

October 13, 2024

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Amos 5: 6-7; 10-16; Hebrews 4:12-16

Grounded in Hope: The Throne of Grace

We are in the second week of our *Grounded in Hope* worship series focusing on texts from the Letter to the Hebrews. The structure of Hebrews is a little different than other books in the Bible, so before I read our text, I want to orient you a bit to how Hebrews is organized. While it is referred to as a letter, it is less like the letters we are familiar with from the apostle Paul and more like a sermon. Hebrews is organized around alternating proclamation and sections of exhortations, advice and warning. Last week we heard the first proclamation: God Has Spoken Through Jesus Christ: “Christ is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.” This proclamation is followed by a warning to pay attention to the message of Christ, an urging to remain faithful, with examples from ancient Israel’s history, and finally to enter into Sabbath rest as part of living faithfully.

The beginning of our scripture this morning is the end of this exhortation: dwell in the living and active word of God for God is able to judge the actions of the heart. The second part of our scripture begins the next proclamation about Jesus: Jesus is the great High Priest, and through him we receive mercy and find grace. Hear now these words from Hebrews Chapter 4:12 -16, first with words of exhortation:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

And now a proclamation about Jesus:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 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. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

We are in the season of announcements of prize awards... The MacArthur Genius Grants, the Nobel Awards for Physiology, Medicine, Chemistry and Peace announced this week. One that may have been overlooked in the buzz of the Nobels is the announcement of the Templeton Prize. This prize honors individuals whose exemplary achievements advance Sir John Templeton’s philanthropic vision: harnessing the power of the sciences to explore the deepest questions of the universe and humankind’s place and purpose within it. The prize

winners have ranged from theoretical physicists to geneticists to philosophers to religious and nation state leaders. Some are familiar or quasi-familiar names like Jane Goodall and Frances Collins, King Abdullah of Jordan and Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Most, however, are known to only a small swatch of the population, those who labor with them at the interface of science and faith and the exploration of place and purpose. This year's winner is Dr. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a professor and South African National Research Foundation's Chair in Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma and the Director of the Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest at Stellenbosch University. That is a mouthful, so here is what that means... Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela studies the mechanisms of trauma and forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa. She has created a globally-recognized model for social healing in the aftermath of conflict, a model she calls "the reparative quest."

The "reparative quest" was developed through her work on the Human Rights Violations Committee of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that aimed to address the injustices of apartheid. In 2003 she authored a book titled, *A Human Being Died That Night* that recounts her conversations with the former commander of state-sanctioned death squads, Eugene de Kock, and argues for the possibility of remorse, forgiveness, and reconciliation. She shares this thought: "Through the many encounters I had in my work when I served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I learned that ordinary people, under certain circumstances, are capable of far greater evil than we could have imagined. But so are we capable of far greater virtue than we might have thought."¹

I think Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela's words parallel the words we heard Rebecca read from the prophet Amos: "For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and push aside the needy in the gate. ... Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph."

And I think Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela's words give a real world example of the call from our scripture in Hebrews: to bear ourselves completely before God – the one to whom we must render an account. For we have a high priest in Jesus Christ who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. And this allows us to approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

I'm going to come back to the concepts of mercy and grace and in moment. However, I want to take a tangent to talk about the language of the "high priest." In the Greek of the New Testament, this is the same word that is translated "chief priest" in the Gospels. It refers to one belonging to high priestly families who had special responsibilities in the temple system. In Hebrews chapter 5 there is a longer explanation of the high priest as the one who is in

¹ <https://www.templetonprize.org/laureate/pumla-gobodo-madikizela/>

charge of things pertaining to God on behalf of the people, including offering gifts and sacrifices for sins committed. A significant duty of the high priest was that once a year on the day of atonement, he entered the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle or the temple and offered a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of the people. This day of atonement (or Yom Kippur) is celebrated by our Jewish siblings and happened to fall on this past Friday night into Saturday.

Hebrews 5 also shares that one does not presume to take the honor of becoming the High Priest, rather become the High Priest only when called by God, just as Aaron was. According to the Mosaic law no one could aspire to the high priesthood unless he were of the tribe of Aaron. Likewise, the Letter to the Hebrews shares, “So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him “You are my Son, today I have begotten you.”

