

Sermon for Second Sunday in Lent

March 8, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Genesis 12:1–8; Psalm 33:18–22; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17*; John 3:1–17*

Today’s gospel lesson can give the impression that Nicodemus went in the darkness of the night to Jesus, the Light of the world and just disappeared.¹

Nicodemus asked three questions. Jesus responds at some length. Then, Jesus and his disciples are off to Judea. Only later in John’s gospel will we learn what this encounter with Jesus meant for Nicodemus.

Later in the gospel, gathered with other Pharisees in the temple on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Nicodemus is mocked when he defends Jesus by saying, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?”² Raymond Brown wrote that Nicodemus’ question suggests that this Pharisee had indeed found faith when he went looking for Jesus in the night—today’s gospel lesson.³

¹ John 8:12.

² John 7:51.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), I:130.

Nicodemus' journey with Jesus continued. In this gospel we read, "Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus . . . asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus . . . So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices . . . Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid . . . they laid Jesus there."⁴

In his commentary on Jesus' unhurried burial in this gospel, Francis Moloney calls this story, "Jesus Is Buried in a Garden by His New-found Friends."⁵ The body is buried with a royal fortune of spices. Before dawn on the third day, Mary Magdalene will return and discover the stone taken away. Peter and the unnamed disciple we know only as the disciple Jesus loved were there, but they left. The Risen Lord would make himself known to Mary Magdalene and say to her, "Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."⁶

⁴ John 19:38–42.

⁵ Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 510–13.

⁶ John 20:17. My translation.

Yesterday, I was the celebrant for the 12:10 Eucharist. The gospel was a very short passage from the Sermon on the Mount.⁷ It was about loving our enemies. The concluding verse was, as translated by the Revised and New Revised Standard Version of the Bible was, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.”⁸

It doesn’t happen often that this yesterday’s gospel occurs as a Sunday gospel, but three years ago it did—it won’t be heard again on a Sunday until 2025. I remembered that Dr. Mark Davis in his Scripture blog suggested that the English word “complete” was a more useful translation of the Greek word *teleós* than the English word “perfect.”⁹ “Complete” carries an echo of the process of maturing.¹⁰ For me, the parable of the sower comes to mind, where seeds in good soil grow and bring forth more and more grain.¹¹

Matthew the evangelist organized his gospel around five discourses, sermons but John organized his gospel

⁷ Matthew 5:43–48.

⁸ Matthew 5:48.

⁹ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/02/be-perfect-as-nature-is-perfect.html> (Accessed 19 February 2017).

¹⁰ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “τέλειος,” 995–96.

¹¹ Mark 4:1–9; Matthew 13:1–9; Luke 8:4–8.

around Jesus' encounters with individuals, some named, some not. The next three Sundays we will hear the stories of the unnamed woman of Samaria, the unnamed man born blind, and the story of Jesus' friend Lazarus, at whose grave he wept. John is the gospel without apostles. In John, every individual believer is in a direct relationship with the Good Shepherd because he or she is a believer.

I was celebrant last month on Monday, February 24, the Feast of Saint Matthias the Apostle—the apostle chosen by casting lots to take the place of Judas.¹² As a matter of discipline, I read the prayers of the Prayer Book as they are even if the occasional prayer seems wrong to me. For Matthias we prayed to God, “Grant that your Church . . . may always be guided and governed by faithful and true pastors”¹³ At the end of John's gospel, the Risen Jesus does not ask Peter to govern Jesus' “Church,” but to feed Jesus' sheep, to tend them, to be a pastor, a shepherd, not a ruler.¹⁴

Back to Nicodemus' journey of faith. It was a new friend, not those who had been with him from the beginning, who went to Pilate on that terrible day.

¹² Acts 1:15–26.

¹³ *The Book of Common Prayer* [1979], 239.

¹⁴ John 21:15–17.

Nicodemus came to follow Jesus in life and did not desert him in death.

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

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