

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, August 4, 2019

Said Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year C, Proper 13: Ecclesiastes 1:12–14; 2:18–23; Psalm 49:1–7*;
Colossians 3:5–17*; Luke 12:13–21*

In my homily last evening at our Sunday Vigil Mass, I didn't mention yesterday's mass shooting in El Paso, Texas. But awakened with the news of a second mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio, in the early hours of this morning, I want to say something about this evil that is abroad in our country in our lifetime. Living and working at Saint Mary's, I know I listen and worry when I hear the sirens of more than one ambulance at a time passing by the church. Things have happened here, and evil things can happen here again.

As far as I know, none of my own family and friends have been victims of murder during my life. I've never had to minister to the family of a person who has been murdered or to the family of a member of our armed forces who was killed recently while on active duty. Among the prayers I treasure for its clarity and strength is a collect that was adapted from *Holy Dying*, a devotional text by the seventeenth-century English bishop Jeremy Taylor for our first American

Prayer Book in 1789—and it’s still there.¹ I quote the traditional language:

*O God, whose days are without end, and whose mercies cannot be numbered: Make us, we beseech thee, deeply sensible of the shortness and uncertainty of life; and let thy Holy Spirit lead us in holiness and righteousness all our days; that, when we shall have served thee in our generation, we may be gathered unto our fathers, having the testimony of a good conscience; in the communion of the Catholic Church; in the confidence of a certain faith; in the comfort of a reasonable, religious, and holy hope; in favor with thee our God; and in perfect charity with the world. All which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”*²

Today’s gospel lesson begins with words addressed to Jesus, “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.”³ Jesus’ response is a sobering one—and his words are hard to translate from New Testament Greek to English.

¹ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 316.

² *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], 489.

³ Luke 12:13.

We heard from the Revised Standard Version, “Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”⁴ Though François Bovon’s translation in his commentary on Luke is not literal, I think it captures the meaning better: “Take care and be on your guard against all kinds of greed; because, for those who are affluent, life does not depend on what they themselves possess.”⁵

There are four vocative nouns—words of direct address—in this short lesson: Teacher, Human (the Greek word used is *ἄνθρωπος*, (human being)⁶, Soul, and Fool. All humans have souls. All of us can be foolish. All of us can choose to know Jesus as our teacher, to know that what matters is God’s gift of life in this world and in the world to come.

Professor Bovon taught at Harvard for many years. He died in 2013. In his commentary he draws our attention to a sermon written on this parable of the

⁴ Luke 12:15.

⁵ François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 192.

⁶ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἄνθρωπος,” 81–82.

rich fool by the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia (central Turkey) known as Basil the Great. He wrote, “If Scripture offer us this example [the one of the foolish rich man], it is so that we will avoid behaving similarly.”⁷

Basil also gave an example of the not uncommon and harsh poverty of his time and place: the agony of an impoverished and hungry tenant farmer who had to sell one of his children to feed the others.⁸

Luke is the gospel where the Lord’s teaching on money and possessions begins before he is born with the words of Mary, “[the Lord] has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty.”⁹ In Luke, when John the Baptist warns of the “the wrath to come,” he is asked by the crowds, “What then shall we do?” He responds, “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 205.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Luke 1:53. *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], 119.

¹⁰ Luke 3:10–11.

May God help our hearts to be generous as we are able with whatever blessings come our way. May God help us help others to see a way for us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

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

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