

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
January 18, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Who Owns you?

Scriptures: I Samuel 3: 1-20, I Corinthians 6: 12-20, John 1: 43-51

“Who owns you?” Yes, “who owns you?” We might indignantly respond, “No one owns me! I am a free American man or woman. How dare you, Bob, even suggest that someone owns me!” We might think and believe this way as secular Americans, but how do we think or believe about who owns us as Christian Americans? You see this question is one of the fundamental issues being raised in today’s scripture lessons. I could rephrase the question to ask “Who or what do you serve with your life?” or “To whom or what have you given your life?” Whether or not we want to admit it, there are people, animals, institutions and material goods that have a great deal of influence upon us, and control us in some way. Most of the time, this can be a positive experience, but unfortunately, sometimes, it can be detrimental to us. More than we realize, others can see what or who owns or controls our lives. God, especially sees us for what and who we are and knows who owns us.

Another way in which I could ask the question, “Who owns you?” is “show me the last thing you will give us up and I will show you your god.” As Christians, we know that the God who gave us life and all that is around us, owns our lives—and has the final say in our lives. You see, when we confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we are saying, we are giving our lives; our hearts, minds, souls and bodies to him.

I like how this issue is raised and answered in the first question in THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, which is a part of our Book of Confessions. **Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?** The answer is one we have used as a creed in worship. “A. That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” As Christian Presbyterian Americans we are saying it is God in Jesus Christ who owns us, and we gladly serve him in response to the grace filled and loving way he treats us. The truth is, God in Jesus Christ owns us, whether we recognize it or not.

If we agree that God in Jesus Christ owns us, then it is easier to move on to the next fundamental issues being raised in today’s scripture lessons. If you do not agree, I will ask you to at least listen to the rest of the sermon.

When we recognize that God in Jesus Christ “owns us,” we can more readily hear his call to serve him as one of his disciples or priests. Yes, a priest. We do not use the concept of priest very often as modern Christian disciples except for churches who call their ministers, priests. But there are several Bible passages where believers are referred to as priests. One is from I Peter 2: “But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of **priests**, a holy nation, a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God

who called you out of darkness into God's wonderful light." In the Presbyterian and Reformed version of the Christian faith, we have a slogan based on I Peter 2, where we acknowledge that we are "The Priesthood of All Believers." This means that every person who confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior recognizes that he owns them and is calling them to be a disciple or priest wherever they live, work or play.

Now, just in case the Biblical concept of "priesthood" is confusing to some of us, let's look at the word, "priest". In its most ancient Hebrew etymology, the word "co hen" or "priest" meant bridge. In the Koine or Biblical Greek it is "Ir e ose", which means "to Stand". Putting all together, a Biblical priest is a person who stands before God as a bridge for others so that they might have access to God. You and I have been called by God's Holy Spirit to stand as priests or bridges over which people might come to surrender their lives to God in Jesus Christ, just as we have.

If we can buy into the belief that God in Jesus Christ owns us and has called us to become one of his disciples or priests, then we can move on to the next issue raised by today's scripture lessons. The issue or question is, "What kind of disciples or priests will we be?"

The priests mentioned in I Samuel provide an interesting contrast. In the Old Testament, all priests were called to stand before the presence of God on behalf of the people in the Holy of Holies in the Tent of Meeting in Jerusalem. They were to be the bridges to God for the people. They had agreed that God owns their lives and they would serve him alone. However, I Samuel 2 tells us, the sons of Eli who were serving in the Tent of Meeting when young Samuel received his call from God, were scoundrels; they cared nothing for Yahweh nor for what was due to the priests from the people." Whenever anyone offered a sacrifice, as God's servant priests, they would **not** accept the meat that had been given as a cooked or burnt sacrifice to God as the law of God required." You see, the sons of Eli wanted the raw meat so that they could cook it and eat it themselves. This eliminated any connection the worshipper might have to God in offering a sacrifice. These corrupt priests would say to the worshippers, "if you do not give us the raw meat now, we shall take it by force." The young men's sins were very great in Yahweh's eyes, because they treated with contempt the offering made to Yahweh. They were also having illicit sexual relationships with women who served as greeters at the Tent of Meeting. These priests failed miserably as bridges. These priests were behaving in a beastly manner by forcing, controlling and manipulating people. The ministry of a priest of God was to be loving, healing, calling out evil when necessary, and to be bringing freedom in ones relationship to God and others. Eli's sons allowed power and food to own them over God. Those priests failed miserably as bridges and had a terrible effect on others.