Our text this morning proclaims that “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.” As we heard last week, this high priest is the imprint of God. And in his role as a high priest, Jesus is the one who atones for our sins, brings us back into right relationship with God. And as verse 16 shares, this means “we can approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

On the surface, it can seem like a direct task – something we do each week in our prayer of confession. We acknowledge those places where we have fallen. We are assured of our forgiveness by God and then we extend that same forgiveness to others through the passing the peace of Christ. Is it that straightforward? I look back to words from Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela’s from her experience with the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Council, which taught her hard lessons about forgiveness, mercy and grace. Earlier this summer, she wrote a column for The New York Times series Big Questions. The question she responded to was *What do We Fear?* Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela wrote about our fear of forgiveness. She wrote about how forgiveness can be transformative – so transformative that sometimes we are afraid of this transformation. She writes,

“Forgiveness emerges from both within and outside the place of hurt, and it requires a degree of intentional openness, of reaching out beyond oneself toward the other. Therein lies both its transformative potential and its moral ambiguity — and this is what is most frightening about forgiveness. The inward psychological journey necessary before we can forgive enables us to see the humanity of those responsible for our wounding, and, having forgiven them, admit them into our world of common humanity.”²

Admitting others to our common humanity requires us to change, especially when we would rather hold on to our sense of being wronged. When we would rather not give up the power

² Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela. *Why Do We Fear Forgiveness?* *The New York Times*. June 17, 2024. Online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/special-series/south-africa-apartheid-forgiveness-fear.html>

that resentment and anger hold in our hearts. I acknowledge this can be a hard thing for me to do. And yet, if I (we) are to extend mercy and grace and if I (we) are to receive mercy and grace ourselves we need to embrace the inner work that calls us to a new way of life.

Mercy and grace are two words that we use a lot at church. Sometimes I worry that we use them so much they have often lost meaning and become empty phrases; they become like an advertising slogan, something that “tastes great and is less filling” or “nothing work faster or better.” As I shared with the younger PCO folks, mercy is being kind and feeling compassion for another person (or a cat), even when they don’t deserve it. Mercy is the act of withholding deserved punishment. While grace is getting something you don’t deserve; of receiving unmerited favor.

When I am trying to define hefty theological concepts, I often turn to former Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner. Buechner says about grace: “Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.” He reminds us that for grace: “There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do.”³

Buechner approaches mercy through the lens of justice.

“If you break a good law, justice must be invoked not only for goodness' sake but for the good of your own soul. Justice may consist of paying a price for what you've done or simply of the painful knowledge that you deserve to pay a price, which is payment enough. ... Justice also does not preclude mercy. It makes mercy possible. Justice is the pitch of the roof and the structure of the walls. Mercy is the patter of rain on the roof and the life sheltered by the walls. Justice is the grammar of things. Mercy is the poetry of things.”

Mercy is the poetry... As Buechner discusses Jesus death on the cross, he returns to the theme of justice and mercy... “[The cross] represents what one way or another ... we deserve the very godlessness we have brought down on our own heads. That is the justice of things. But the cross also represents the fact that goodness is present even in grimness and God even in godlessness. That is why it has become the symbol not of our darkest hopelessness, but of our brightest hope. That is the mercy of things.”⁴

Our brightest hope. We are grounded in hope as a people who receive mercy and find grace. As one commentator has noted, “It appears the author of Hebrews has spent a considerable amount of time pondering what might encourage the book’s community of readers to keep going, to press on, and the answer they arrive at is a startling one. It is the faithfulness of one

³ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/9/grace>

⁴ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/7/17/justice>

who has been tested.”⁵ Jesus has been tested, and while he is free from sin, he can understand and sympathize with us in our weakness. This grounds us in hope.

We are grounded in hope because when we are weak, when we are despairing from errors we have made, we are met by a sympathetic high priest who extends mercy. And moreover, we receive mercy and find grace within context of community. Within the context of a community that cares for each other. Within the context of our individual stories being connected to the wider faith story. Of being cared for in our most vulnerable moments. In those moments when we are not sure we can keep on going. When we are ready to throw in the towel.

During our stewardship season, we are sharing stories of how giving of our time and talent and treasures makes an impact on the wider community and on our congregation. Last week we heard how our donations of blankets helped provide both warmth and a sense of security to new refugee neighbors. This morning Nadine Royce will share the impact of our Congregational Care & Life ministry. It truly is a ministry of grace.

When we are touched by grace, we are changed and called into a new way of life. We are reoriented from feeling as if the bottom has fallen out (or is about to fall out) to remembering that we are held up by hosts of angels arms and hearts. We remember, as I shared in the words of preparation, that “Scripture offers us not one but several hopes for the future.” There is the hope of freedom after slavery. There is the hope of homecoming after exile. There is the hope of reconciliation after estrangement. There is the hope of community being formed from strangers. There is the hope of the outcast being welcomed to the table. There is the hope of new life after death⁶.

This is the hope we are grounded in – hope in all of the possibilities. For we have a great high priest who can sympathize with our weakness and invites us to the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. *Join me in prayer.*

⁵ Clint Schneklath. October 13, Ordinary 28B (Hebrews 4:12–16). *Christian Century* October 2024; published online October 7, 2024 at <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/october-13-ordinary-28b-hebrews-4-12-16>

⁶ Shirley C. Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press; 1994.p 384.