

Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany

February 23, 2020

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2: Deuteronomy 6:1–9; 2 Corinthians 3:7–18; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26

At the end of my second year in seminary, my classmate, John McCausland, whose family had a cabin in northern Wisconsin, invited me and another classmate, Jim Nutter, to join him there for a few days just to get away. I remember a couple of things from that weekend. After a run, when we jumped into the lake, it was really cold—the snow had melted only a couple weeks earlier—and Jim, a guy from Maine, stayed in that very cold water the longest.

I have a memory of us going to see a movie. I'd forgotten the name, but the internet helped me find it. It turned out to be *Porky's*—a comedy about the escapades of 1950s high school students.¹ I remember seeing a movie because Jim and I gave John grief during it and afterwards—at the time he and his wife's two daughters were teenagers.

The other thing I remember as we drove north, not on interstates, but on state roads, was hearing a radio

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084522/>, (accessed 23 February 2020).

preacher talking about being a “dispensationalist” but not a “hyper dispensationalist.” It was a new theological term for all three of us. More laughs.

My 1978 edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*² doesn’t have an entry for “dispensationalism,” “hyper dispensationalism, or the term I came across trying to look this up on the world wide web, “ultra dispensationalism.”³ It turns out that a priest, John Nelson Darby, in the now Anglican Church of Ireland is credited with initiating this theological direction. You may recall Garrison Keillor’s *A Prairie Home Companion* radio show, where he would speak from to time about the Plymouth Brethren, the tradition in which grew up. Wikipedia tells us that Keillor left the church of his youth and now worships in an Episcopal parish.⁴ In 2011, when he was doing his show from Town Hall on Forty-third Street on Easter Eve, he spoke about being at Saint Mary’s on Good Friday.⁵

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978).

³ <https://www.bereanbiblesociety.org/are-we-hyper-dispensationalists/>, (accessed 23 February 2020).

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Garrison_Keillor, (accessed 23 February 2020).

⁵ He mentioned that a young “priest” was the narrator for the passion. It was actually the Reverend Remington Slone, then a transitional deacon, and a senior at the General Theological Seminary.

The word “dispensation” is used four times in tonight’s reading from the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians: “the dispensation of death⁶ . . . the dispensation of the Spirit⁷ . . . the dispensation of condemnation, the dispensation of righteousness.”⁸ But when I went to look up the Greek word here, *diakonía*, I became confused. It’s ordinary meaning is “service” or “ministry,” perhaps more specifically an assignment by someone for others.⁹ For the record, the often-helpful *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* makes no mention of dispensationalism. I’m pretty sure I don’t want to venture into the theological world of the Plymouth Brethren. So, I’m just going to leave that hanging.

In the Acts of the Apostles *diakonía* is used in this verse, but you wouldn’t know it: “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.¹⁰ A more literal translation would be, “because the Hebrews

⁶ 2 Corinthians 3:7.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:8.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:9.

⁹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “*διακονία*,” 230.

¹⁰ Acts 6:1.

were being overlooked in the daily ministry [to] the [Hebrew] widows.”

I checked the *New Revised Standard Version* and the Roman Catholic *New American Bible Revised Edition*. Both used the word “ministry” to translate these verses from Second Corinthians. The King James Version uses “ministration” in Second Corinthians and, arguably, a better translation of the verse from Acts: “because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”

I don’t have a commentary on Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. I probably should. It’s regarded as Paul’s work, but there are arguments that an editor—compiler—put it together from two or more letters Paul had written.¹¹

I’m not comfortable with all of Paul’s words in this letter, for example, “to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed.”¹²—any more than I am comfortable hearing Jesus in John say to the Jews, “You

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 548–51.

¹² 2 Corinthians 3:14–15.

are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.¹³

Jesus opened a new place in the lives of those who needed his words. His Spirit is still opening the lives of those who are ready. John and Paul both have echoes of universal salvation in their writings—not major themes, but it's there. John's Jesus speaks of having other sheep, bringing them into his fold, and there being one flock, one shepherd.¹⁴ And Paul in his letter to the Romans wrote "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all."¹⁵ John the Evangelist and Paul the Apostle sometimes do reflect a very merciful and very generous, merciful, and loving Savior.

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

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¹³ John 8:44a.

¹⁴ John 10:16.

¹⁵ Romans 11:32.