

**Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
October 20, 2019**

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year C, Proper 24: Genesis 32:3–8, 22–30; Psalm 121; 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5;

*Luke 18:1–8**

In our last Prayer Book, the celebration of the Eucharist began most Sundays with what was called the Summary of the Law, with the people kneeling: “Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.¹ These words are found in Mark, in Matthew, and in Luke.

In Mark a scribe asks Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?”² In Matthew, a scribe who is a lawyer asks, “Which is the great commandment in the law?”³ Luke gives these words a different context. A lawyer asks Jesus, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by asking the lawyer, “What is written in the law?” When he responds correctly, Jesus replies,

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 67, 69.

² Mark 12:28.

³ Matthew 22:36.

“You have answered right; do this and you will live.”⁴ Luke continues, “But [the lawyer], desiring to justify himself said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor.”⁵ Jesus then tells, if I may speak of it in this way, the Parable of the Bad Priest, the Bad Levite, and the Good Samaritan. Jesus concludes that story by asking, “Which of these three proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? [The lawyer] said, ‘The one who showed mercy on him.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ ”⁶ Like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, today’s gospel lesson, generally known as the “Parable of the Unjust Judge,” makes me think of the title of the Spike Lee film, *Do the Right Thing*.

Last Sunday, our gospel lesson ended with these words, “Behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”⁷ Our lectionary omits a long passage on what Luke calls, “the days of the Son of man”—the end of time.⁸ The kingdom of God is among us. We do not know when our own lives or creation as we know it will come to an end. God can work for us in ways we don’t recognize or expect, even when we are victims of—the Greek word

⁴ Luke 10:28.

⁵ Luke 10:29.

⁶ Luke 10:36–37.

⁷ Luke 17:21b.

⁸ Luke 17:22–21.

here means—injustice, unrighteousness, wickedness.⁹ Today’s parable is about praying and never losing heart. Jesus and his disciples are close to Jericho, their last stop on the way to Jerusalem and the cross.

Luke the Evangelist is writing probably in the 80s of the first century of the Christian Era.¹⁰ The Roman Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians was in the year 64. The Great Jewish Revolt left Jerusalem in ruins in the year 70. In spite of the continuing growth of Christian communities, apostasy—abandoning the faith—was a challenge. The letters and gospels that become the New Testament, beginning with the earliest text, Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, are shaped by belief in Christ’s second coming and its delay.¹¹

When *The Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer* was published in 1976, which came to be the 1979 Prayer Book that we use, there was a lot of discussion about the new catechism, now called “An Outline of the Faith,”¹² but still in the traditional question and answer format. My favorite catechism question and answer

⁹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀδικία,” 20.

¹⁰ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 226.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 461–62.

¹² *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 844–62.

belongs to the Presbyterian Shorter Westminster Catechism—the language is from 1646: “Question: What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.”¹³ But I very much like first question and answer of our new catechism in the section on Prayer and Worship: “Question: What is prayer? Answer: Prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with or without words.”¹⁴

While I was in Tucson at the beginning of the month for a conference I heard a presentation by Father Scott Gunn. Since 2011, he’s been executive director of Forward Movement, an evangelism and discipleship ministry of the Episcopal Church that was started during the Great Depression. Part of his presentation was on the research they have done on practicing Episcopalians. They’ve interviewed over 12,000 people in over 200 congregations—enough for their work to be statistically significant. They sorted us Episcopalians into four groups: People whose engagement can be described as “Exploring a life with God in Christ—people taking small steps on an intentional spiritual journey;” “Growing in a life with God in Christ—

¹³ <https://thewestminsterstandard.org/westminster-shorter-catechism/>, (accessed 20 October 2019).

¹⁴ *BCP* (1979), 856.

people who are committed but still have lots of questions;” “Deepening in a life with God in Christ—people who describe themselves as relying on God’s presence and power in their daily lives;” and finally, “Centered in a life with God in Christ—people who describe their faith as the most important relationship in their lives.”¹⁵

I wasn’t surprised that engagement with scripture and the Eucharist were called “Key Catalysts for Spiritual Growth.” I was surprised and happy to hear that a daily prayer life, short or long, but discipline practiced daily, matters for relationship to God. It can be as little as making the first words of our day the Lord’s Prayer. I’ve never taken or taught a class on daily personal prayer, but there’s no reason why some of us can’t put one together—and we will. I close with words from today’s gospel: “Jesus told the disciples a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”¹⁶

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

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¹⁵ <https://renewalworks.org/researchsummary/>, (accessed 20 October 2019).

¹⁶ Luke 18:1.