

Hebrews 5:5-10

⁵So 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”; ⁶as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” ⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and **he was heard because of his reverent submission.** ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

John 12:20-33

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. ²⁷“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

No Turning Back

Back in 1989 I joined the U.S. Army. I was a rather old recruit at 29 – most who enlist do so in their late teens or early twenties. But since college I had done various jobs that didn’t seem to be going anywhere, had dated some women but the relationships hadn’t gone anywhere, and I still had a lot of student debt from loans that weren’t going anywhere either. The army put it in writing that they would pay off my student loans if I made a four-year commitment. There were lots of other incentives, educational and otherwise.

But the truth is that I would have joined the army regardless of the student loan payment, regardless of the benefits, and despite the risks of facing combat somewhere in this very violent world, because I desperately wanted to escape the place that I was in my life. I really wanted to change, and I needed help to do that. I was lazy, cynical, and depressed, and I knew that unless I went through some sea change I would only get worse. But I couldn’t make that kind of change from where I was sitting. I needed to change my whole environment, the world in which I lived,

and joining the army accomplished that. I was soon surrounded by new faces in a new environment, and being pushed to my limits, physically and psychologically, further than I'd ever been pushed before. Things were hard at times, and sometimes I found myself wishing I hadn't joined, but quitting the army is not as simple as quitting a job. Once you sign those papers and raise your hand and make that promise, there's no going back. I was really starting all over again, and starting from the bottom as an enlisted soldier, with everyone around me of the exact same status – same uniform, same belongings, same haircut. Age and race and background didn't matter; we were all starting fresh from the bottom and doing our best to keep up with the demands that were placed upon us. We had no time to brood about our past, and we didn't have the temptations around us that might have caused us to fall back into the pit that many of us had climbed out of.

I was glad that I made the decision to join the army! During some of my time on leave I would go visit my old friends, but I felt further from most of them in many ways, and further from the life I had once lived. Over the course of three years I discovered that I was really a new person. Memories of my past folly did not disappear, but when I thought back on my old way of life, I could really see that my priorities had changed, my values had changed. I felt better about myself and the world I lived in.

I see that my walk with Jesus is in many ways like my tour of duty in the army. First of all, it is voluntary. As children we may have gone to church and gone through confirmation and continued to come to church out of some sense of obligation, but there's a difference between attending church and following Jesus. Going to church may be an automatic sort of behavior, like brushing our teeth before going to bed. But following Jesus more thought, more energy, more time, more commitment.

And that's why it's a difficult decision to make; it should be, because it's not at all easy to follow Jesus. (“Wide is the road that leads to destruction, but narrow the way...”) Before we make such a commitment to follow Jesus we may have only a vague idea of what lies ahead, like my idea of what military life was going to be like – I remember going to a barber before going to basic training, and having my haircut in a way that would comply with army regulations, only to find my head shaved by the end of my first day of active duty – that was a waste of \$10. I had no idea how hard they would work me physically. I had no idea how little sleep I'd be getting. When we join God's army, similar things happen; we go in thinking the road will be paved and instead find a rather muddy, rocky, and twisting road.

But deciding to follow Jesus is a conscious effort to get on the right road, and to leave all the mess of our current situation, to give up what may have been easy was not satisfying. Both John the Baptist and Jesus called it repentance, recognizing that the road you're on is the wrong road and you need to get on the right road. And you know that it would be easier for you to continue down the road you're on. Yet you are able to see where that road leads, and it's frightening to you. One of my old buddies from high school died last year of COPD, and I remember that when I last saw him alive, about sixteen years prior, he was a heavy smoker and a heavy drinker, and he was very angry with the world, and I don't know if somewhere during the past sixteen years he made a decision to turn his life around. I hope so, but I think it might have been too late to save his own life.

