

Sermon for Corpus Christi Sunday

June 14, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Deuteronomy 8:2–3; Psalm 34:1–8; John 6:47–59**

When I was a student at Nashotah House, students and faculty were required to be in their assigned seats in the chapel for Morning Prayer, Mass, and Evensong from Solemn Evensong on Sunday through Evensong on Friday night. Saturdays were optional. Sunday mornings, most of us were elsewhere. After Sunday Evensong, Benediction was offered at the altar where the Sacrament was reserved for those who wished to stay for the service.

Father James Edward Griffiss—Jim—was professor of philosophical and systematic theology when I was a student at Nashotah House, one of the professors who liked to officiate at Benediction. After my coming to Saint Mary's, I would discover how well he knew this parish. In 1964, he was in residence here to assist the new rector, Father Donald Garfield, during a sabbatical. While he was here, a recording of a Solemn Choral Evensong & Benediction was made for which he was the officiant. I haven't heard that record for many years. Jim had a great voice. He was part of a Nashotah faculty that had known and lived the traditional Anglo-Catholic rites before the liturgical

reforms of the 1960s and 70s. That faculty was able to approach the new contemporary language rites with knowledge and desire that ceremonial, for example, express the theology of the newer Eucharistic prayers, prayers not shaped by the controversies of the sixteenth century and before.

Father Griffiss was an ecumenist. One of the things he used to say about moving forward with other Christian communities, if memory serves, was something like, “Maybe the real way forward is for us just to start worshiping with each other, get used to sharing communion with each other, and then talk about what’s on the table for reconciliation.” That said, a real retreat from the ecumenical movement was already underway in the early years of John Paul II’s pontificate. Father Griffiss’s remarks have remained with me all through the years.

Friday afternoon, I had planned to start this sermon with Father Griffiss’s words and to go on to talk about an article I had come across by Maxwell Johnson, professor of liturgy at Notre Dame. Professor Johnson is an ELCA pastor and was a welcome supply pastor at Trinity Church, Michigan City, Indiana, where I was rector before coming to Saint Mary’s. He and his wife have worshiped with us more than once over the

years. The article is called, “Liturgy and Ecumenism: Gifts, Challenges, and Hopes for a Renewed Vision.”¹ I came across a reference to it in a footnote.²

That said, I did not expect my mind and heart to wake up yesterday with the news from Atlanta of another shooting of an African-American man, Rayshard Brooks, by a White police officer. It’s another example of an evil that cries out for a new day. To use Professor Johnson’s title: What “gifts, challenges, and hopes” can we see as we try to look ahead and to begin to tear down, as it were, more of the walls of racism that continue to divide us.

One of the things Johnson’s article happens to discuss is how liturgical scholars “work disinterestedly, serving no cause but the truth wherever it is to be found.”³ Where is truth to be found this morning for us? One place to start is Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, the second earliest of his letters that we have. He wrote, “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were

¹ Maxwell E. Johnson, “Liturgy and Ecumenism: Gifts, Challenges, and Hopes for a Renewed Vision,” *Worship* 80 (January 2006), 2–29.

² Thomas O’Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Understandings* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 148 n.12.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁴

One subject that Johnson raises is the objections by some within his ELCA community to the use of the word “Eucharist” instead of “Lord’s Supper.” He notes that it’s been at least 1800 years since Christian worship was a real supper, as it was in the beginning. He writes, “The word “eucharist” itself is biblical and has something to do with what Jesus reportedly did at the Last Supper (he gave thanks), a term which, by the way is not later at all but was clearly in Christian usage for the meal or supper itself by the end of the first century.”⁵

That’s what we know. In the words of our traditional rite, “It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty, that we should at all times, and in all places, give thanks unto thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God.”⁶ I hope you can join me in asking God to bless us and the people of our nation and the world with open eyes, minds, and hearts to look those we may

⁴ Galatians 3:25–28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 333.

have thought of as “the other” as our sisters and brothers?

Finally, the late James White, an ordained United Methodist elder, who for many years was professor of theology at Notre Dame, liked to joke that the Roman Catholic parish near his Methodist church in South Bend used real wine and his Methodist church used real bread.

One of the things that distinguishes our Anglican tradition is our common cup. If the corona virus has been in New York since the end of last year, I’d be surprised if I and the other priests here, and in other parishes haven’t ingested, it more than once while doing the ablutions at Mass. I’m so thankful for our live-stream Eucharist. Today we have Eucharist and a Eucharistic blessing. I hope that sooner than later we may gather in person in this holy place, welcome strangers to our church home, and that there will be real Bread and one Cup for our Eucharists.

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