

Sermon for the Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday

May 31, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Acts 2:1–13; Psalm 104:25–32; John 14:8–17*

When Jesus and his disciples went to the grave of his friend Lazarus, Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”¹ Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life.”² His words do not prevent Martha from objecting to Jesus having the grave opened. Biblical blindness, if you will, the kind of blindness to God’s presence in the world that begins with the story of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.³ So today, with the appointed gospel from the supper before the Passover, we hear Philip say to Jesus, using an imperative form of the verb, “You, show us the Father.” Jesus’ reply, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me?”⁴ Biblical blindness.

There is an important Christian theological argument for the impassibility of God, that is to say, God cannot be affected by the actions or words or emotions of any

¹ John 11:21.

² John 11:25.

³ Genesis 3:1–7.

⁴ John 15:9.

creature.⁵ For me, this argument doesn't seem to cover all the bases. The God of the Hebrews has many strong emotions that affect his actions in the narratives of the Old Testament. Jesus also said at this supper, "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 will make a home with him or her."⁶ Is there love without any effects on the one who gives and the one who receives? I think not. Is there evil without any effect on the one who commits it and on those who suffer? I think not.

At ten minutes to four yesterday afternoon, I took the opportunity to take a 60-minute walk. I was on duty to lead Evening Prayer at 5. I made it back on time. By 5:30 PM, when I was back in the rectory, a demonstration had arrived at the corner of 47th Street and Seventh Avenue, the north end of Times Square. I heard the crowd and I heard the sirens of a dozen or more police vehicles as they arrived and parked on 47th. The officers I observed seemed organized, professional, calm. I spoke with an officer in a police car parked in front of the rectory. She told me that when the protesters started to move, they would

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. "Impassibility of God," 694.

⁶ John 14:23. My literal translation.

follow—and they did. I don't know how much damage, if any, was done in the square. I think there were some arrests. This demonstration did not make big news, though Seventh Avenue was blocked for a while. I wonder what will happen tonight.

I confess I haven't been able to make myself watch the whole video of the arrest and the murder of George Floyd, one officer with his knee on the man's throat, two officers helping to hold Mr. Floyd down, a fourth watching it all happen.⁷

I don't understand the evils of murder; but alongside the God's sixth commandment, "You shall not commit murder," are the commandments, "You shall not steal . . . You shall not be a false witness . . . You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor."⁸ The heart of most Americans was changed in the course of my childhood and teenage years by the preaching and example of a non-violent movement of practicing Christians and Jews led, until his assassination, by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObkVokRud_g, (accessed 31 May 2020).

⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 350.

When Jesus says, “I give you another commandment, love one another,” it’s not a theological proposition, and it’s not just about rules to follow. For Christians it’s a relational reality, a relationship with Jesus. Mercy, kindness, affection, understanding, sympathy, compassion. It also means, I think, confronting those who do evil and stopping them. It’s messy for us; it’s for God; it was messy for Jesus.

I’ve struggled all my life to be in right relationship with sister and my brother. Like our mother and her brothers, the three of us have grown closer as the years have passed. A wonderful thing. With age and experience, sharp edges, as it were, in relationships can be softened; new doors can be open.

Like Ascension Day, the Day of Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Spirit according to the chronology of Luke’s gospel and Luke’s Acts of the Apostles. There’s an entirely different rhythm in John, where Jesus hands over his Spirit from the cross to those standing near, including his mother and the unnamed disciple whom he loved. Then Jesus himself lays down his life.

In John, on the morning of the resurrection, it was not Simon Peter, but the disciple Jesus loved who had been at the cross and who followed Peter into the

empty tomb, who saw the cloths that had covered Jesus' body, the cloth that had covered Jesus' face, and believed. The Spirit is at work in all human our lives. May our faith help us to have eyes that see others and help us be in right relationship with all.

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

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