

## Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 20, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year A, Proper 20: Philippians 1:21–27; Psalm 145:1–8; Matthew 20:1–16*

As I started to work on today’s gospel lesson, I found myself thinking about the parables in Luke of the lost and the found—the sheep, the coin, and two lost sons.<sup>1</sup> One found his way back to his father’s table. Luke’s Jesus leaves the story with the son who never left hearing these words from his father, who has left the banquet to invite his son inside, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” I hope this son found his way to his father’s table.

This year I have been reading, here and there, in Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. He’s a professor of the History of the Church at Oxford University.<sup>2</sup> He is the son of an Anglican priest. He was already an ordained deacon, but as a gay man, he walked away from ordination as a

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 15:1–32.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stx.ox.ac.uk/people/fellow/professor-diarmaid-macculloch>, (accessed 20 September 2020).

priest because of the stand the Church of England took against homosexuality in November 1987. He's still a churchgoer.<sup>3</sup> While looking for some information on the seventh-century English Bishop Aidan, he wrote these gentle words about what Aidan and his fellow monks were about: "The missionaries of Christianity talked to [people] of love and forgiveness shaping the purposes of God."<sup>4</sup>

The Protestant Reformation brought to Western Christians a new theological focus on faith and works. For Morning Prayer today, it just so happens that today included these words from the Letter of James, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."<sup>5</sup> In his commentary on Matthew, Ulrich Luz notes that Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin all made use of this parable.

Luther wrote that those who thought they were due more than they received lost everything.<sup>6</sup> For Martin Bucer, a contemporary of Luther, who had been a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/the-clergymen-came-out-two-by-two-1611729.html>, (accessed 20 September 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010), 343–44.

<sup>5</sup> James 1:22.

<sup>6</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 527.

Dominican friar, the eleventh-hour workers were like the wrongdoer on the cross who asked Jesus to remember him.<sup>7</sup> For Calvin, it was all about God's grace and God's freedom to forgive.<sup>8</sup>

That said, at Evening Prayer today, the second lesson from the Letter of James includes these words, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only."<sup>9</sup> In his Letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, "The same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'"<sup>10</sup> There is nothing in Paul's letters to suggest he knew the story of the penitent wrongdoer. But Paul knew that the home of human faith is heart and mind.

Professor Luz acknowledges that Roman Catholic scholarship has moved in the Protestant direction. The late Jesuit priest and scholar Daniel J. Harrington, who died in 2014, was a New Testament professor at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry. In his commentary on Matthew, he called our attention to the real-life situation of people today who are living

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> James 1:22.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 10:12–13.

on the margins of economic stability. I've had many opportunities to examine my heart and mind about what I see when I see persons who are genuinely living on our streets. It's easy to make assumptions about some, but I try to remind myself that that is something that I should not do. I do not know what they have done or what they have endured. And it's not easy to understand how to respond.

Graduate school at the University of Chicago—before seminary—introduced me to a much wider world than I had known growing up in Virginia and going to college there. My library has an interesting collection of books that I've read on the subject of American slavery. One of the unusual stories is found in *For Adam's Sake*, by Allegra di Bonaventura—she's still at Yale, I believe. Her research began as a look at Joshua Hempstead of New London, Connecticut. He was born in 1678. He was a shipwright—a carpenter who worked on ships. At the age of 33, he started keeping a daily diary. As she read his diary, the name Adam kept coming up. It turns out that Adam Jackson, also born in New London, Connecticut, was an African-American slave. Through Joshua's diary, she tries to put together the story of Adam's life. She writes carefully. Her approach seems to capture something of the mystery of the convoluted mess into which we are

born in our own time and place. I like my God to be large when it comes to, in MacCulloch's words, "Love and forgiveness shaping the purposes of God." If we start there, God's grace, I believe, will find us.

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

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