

**Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,  
October 15, 2017**

**Solemn Evensong & Benediction**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Year 1, Proper 23: Micah 6:1–8; Luke 7:36–50; Nehemiah 9:9–15*

In Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented*,<sup>1</sup> the narrative is dark from its beginning. When Tess returns home unmarried and with child—well, it's a sad English novel.

Tess gives birth to an infant son. The child becomes gravely ill. When the end of the infant's life approaches, her father refuses to let the vicar into his house to baptize the boy. So Tess does it. She names her son capital "S" "Sorrow." In the morning, she seeks out the vicar. Though he recognizes the validity of the baptism done by Tess, he refuses to bury the child in the churchyard proper, because the boy was born out of wedlock. The child Sorrow is buried at night, not by the vicar, but by the sexton and the mother in a corner where those outside the community of the faithful are buried.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

This story is only one example in the novel of what one might call, not only a religious, but also a social ideology crowding out, as it were, humility, understanding, and mercy. The baptism was done correctly; whence—if I may use that old word—comes the prejudice? If a man may be forgiven intimacy before marriage, why not a woman? The desperation of poverty runs through the novel from beginning to end.

Tonight's lessons are well chosen. The prophet Micah addresses the ideology of idols and unfaithfulness. Luke addresses a different kind of ideology. Unlike the vicar of the novel, or the Pharisee in Luke, Jesus graciously welcomed the touch of one who sought to be faithful to him, though the ideology of that time and place deemed it offensive. It did not bother the Pharisee that he disregarded the ordinary customs of hospitality for his guest. In his commentary on this passage, François Bovon pointed out that instead of the verb "to hear" or "to believe," in this story what matters is the verb "to love."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 298.

One more thing. When Father Matthew Mead was here in August as our preacher and concelebrant for the Feast of the Assumption, he remarked on how much he still values the opportunity to kneel for Communion, and as a priest, this doesn't happen very often for him. But kneeling or standing to receive Communion—or whether the altar is oriented for a presider to pray facing the congregation or looking away from the congregation—is not the biggest ritual shift since the time of the New Testament.

In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which we use for many good reasons, we heard, “and [Jesus] went into the Pharisee’s house, and took his place at table.”<sup>3</sup> But that’s really not what the Greek says. The New Revised Standard Version also misses the opportunity to translate the Greek here more carefully. The New American Bible, Revised Edition (Roman Catholic) gets it right: “And [Jesus] entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table.”

Jesus isn't sitting at a table—it wasn't like Leonardo's Last Supper. Because Jesus is lying on a couch, the woman can be, “standing behind him at his feet” and

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 7:36b.

can bathe his feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair, kiss them with her lips, and anoint them with a costly oil.<sup>4</sup>

The Pharisee is unconcerned that he has treated Jesus ungraciously—Jesus allowing the woman to touch him is for the Pharisee proof of the Pharisee’s own righteousness. He does not know who Jesus is, and Jesus knows that. Jesus also knows of the woman’s love and welcomes her touch. As it will be at Calvary, knowing who Jesus is and having love for him will open the way to God’s kingdom.

Across the decades of the second century, the 100s, the weekly Saturday evening meal, at the end of a day of work, that was shared by Christians for fellowship, teaching, prayer, and song, will be transformed into a gathering on Sunday morning where bread and wine will be shared, but not the fellowship of a meal. The relationships within the Christian community and the experience of what it means to be a Christian will be different from those who were used to really eating with each other, rich and poor, free and slave, probably united by language, but not by race. There’s

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 7:38.

no clear historical record of how the transition was effected; the church just grew. May the church continue to grow and change under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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