

All of you who came to church today
have heard quite a few words already...

words on the radio as you drove to church
a friendly hello from someone across the parking lot
a good morning from an usher as he handed you a bulletin
song words set to music
a Bible reading from the lector...

Lots of words.

But among all these, are you hearing the words
you **MOST NEED TO HEAR**?

For I know that you, like me, brought some **NEEDS** with you through that door.

Some of us came in **LONELY**,
starved for another person to be interested and really listen to us.

Some of us are wrestling with a tough **DECISION**....or a frightening
TEMPTATION...and we don't know what to do.

Others, I am sure, are sitting on a bundle of **ANXIETIES**.
Our health. Our children's turmoil. Our finances.
It's tied our stomach in knots.

Still others, recently retired...or widowed...or with children grown and gone
are wondering what **PURPOSE** is left in living.

So many needs!

Some years ago when I attended a pastors' conference,
I was reunited with an old friend, a fellow pastor named Dave Belasic,
who had been a neighbor of mine in Ohio and then a DP in New York State.

As we talked, he confided in me that he was overwhelmed by the number of
troubled congregations and troubled pastors.

“I see so many burdens!” he told me.

I’ll tell you the truth. Two of the words I need to hear the most right now are the words
I UNDERSTAND.

When these two words are spoken with honesty and compassion,
there is hardly a lovelier sound.

If someone says, “I UNDERSTAND,” it means I am no longer ALONE.
I have a FRIEND!
And there is a beginning of help and hope.

Isn’t that what drives so many people to see a counselor, or join a support group?

Isn’t that, in part, what brought many of us here to church today?
To hear those words from someone, but most of all, from GOD?

If that hunger for understanding drives you today,
listen to the Epistle lesson from Hebrews 4:

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 have NOT a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us, then, with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Did you hear the words?

From beginning to end, this text says it unmistakably to our hungry hearts:
GOD UNDERSTANDS!

We have it on the authority of our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

That’s what a PRIEST does, after all.

He’s a Mediator, a go-between.

Someone who can carry our burdens into the very presence of God,
and bring back a message from God’s heart to ours.

Jesus, better than anyone else, knows the heart of God, for he is, the writer reminds us,
the very SON OF GOD.

Even in our imperfect human world, who better knows a father's plan and intentions than his son?

Henry Ford entrusted the running of his giant auto company to his sons and grandsons.

Faith healer Oral Roberts and Evangelist Billy Graham relinquished their preaching ministries to their sons.

When writer J. R. R. Tolkien died, it was his son Christopher who finished one of his father's unfinished books and edited the maps in the LORD OF THE RINGS.

Jesus, the Son of God, knows the Father's will intimately.

He came from His Father's throne of grace, stood among us, and spoke the Father's word to a sad and sin-sick world:
"I UNDERSTAND!"

But how can that be?

How can God in heaven truly understand, truly sympathize with people on earth?

For as the Jews pointed out, GOD IS HOLY –
and "holy" means "separate"... "different" from people like us.

The Greeks, too, found it hard to believe that God could ever understand or "feel with" us.

What distinguished God, said the Stoics,
was not His SYMPATHY,
but His APATHY – His lack of feeling, His divine detachment!

Don't we wonder how God could begin to understand
the cold sweat of a teenager's first date
or the panic of being unable to pay mounting debts,
the hopelessness of an addict,
or the crushing pain of a divorce?

How indeed, unless by some miracle, God Himself could step into the world and experience human life from the INSIDE?

The year was 1959.

The racial crisis in the United States was approaching the boiling point.

Those favoring integration clashed with those who wanted to maintain racial separation. Tensions were mounting.

A white man named John Howard Griffin, puzzled about all of it and unable to understand the complaints of black people, decided on an astonishing and risky course of action...
using medication and special dyes, he darkened his own skin and posed as a black man.

It was, he said, like passing into a different universe.
he traveled through the Southern states, and there he was treated in a manner that appalled him.
He was refused entry into restaurants and hotels, forbidden to ride certain vehicles, taunted, called names, and cheated.

So powerful was his experience that he returned home and wrote a book about it, a book entitled

BLACK LIKE ME

John Howard Griffin learned to understand black people in perhaps the only way it was possible – by becoming one himself.

