

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter May 17, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A: 1 Peter 3:8–18; Psalm 148:7–14; John 15:1–11**

It's the supper before the passover. Jesus, having washed the feet of those who were with him, while all of them were eating said, to Judas, “ ‘What you are going to do, do quickly’ . . . [Judas] immediately went out; and it was night.”¹ After speaking to the men and women² who were with Jesus about his departure, he speaks of the vine, the vinedresser, and the branches, of abiding—remaining—and bearing fruit. Then he says, “These things I have spoken to you-all in order that my joy may be in you-all and your joy may be fulfilled.”³

The shepherd calls his sheep so that they may know his life is in them,⁴ his joy in them⁵ and the gift, that he mentions first at this supper, his peace is in them.⁶ Life, joy, peace—they come from God the Father, through his Risen Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹ John 13:26–30.

² Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 93–114.

³ John 15:11.

⁴ John 5:40; 10:10; 20:31.

⁵ John 15:11; 17:13.

⁶ John 14:27.

So, “even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.”⁷

Yesterday morning, buses began to unload men and with suitcases and large plastic bags, of what I took to be their possessions, across the street. I wasn’t sure what was going on in the morning and when I asked I was just told the Oyo Hotel—for many years it was called the Nighthotel and I forget what it was called before that—was opening. In the afternoon, when I left to take a walk, I would learn that the hotel was now a homeless shelter for 300 men.

As I walked to the Hudson River Park, I found myself wondering what this would mean for our parish when we can open our doors again. When I returned to West 47th Street, I did not go into the rectory as I normally. I was uncomfortable with the disposition of the men gathered near it. I continued to Sixth Avenue and came in through the parish house. I think I have as good a handle as one can have on life, but yesterday I brought home fear and anxiety, not joy and peace. It was hard for me last evening to remember Jesus’ last words to his friends at the supper before the passover, “In the world you-all have tribulation; but be courageous, I have overcome the world.”⁸ I suspect

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 499.

⁸ John 16:33. My translation.

that this very week those of us who live here will have new opportunities to be try to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”⁹

One of the learnings for me this year has been to reflect on the journeys of the individuals in John’s gospel with whom Jesus speaks. This year I finally realized that, in John’s gospel, Thomas and Nicodemus have their own journey to faith and to being a part of the fellowship of Christ’s brothers and sisters.

Sometime in grade school all of us Baptist kids memorized the conclusion of Matthew, Jesus’ words to the eleven, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”¹⁰ That said, I didn’t pay attention until seminary days to the words that begin this gospel’s conclusion, “Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they prostrated themselves before him: but some doubted.”¹¹

⁹ Matthew 10:16.

¹⁰ Matthew 28:19–20.

¹¹ Matthew 23:16–17.

Very rarely in my adult life do I have really struggled with doubt. For whatever reason, I have been open to the words of faith since I was a child. There's even a faint trace of a scare on my upper lip that I got by falling against a chair in Sunday School when I was three-years old. I don't understand unbelief. I don't understand evil. I know I am very human and my words and actions can affect others in a negative way even when I have no consciousness or intention—I'm just another human being. But I do think, within the framework of our lives, we can choose to try to be bearing fruit in our lives. To strive to accept not just life, but Jesus' joy and his peace—when we are trying to be who God wants us to be and to do what God wants us to do.

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

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