

Year B* Easter 7* Rick Lawler* 5/28/06*
St. Mary of the Hills* Blowing Rock*
The Folds of His Robe*

Then the LORD said to Moses, bring near to you your brother Aaron, to serve me as priest— You shall make sacred vestments for the glorious adornment of your brother Aaron. And you shall speak to all who have ability, whom I have endowed with skill, that they make Aaron's vestments to consecrate him for my priesthood. These are the vestments that they shall make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a checkered tunic, a turban, and a sash. When they make these sacred vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests, they shall use gold, blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen.

Aaron was Israel's first priest. And through Moses God and the people clothed him in holy vestments. The vestments were not unimportant. They said something about God, about holiness, about Aaron and the people. They still matter. These priestly vestments awaken our senses, remind us that something very special happens on Sunday morning.

On the day of his or her ordination an Episcopal priest is clothed with a chasuble for the first time. Often that chasuble is made of fine of fine material especially for that priest. But the chasuble is from the people and in some sense from God. It always reminds the priest that she has been set aside, made holy, by others.

Priesthood is a mystery. It is a mystery that has been with us a long time. As long as most the other mysteries.

Father Barks, or Father Bill, or F. B. as we sometimes called him, was my first priest. My earliest recollection of Father Barks is him standing on the church steps greeting us after the service. I must have been five or six years old. I remember his black robes. I remember hugging him and being enveloped in his black cassock and cape. I remember the strength of his hug.

I spent a lot of time with Father Barks. Confirmation, Youth group, trips to monasteries, Chicago Bear football games, dog shows, prayer meetings, and countless Sunday Eucharists! We became good friends. I think I hurt him sometimes. I know I loved him. He died before I entered the process to be ordained. But I did have a chance once to

tell him I was thinking about being a priest. He didn't say much to me. Which disappointed me. He said, "It is a great honor to be allowed a part in people's lives just when life is so important; birth, marriage, sickness, death. That's what has been important to me" he said. And that was it. He was dead within a year.

I went on to become a priest. Which still seems like a miracle to me. Partly because of you. I get a view of you that is unique. I wish sometimes that you could see yourselves from my vantage point. I get to see your generosity, your patience, your humor, your courage and good sense. I also see your brokenness. And, like Father Barks said, that is awesome. It seems like a miracle to me because I know I could never earn the right to be where I am. It has to be God's work or just a wonderful accident. Either way I am grateful to be a priest, one of your priests.

I'm sure Aaron had doubts about his right to stand before the people as a priest. If he didn't he must have been more thick-headed than usual. This is what Frederick Buechner says about Aaron after his brother Moses went up the mountain to meet with God.

With Moses lingering so long on Mount Sinai that some thought he'd settled down and gone into real estate, the people turned to Aaron for leadership, and in no time flat - despite an expensive theological education and all those years at denominational headquarters - he had them dancing around the Golden Calf like a bunch of aborigines.

Nice robes and all, Aaron made a pretty big mistake. He compounded that mistake by offering what has to be the world's worst excuse for his actions. When confronted by Moses, who has just dashed the first stone tablets containing the law to pieces, this is how the brother's conversation went.

Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" And Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold,

take it off ' ; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire,
and out came this calf!"

Aaron is not perfect.

Fr. Barks was not perfect either. He could be moody, even pouty. He sometimes ran rough shod over folks. It was still the days of "Father knows best." He had a hard time when young men like me found others things to do on Sunday than go to Church and youth group and he let you know it.

Priests are not perfect. That's been a constant.

A couple of weeks ago I came to the end of a week where I was reminded quite a few times that I fell right in line with Aaron and Father Barks, that is, I saw my limitations more clearly than usual. One of the consistently humbling things about being a priest is how often your priesthood uncovers your weaknesses. The real trick is learning to trust that as a good thing. The last thing I read before I headed home for the weekend was this passage by Thomas Merton, also a priest.

Merton said,

The union that binds the members of Christ together is not the union of proud confidence in the power of an organization. The Church is united by the humility of her members. Hers is the union that comes from the consciousness of individual fallibility and poverty, from the humility which recognizes its own limitations and accepts them, the meekness that cannot take upon itself to condemn, but can only forgive because it is conscious that it has itself been forgiven by Christ.

Thomas Merton, from *The Power and Meaning of Love*

We are united by our humility before Christ. My weaknesses, even my sins, are good things to God. They are the cracks and crevasses that God uses to get past my defenses and my pride and my senses of competency. They are the openings God is looking for to create of me a creature surrendered to him.

What Aaron and Father Barks and Thomas Merton and my own life have taught me is that priests are like everyone else. Or, to put it another way, you are like me. Your weaknesses, limitations, and even your sins, are good things to God. They are the cracks and the crevasses God uses to get past your defenses and your pride, your sense of competency. They are the openings God is looking for to create of you a creature surrendered to him.

I went home after that week a little weary. It's work being faced with what's wrong with you, whether it is the Day of Judgment or just another tough day at work. But I also went home a little more trusting of God. God comes through me. God comes through you. God comes through the likes of Aaron, Father Barks, Thomas Merton. Not even the worst things about us can not stop God. God is the one who works though the worst things, brings life and hope out of disaster, confusion, and sin. That is the good news I see this morning.

Jesus, strictly speaking, was never a priest. But the symbol of priesthood was so deeply rooted in his followers imaginations that they made him a priest after his death and resurrection. The portion of John's gospel, which we read this morning is call "The High Priestly Prayer" of Jesus. In the parish I grew up in there was a cross on which Jesus was fully vested as a priest, with alb, cincture, stole, chasuble, and maniple.

Having known a good, if imperfect priest like Father Barks, I could see myself disappearing into Jesus' robes just as I was engulfed in Father Barks' black cassock.

Being a priest means knowing we are all fallible, knowing we are all limited, knowing that none of that can stop the High Priestly Jesus from embracing us in the folds of his robes.