**Homily for Monday in the Fifth Week of Lent, March 30, 2020**

**The Holy Eucharist**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Susanna 41–62\*; Psalm 23; John 8:1–11*

Last November, when I was reviewing the lessons for the Daily Office in Advent, I realized for the first time, that though the we would be reading Luke in Year One in Advent, today’s gospel, which I’ve always thought as belonging to John, was appointed for Wednesday in the Week of 2 Advent.[[1]](#footnote-1) I had never noticed when reading John or Luke in one of my annotated Bibles that there’s a note attached to this passage in both gospels. This is from the *New Revised Standard Version:*

*The most ancient authorities lack [John] 7:53–8:11; other authorities add the passage here or after John 7:36 or after [John] 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations of text; some [authorities] mark the passage as doubtful.*[[2]](#footnote-2)

Raymond Brown in his *An Introduction to the New Testament* wrote that, though canonical, “almost certainly it is out of context here in John.”[[3]](#footnote-3) He suggests that the story may have “traveled independently of the four Gospels and could not be included until there was a change in the church’s reluctance to forgive adultery.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Confession: when I came across this last fall, my first thought was that the lectionary editors were playing fast and loose with the gospel—or trying to teach me something? The relevant proverb for my spiritual state in that moment, in the language of the King James Version of the Bible, is, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In St. Benedicts’ Rule for Monasteries, his chapter on the twelve degrees of humility takes 16 days to read—the whole rule is read three times through a year.[[6]](#footnote-6) The journey of Christian life and practice, in or outside of religious communities, is a school of humility.

Now the first reading, the story of Susanna, has a really complicated history. It’s a Greek text, never a Hebrew Scripture, but it was a Jewish pre-Christian story, one of the legends about the prophet Daniel.[[7]](#footnote-7) In a Roman Catholic Bible, it is a chapter in Daniel. In Anglican Bibles it is a short book in the Apocrypha. It’s not that long, but we heard an edited version today because this Eucharist is normally a Mass for a congregation in the middle of the workday.

Let me close with what I consider the conundrum presented by Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness in Matthew, when he responds to Peter’s question about how many times he is to forgive his brother. Jesus says, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-times seven.” He then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant, the servant whose master forgave him his debt, but he did not forgive his own servant’s debt. The unforgiving servant had only one chance to be spared, not seven, not seventy-times seven.[[8]](#footnote-8) It doesn’t sound like the same Jesus who says in this gospel, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

✠May the Divine Assistance remain with us always

and with those who are absent from us. Amen.

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1. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 936. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1896. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 375–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Proverbs 16:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *St. Benedict’s Rule for Monasteries,* trans. Leonard J. Doyle (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1948), 21–29. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament,* Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Matthew 18;23–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matthew 9:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)