In contrast to this, we have the priesthood as seen in the young teenager named Samuel. In the midst of the scandal of Eli's sons, slept this young man. His mother had dedicated him to the Lord when he was born. Near the dawn of one morning, God called him to be a priest in the style of a prophet priest who spoke God's truth and lived in God's ways. It took four times for Samuel to understand that it was God calling him. This makes sense to me. How many times has God had to speak to me or you in some way or another for us to finally hear the call?

God's call for us to be his priests or bridges that he wants us to be is not always easy to fulfill. It takes great trust in God and courage of commitment. Eli, who had raised Samuel, as a son, made Samuel tell him what God had spoken to him. The message was that Eli and his sons were going to be kicked out of the Tent of Meeting for their terrible behavior. In great fear, but desiring to be obedient to the God who owned him, Samuel did what had to be done and told the truth. Whistle blowers often pay a terrible price, but in the end God was with Samuel and the ways of God prevailed. Initially, it sounds inspirational to say that we have been called by God to do something and have given our lives to serving the God who owns us. Yet, God can call us to take on some tough challenges in ministry.

We may or may not realize it, but the call we received in our baptism, where God claims us and seals us to him, is God's call to us to be part of the "Priesthood of All Believers" and a "bridge" on God's behalf to others in the society around us. This Monday is the celebration of Martin Luther King Day. What a call God gave to him as a young adult to challenge the evil of racism and racist structures in our society. God walked with him through many a mile of protest marches and more than several nights in jail. Unfortunately, it cost Martin his life.

We do not have to be as out there as Dr. King was, but we may be called by God to be bridges for others to God as we face challenges in our jobs, school classes, volunteer work, or if we live with one or more persons. We can be a challenge to ourselves. Each of these circumstances involves challenges. What you and I say or do to someone else has an effect on them, good or bad. All this applies to us regardless of our age. It is a challenge indeed to be a bridge to God for other people. Yet, Like Samuel, because it is God who calls us and owns us, we need to know that God also walks with us as we do his priestly work.

Regardless of the task God calls us to in the "priesthood of all believers," all it really takes is to say, "Yes" to the Lord with the same basic faith and trust that the young teenager, Samuel had in God. He said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." It is that simple and that courageous. You see, Samuel turned out to be a very strong bridge, who gave the people access to God, and who carried God's messages back to them.

The passage from I Corinthians is also about what or who owns us and the effect, we, as Christ's priests, can have on others. This passage was written to new Christians, some of whom had been worshippers in male and female prostitute religions which involved not only sex, but heavy drinking and gluttony. Some had been faithful Jews who had felt imprisoned by the laws and rules of the synagogue. They heard about and responded in faith to God in Jesus Christ, through the witness of the Apostle Paul. They had become, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, people "who have been consecrated in Jesus Christ and called to be God's holy people with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord as well as ours." They were a part of the priesthood of all believers, bridges to one another and to others for God.

The problem was that after they had been freed by Christ from pagan religions and the oppression of synagogue law they thought they had the freedom "to be and do anything" they wanted, but as Paul wrote, "not everything is good for us." Paul further chastised these new Christians in stating..."do you not realize that anyone who attaches themselves to a prostitute is one body with them, since the two, as it is

said, become one flesh. But anyone who attaches themselves to the Lord is one spirit with him. Do you not realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you and whom you received from God?" Do we not realize that God in Jesus Christ owns us and we need to live by God's ways? So when the Corinthians abused the freedoms we have in Christ, and allowed sex, food and debauchery to own them, which is true of so much of our modern society, they became like some of the bridges in our highway systems, potholed with rusted through supports. They easily collapsed into the river when they were struck by all kinds of beliefs and practices that could spoil their witness as priests and weaken their superstructure as God's bridges. We must be careful of this, too, as Christian Americans, so that we do not lose our effective witness as bridges for others to God.

In the reading from John 1, we also discover what kind of disciples or priests God in Jesus Christ wants us to be. He wants us to be like Phillip and Nathaniel. They were willing to surrender their lives to him. They realized that Jesus was the ultimate priest or bridge for all people whose hearts and bodies cry out so desperately to be one with God. With them, let us again surrender to God's marvelous ownership. We would also be very, very smart to follow Paul's admonition, to use our bodies for the glory of God. We never know when or in what circumstances the call will come from God's Holy Spirit for us to be a bridge for others who need to see God's will in us, or who wish to be introduced to Jesus. As we answer God's call may our prayer be, "Oh God, give us the same basic faith and trust in you, that the teenager Samuel had, so that our response to your call, may simply be, 'Speak Lord, for your servant, your priest, is listening.'" Amen.