That is the very thing the Son of God did...to an even greater degree.
For He did not simply dress as a human, or pose as a human...

HE BECAME A HUMAN BEING! The writer of Hebrews says,
He himself partook of the same nature. He was made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest...

therefore he is
not...unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.

The word “sympathize” literally means “to suffer with.”

John Howard Griffin suffered with black people the abuse and indignities they experienced.

Jesus, our High Priest, suffered with us, the whole of the human condition – the cold and poverty, the loneliness and physical abuse, and, yes, the powerful temptation of SIN.

We have a High Priest who
in every respect has been tempted as we are.

Have you ever pondered that? “Tempted as we are...”?

Are you tempted to put MATERIAL NEEDS BEFORE spiritual ONES?
So was HE!

“Son of man, command that these stones become bread”

Are you tempted to strike back, to retaliate when hurt?

So was HE! How often he had to bear the taunting and the name-calling:

“Glutton... drunkard... son of the Devil”

Are you tempted to avoid sufferent and take the easy way out of a hard situation?

So was He! In Gethsemane he wrestled with fear and asked,

“Father, let this cup pass from me!”

TEMPTED IN EVERY RESPECT.

It is my conviction that the Bible means what it says. That Jesus felt
the heady lure of popularity
the sweet whisper of sexual desire
and alcohol’s promises of forgetfulness...

Felt it all, but did not SIN!

Those three words “yet without sinning” signal even better news than we hoped.

For Jesus’ triumph over temptation brings us the news that God says even more than
“I UNDERSTAND”

God goes on to say, “I CAN HELP!”

That is where this High priest parts company with every other human helper.

A MARRIAGE COUNSELOR can describe a better way for a couple to
communicate, but he cannot give them the will to use it.

An Alcoholics Anonymous group can confront a drinker and point the way
to sobriety, but it cannot keep him from drinking.

But Jesus does more.

He comes, not merely to SYMPATHIZE, but to be a SUBSTITUTE.

Because He did not sin, He could offer his own lifeblood for the sins of others.

One of our Communion hymns says it this way:

**Offered was He for greatest and for least
Himself the Victim and Himself the Priest**

Nor is His saving work finished.

Not only did He give Himself into death on the cross.

Not only did He rise from the grave to conquer death.

But even now He stands at God's throne to pray for us and bring our cries to God.

He is able, says Hebrews 7, to save those who draw near to God through Him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

He is our CRISIS LINE, connecting us with God's help at every hour.

I read about something that happened in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, one bitterly cold night years ago.

A man working for a crisis line received a phone call from a man who had swallowed an overdose of pills. "Can God forgive me?" the desperate man asked.

The listener, using his equipment, traced the source of the call and dispatched an emergency response team. But using his heart and his faith, he also spoke to the distraught man about a Savior who loved him and even now stood in the presence of God to forgive him and help him start over.

The caller was located in time for paramedics to save his life. And also in time for him to meet the man who had taken the call, from whom he learned that he could begin again with hope.

WE HAVE A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

means that each of us has a powerful crisis line at hand.

One need not find a phone booth, nor insert any quarters.

NO! For the Lord Jesus is always on duty at the Father's throne to say what we desperately need to hear:

"I UNDERSTAND" and

"I WILL HELP"

What will you do with this message?

Ah, I hoped you would ask!

The text says very simply,

Let us with confidence draw near to the throne.

No need to worry. No need to feel unworthy or ashamed.

HE UNDERSTANDS!

We are doing it now, as we meet in this church, and as the words of the old liturgy used to invite us so sweetly,

**Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins
unto God our Father.**

Let us dare to believe that God's throne is a throne of Grace –
a place where we get something better than we deserve!

Then too shall we not do what that Crisis Line Operator did for the
desperate man who called?

Shall we not, having experienced the SYMPATHY of God
draw near to the neighbor and share that SYMPATHY with him?

SYMPATHY, wrote Charles Parkhurst, "is two hearts tugging at one load."

Open your ears today when you go out from this place.

Listen to the cries around you,
and speak your Savior's message:

I UNDERSTAND!