But the greatest similarity I see between my decision to join the army and our decision to follow Jesus is that we come to realize that the past is truly behind us because of what Jesus has done for us. When I joined the army there was no one reminding me of all the foolish and selfish decisions that I had made, of the sins that I had committed, sins of pride and indifference. That really was my past life, and good riddance. A new life had really begun, and I didn't have to feel shame or regret over past decisions and actions. I would never be able to forget many of my past mishaps, but I was able to honestly leave them in my past. I am now able to see my past sins in a positive way, because they have allowed me to sympathize more with those who have made, or are making, similar mistakes. They're no longer a source of shame because I can honestly say that that's not me anymore. Like the apostle Paul I can say, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me."

Our scripture readings today drive in the point that as Christians, our lives are brand new, and there's no turning back. I don't mean that we are not TEMPTED to turn back but when we figure out exactly who Jesus is, we have no DESIRE to turn back. So often we think of being a Christian as either a code of behavior or as an acknowledgment of some fact about Jesus' identity as Son of God or some combination of the two. We are told that we should profess faith in Jesus as Son of God in order to ensure us that the gates of heaven will open for us when our time comes, and perhaps it's our doubt about how sincere our faith really is that makes us conscious of behaving well toward others in order to tip the scales in our favor. If that's the way we think, we're no different from people of any other religion who believe that their destiny is contingent upon their behavior, past and present. Today's readings cue us in to what makes a Christian different. Today's readings prompt us neither to behave according to Jesus' instructions nor to believe in his status as the only begotten Son of God. Today's readings have nothing to say about how we need to act toward God, but have everything to say about how God acts toward us. Today's readings remind us of what Jesus has done once and for all for one and all of us. He has died for our sins, and he is now risen, which tells us that our past can longer come and bite us in our hind quarters. WE'RE FORGIVEN, and even the sin you committed this morning is forgiven. And what about the sin you're going to commit this afternoon? Well that one will be forgiven, too. More than the teaching, more than the healing, more than the 'miracling' that Jesus did in his life, it was his dying and resurrecting, his *offering* himself for us that matters the most. Hebrews describes him as the great priest who makes the sacrifice on our behalf. In John's gospel Jesus says, "It is for this reason that I have come to this hour; Father, glorify your name." Above and beyond all the moral teaching and the healing and the miracling, Jesus came to die for our sins, and because of that, we have new life. There may still be sin and the temptation to sin in our lives, and the expectations Jesus has of us are a lot like those made of my drill sergeants in basic training, but I don't have to be hounded by my past. Jesus died so I could leave that past behind me, and there is no turning back. Why would I want to go back?

Now of course you have to recognize that if Jesus died for your sins, he also died for those who have sinned against you, right? Their sins are no different from yours, and Jesus' death atones for their sins just as it atones for yours. Not all your enemies know that, but it is important that YOU know that, because that empowers you to FORGIVE those who have sinned against you. In fact it compels you to forgive. In your dark past you may have done something horrible to another person, but you have felt that weight lifted off of you as Jesus bore it on the cross, so even if the

person you have hurt refuses to forgive you, you place your faith in the cross and know that God himself has forgiven you. And knowing that, you can no longer NOT forgive those who have sinned against you, because God already has, and quite frankly he outranks you His forgiveness overrules your stubbornness, so what's the point? In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, "forgive us our trespasses AS WE forgive those..." We are forgiven AS we forgive. You can't have one without the other. As badly as someone may have treated you, that person is no more beyond God's forgiveness than you are; realize that, and celebrate it. That person may come to know that same sense of forgiveness that you feel, and you should in no way interfere with that.

In a minute, we'll hear the song "You Are Mine" as we've heard every Sunday during Lent. And as you come up to the altar to pray, I want you to hear God speak those words of forgiveness to you, so that you'll be freed from the shackles of shame and guilt. At the same time, I want you to hear God speaking the words "you are mine" to those that you are having a hard time forgiving. Christ's blood was shed for them just as was for you. Forgive as you are forgiven. Know that you're life is new in Christ. There is no reason for you to turn back. There is every reason for you to walk with the one who has forgiven your sins once and for all time. Amen.