

Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: 1 Samuel 16:1–13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8–14; John 9:1–41**

When I began attending Saint Paul’s Church in Charlottesville during my college years, there were very small Prayer Books and a copy of *Services for Trial Use*¹ in the pews. The latter was known as “The Green Book” because of its cover’s color. I wasn’t really paying too much attention; I wasn’t very regular. But I liked going there, sometimes with friends, sometimes by myself. Looking back now, one can say that the biggest change in our church’s worship since the English Reformation had already begun: the revision of the Lectionary.

With *Services for Trial Use*, for the first time Episcopalians would have the chance to hear at the Sunday Eucharist last Sunday’s gospel, the story of Jesus and the Woman of Samaria, today’s gospel,² the Healing of the Man Born Blind, and next Sunday’s gospel, the Raising of Lazarus³—all from John.

¹ *Services for Trial Use: Authorized Alternatives to Prayer Book Services* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1971).

² John 4:1–42

³ John 11:1–44

When *The Draft Proposed Book of Common Prayer* (1976) was published, these lessons were in the places that we hear them, on the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Sundays in Lent in this Year A of the three-year cycle. I can't imagine my adult Christian journey without knowing these stories, especially the story of the Man Born Blind. Before and after his healing, this man was scorned by his family, his community, and his religious leaders. Though he had been blind since birth, in the many years of physical blindness he had the integrity to realize he had been healed by a true prophet, and he would not speak ill of him. He declared, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."⁴ When the man is cast out of the temple, Jesus himself seeks him out and says, " 'Do you believe in the Son of man? . . . You have seen him, and it is he who speaks to you.' [The man replied], 'Lord, I believe;' and he prostrated himself before him."⁵

It has been while I have been serving at Saint Mary's that I've wondered more than once how the history of the Church might have been different if Christians through the centuries were used to hearing these lessons in a language they understood. Jesus with the

⁴ John 9:33.

⁵ John 9:35–38.

Woman of Samaria is the longest theological exchange Jesus has in any of the gospels. Then, there's the mischief with Easter Day. The traditional gospel in the Christian West is still John's account of the Risen Jesus but, for most Christians, it doesn't include Jesus' appearance at the tomb to Mary Magdalene, her recognition of him when he speaks her name, and Jesus saying to her words that reorder our relationship to each other and to God, "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

In her book *Written That You May Believe*, New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders contrasts today's gospel lesson with an earlier healing in John in which a man, who had become lame in the course of his life, is healed. This man doesn't know who has healed him and doesn't really care. But when Jesus seeks him out and the man learns who has healed him, the man returns to those who had questioned him and identifies Jesus. He has no concern or reverence for the great blessing that has come to him.⁷ John's Jesus is not just thinking of the Pharisees standing near in today's gospel lesson when he says, "For judgment I came into this world,

⁶ John 20:17.

⁷ John 5:1–18. Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 149–70.

that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.”⁸

We live in a point in creation history when we can identify what earlier centuries would have called a plague. So I went looking for older prayers. There’s one in the 1662 English Prayer Book that reflects a biblical point of view that sins lead God to punish guilty and innocent people with illness and death. You find this same perspective in the American Prayer Books until 1928 when the text of prayer found in the 1789 and 1892 Prayer Books, entitled a prayer “In Time of Great Sickness and Mortality,” began to reflect the revolution in medical knowledge, yet still faithful:

O most mighty and merciful God, in this time of grievous sickness, we flee unto thee for succour. Deliver us, we beseech thee, from our peril; give strength and skill to all those who minister to the sick; prosper the means made use of for their cure; and grant that, perceiving how frail and uncertain our life is, we may apply our hearts unto that heavenly wisdom which leadeth to eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*⁹

⁸ John 9:39.

⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1789; Standard Edition 1881), 34; (1928), 45.

You can find it in a 1928 Prayer Book on page 45—you can download one online easily. Unfortunately, there’s no prayer along these lines in our present Prayer Book, to refocus our minds and hearts on God’s active presence in our lives, a presence beyond our understanding in times of “grievous illness.”

We’ve been using Form II for our intercessions for our Eucharists since the church has been closed to public worship. It’s been many years since I’ve used it regularly, and we will use it today. One petition has had me thinking about its meaning. It’s this, “I ask your prayers for all who seek God, or a deeper knowledge of him. Pray that they may find and be found by him.”¹⁰

The Man Born Blind did not seek out Christ, he was found by him twice. I pray that you and I will always be able to keep in remembrance the day or the night we were found by Jesus.

✠ May the Divine Assistance remain with us always and with those who are absent from us. Amen.

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¹⁰ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 385.