there are at least two reasons why we can say that indeed Jesus *is* great.

**Jesus is great because of what he does for us.** He is our high priest, and he is great because he fills that role for us. The role of the high priest is an extremely important one, especially for the writer of Hebrews.

It should have been evident from the sermon I preached a couple of weeks ago from parts of the first two chapters of Hebrews, that this letter has to do with the superiority of Jesus Christ. The writer of this letter first discusses Jesus' superiority to angels. Then he presents Christ as superior to Moses, because Jesus leads us to a better rest than that to which the Israelites were journeying under Moses' leadership. But then the writer of Hebrews turns to the most important subject for him, a comparison of Jesus Christ to the levitical priesthood of Israel to show Christ's superiority to that whole system. The largest section of Hebrews has to do with the priesthood of Jesus Christ—from 4:14 to 10:18.

As I suggested a minute ago, Jesus is great because of what he does for us, and *what he does for us is to perform this function of high priest*. In order to appreciate that role and to realize its importance, we need to look at what it means for Jesus to be our high priest.

Priests are those who are authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion, especially as mediating agents between the people and God. In the Old Testament we find that the levitical priesthood was central to the entire religion of our Jewish ancestors. Levites were individuals from the tribe of Levi who were given the privilege of representing the people of God as priests. The tribe of Levi was a tribe of priests, and the chief priest among the priests was the high priest, making him the most important person in the religion of Israel.

It was the function of the high priest actually to enter into the presence of God on behalf of the people. So once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple. No one else ever entered the Holy of Holies, and the high priest did only once a year. It was considered so potentially dangerous to be in the presence of God that the high priest wore bells on his robe, so that the people could hear him going about his work and know he had not been struck dead. That gives a whole new meaning to the response, "I'll be there with bells on," when an invitation to an event is extended. Sometimes, as an extra precaution, the high priest had a rope tied

around one leg so if he should be struck dead in the Holy of Holies, his body could be dragged out without endangering anyone else.

The writer of Hebrews uses the function of the high priest to interpret the work of Jesus Christ. Just as the high priest went behind the veil of the Temple to do the work of redemption, so Christ has gone behind the veil of heaven to do the work of salvation for his people. Just as the high priest could not be seen, so Jesus cannot be seen, but those who believe in him can benefit from the work of salvation that he is about.

There is a powerful difference, however, between the high priest of Israel and Jesus. The high priest made a sacrifice to God on behalf of the people and even made a sacrifice for himself. Jesus did not *make* a sacrifice; he *was* the sacrifice. And Christ is our high priest forever. Whereas the atoning sacrifice offered by the high priest in ancient Israel had to be done every year, Christ's sacrifice of himself is made once—for all people for all time. It is important to note as well that in the New Testament, this idea in Hebrews of Jesus as high priest is a completely new one. No other book in the New Testament interprets Christ in just this way.

What does it mean for us, that Jesus is our great high priest? It means for us, as it meant for those who first read Hebrews, that *we have access to God the Father*. It means that a way has been opened

to God. It means we have contact with the One who is our source and our life. It means that we can enjoy fellowship with God instead of living in dread or fear of him. It means we can rely on and trust in God. It means that we can be reconciled to God and live at peace with him. Because Jesus is our great high priest, we have access to God.

You know about access and how important it is. You don't get backstage to meet the members of the rock band you've gone to see in concert unless you are given access. You aren't allowed to see the President of the United States without obtaining access to the White House. You don't get on the set of a movie filming on location unless someone gives you access. You can't log onto a computer without securing access by way of a password. You aren't going to be admitted into Costco without the membership card that gains you access. And because you understand what access means and how important it is, you realize that Jesus can be considered great because of the access to God he makes possible.

But there is more, and this is very important. Because it is Jesus Christ who is our high priest, it means that *God himself has provided the salvation we need*. God gave us Christ as the high priest, which means that God has opened the way himself. Our access to him originates *with* him. That means God's love for us is such that *what he requires of us, he provides for us*. That is grace taken to the

extreme. So God takes our sin and our need upon himself. God gives us his own Son as our high priest, the high priest we need, that through him God might reconcile the world to himself. Jesus is great because of what he does for us, that is, he is our high priest, and because he is, we have the access to God that God himself provides.

Not only is Jesus great because of what he does for us, but **he is great because he is as one of us**. He not only is our great high priest, *Jesus is our great sympathizer*. As the writer of Hebrews states, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." The writer of Hebrews goes on to maintain that as our great sympathizer, Jesus is able to deal gently with us, because he himself suffered with loud cries and tears. As Clarence Jordon suggests, in *Jesus* ". . . we have a leader who isn't coldly indifferent to our weaknesses, but who himself has been put through the mill like we have, yet without giving in."

What makes Jesus so great? It isn't only that he is our high priest. It is that he is a high priest who knows just exactly what we are going through day to day. He's been there and done that. He knows firsthand what it means to be weak and powerless, to be tested and tempted, to be insecure and anxious, to be frustrated and angry,

to be disappointed and hurt. He knows what it is like to be thoroughly and completely human, with all our frailties and shortcomings.

Just as you understand the importance of access, you understand how meaningful sympathy is. When you are in pain, you want sympathy. When you experience a loss of some kind, sympathy is what you need. When you are going through any sort of difficulty, you want someone who can and will sympathize with you.

And who best can sympathize with you? It is the person who has been where you have been and who knows what you are thinking and feeling. If you are having surgery, you know that the person who has had that same kind of procedure performed can best sympathize with you. If you are going through a divorce, you can find a truly sympathetic ear from a person who has had that experience. If you have lost a loved one, you can find comfort in sharing your emotions with another who has been through the grief process.

So it is with Jesus. It is great that he is the one through whom we have access to God, but it is even greater that he is in a position to sympathize with us so much. He can sympathize with us so much, because he is so much one of us. And what difference does that make for us? It makes all the difference in the world. It allows the writer of Hebrews to say to us, as paraphrased by Leslie Brandt:

It is for this reason and because of what Christ

has done for us that we have the assurance and confidence  
that we need, to approach boldly our loving God.  
And we can come before God with untroubled consciences,  
knowing that our past sins  
will no longer be held against us.  
We are now the people of God,  
his children and servants forever.

I don't know about you, but that is even more than good news for  
me; *that is great news*. Therefore, the one who makes that great  
news a reality is himself great.