

Homily for Monday in the Fifth Week of Easter

May 11, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Acts 14:5–18; Psalm 115:1–8; John 14:21–26*

Since I entered seminary in the fall of 1980, I’ve become accustomed to the repetition of certain lessons within weeks and days of each other, especially during the Easter Season. Every year at the Easter Vigil we hear the story of the Valley of the Dry Bones.¹ In Year A of the lectionary (the current year), it had also been appointed as the first lesson for the Fifth Sunday in Lent. We heard it again at the Daily Office on Thursday in Easter Week. It’s a great lesson. It’s very familiar to most people who hear it—though nowadays I think many more people will be familiar with the song about the bones than the prophecy. That said, I know my mind often wanders when I hear it read. Sometimes I form the words with my lips, without any sound, when this lesson is read.

Today’s gospel, a very few of the many words of John’s account of the supper before the passover, are really familiar too, words about love—and my mind can also wander when I hear them. In the narrative of this supper the two great commands of Jesus, “believe” and “love,” are woven through all of it. The

¹ Ezekiel 37:1–14.

story begins, “Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”² Then he washed their feet.

The last words of Jesus before he and his friends go forth across the valley to a garden are from a prayer of Jesus to the Father, “I made your name known to [my friends], and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”³

The words from today’s appointed passage that, to use the words of John Donne sonnet, “batter my heart”⁴ are these, “If anyone loves me, he or she will keep my word, and my Father will love him or her, and we will come to him or her and make our home with him or her.”⁵ A generous love was easy for John’s Jesus; it’s not always easy for me.

When I feel stuck about what’s in my heart, my conscience will often bring to mind the familiar words

² John 13:1.

³ My translation adapted from the NRSV, John 17:26.

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44106/holy-sonnets-batter-my-heart-three-persond-god>, (accessed 11 May 2020).

⁵ My translation. John 14:23.

from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians: "Love is patient and kind . . . "Love bears all things . . . endures all things."⁶

One of my very favorite books is Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*.⁷ The movie by the name is good, but the novella from which the book takes its name is very fine. It came out while I was in graduate school where MacLean had been on the faculty for many years. Maclean was a man of faith. Presbyterian.

If you know the story, I can tell you that my own brother and I did not grow up fishing. But in the years when Ralph, our sister Caroline, and I were emptying our family's home in southern Maryland and watching the sun set over the Potomac, the words at the end of MacLean's book, a reflection on his parents and his brother who had died, often came to mind. This is the end of the novella:

Eventually all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:4–7.

⁷ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976),.

*raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.*⁸

The word “haunt” comes into English from Old French—h-a-n-t-e-r—where it meant to visit or to dwell.⁹ At some point it began to carry with it the reference to a spectral or ghostly presence. Professor MacLean was a professor of English literature. I think he chose his words very carefully, as did John the evangelist. Love has come to dwell with us. I believe you and I are haunted by the indwelling of Love.

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

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⁸ Ibid., 104.

⁹ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1949), s.v. “haunt,” 378.