

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Exodus 12:1–14; Psalm 78:14–20, 23–25; 1 Corinthians 11:23–32;
John 13:1–20*; Psalm 22*

Many of you may not know that Rick Austill, an active member of our local congregation, died unexpectedly Sunday night. He was only 63 years old. He was at a restaurant for supper with close friends. He went downstairs to the restroom. The next thing his friends knew was that the EMT's had arrived. They followed the ambulance to Bellevue Hospital Center. They were with Rick when he died, not long before 10 PM.

Rick was a person with extraordinary gifts, a musician, a composer. And he had a great gift for arranging flowers at Saint Mary's. It was his turn to be in charge of the arrangements for Holy Week and Easter Day. With a little help from another member of the guild, he did the palm arrangements that were on the altar on Palm Sunday. His "last rites" were both the Solemn Mass of the Passion and supper with his friends.

On Sunday I gave him the Bread at Communion. I spoke to him after Mass about how great the

arrangements on the altar were. Since Monday, my mind—my heart—has carried me every morning to one of the petitions for the Burial of the Dead, “Help us, we pray, in the midst of things we cannot understand, to believe and trust in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to life everlasting.”¹

I know many are grieving. As far as I know now, the Burial of the Dead will be celebrated for Rick here, and his ashes will be placed in the Lady Chapel Vault. I will announce the date and time when the arrangements are confirmed.

Our gospel tonight and the passion tomorrow are from John. John’s narratives always invite us to consider the one thing that matters, “Do you [and I] believe that Jesus is the Anointed, [that is, the Messiah, the Christ,] that is, the Son of God?”²

Last week Father Ryan Lesh, an academic anesthesiologist, now at the University of Virginia, shared an article by the late New Testament scholar

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 481.

² John 20:31. My translation.

Raymond Brown, that he had come across for ministers who are preaching on John.³ The article reminded me that John's gospel wasn't written for those who knew Jesus. It was written so that those who heard its words can encounter Christ, can believe in him, and thus have eternal life.

Father Brown also reminded his readers that in John, when Jesus tells Martha, whose brother Lazarus has died, that she will see the glory of God, the glory is not Lazarus rising from the dead, but Jesus himself, the Word made Flesh.

The healing of the Man Born Blind that matters was not Jesus giving him his sight, but after receiving his sight, when the man is again rejected by his parents and by his community of faith, Jesus sought him out so that he might see the glory of God—in other words, so that he might believe and have eternal life. When Jesus speaks to him, the man falls on his knees and says, “Yes, Lord, I believe.”⁴

³ Raymond E. Brown, “The Johannine World for Preachers,” *Interpretation* 43 (Jan. 1989), 58–65).

⁴ John 9:38.

Tonight we heard only a very little of the very long narrative of the supper before the Passover in John—the longest single story by far of any in the gospels. In John, there are no words about the bread and the wine being a sign for the disciples of something greater. There are words about being clean, about knowing who Jesus is, and about the relationship of believers to him and to each other. In John, from the beginning to the end, though Jesus shares our mortal life, he is always the One who was in the beginning and through whom all things were created.

That night, the disciples' sins were not their real problem, nor the dirt on their feet, but their faith and their fears. When they looked at Jesus, they did not believe in God's only Son. His disciples heard Jesus speak but did not hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. When they look at each other, they did not see a brother or sister. Across the Kidron Valley, his disciples, whom this night he will proclaim to be his friends, will all scatter when Judas and the others come to arrest him.

One of Father Brown's students, Sandra Schneiders, a Roman Catholic religious, and herself a leading Johannine scholar, is the author of one of my favorite

books on John, *Written That You May Believe*. She strongly, and rightly, asserts that the meaning of this gospel is ahead of us, not behind us, in our encounter with the Word.⁵ Faith in Jesus Christ puts us in relationship with Christ and with others who believe in him. The gospel wasn't written for us to go back to Calvary, but to believe in God and to love others now and in the life to come, in this world and the next.

For the evangelist, water is more than water, bread is more than bread, and wine is more than wine. The sight and hearing that matter is believing in Jesus Christ. The washing of feet is not about dirt, but to touch and care for others. God's Spirit is with us as we try to do the things that Jesus would want us to do.

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

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⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 184.