

Homily for the Faithful Departed

November 5, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Parish Requiem, Mass III: 1 Corinthians 4:16–5:9; Psalm 46:1–8; John 10:11–16*

Sometime in the early 90s, I was in Washington, D.C., with friends who were Episcopalian. They wanted to attend the main Sunday service at the Washington National Cathedral. The building is magnificent. It was Easter Season—a nice time to be in D.C. There was a paschal candle; white vestments were worn. But Easter didn't make it into the sermon, nor did any of the hymns bring the resurrection into focus.

In addition to using the appointed lessons, singing and preaching should, I think, take a congregation to the morning of the resurrection for eight Sundays. Just as singing and preaching at the Burial of the Dead should be mindful that human grief is not unchristian, the liturgy, in the words of the Prayer Book, “finds all its meaning in the resurrection.”¹ There are just enough hymns in the Easter and other sections of *The Hymnal 1982* to fill out the Sundays of the fifty-days of Eastertide.

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 507.

When I was a rector in Michigan City, Indiana, three-generation families in the parish were common. If memory serves, I think there were two families where I knew four generations. A few people moved away in retirement, but not many. I think it's fair to say that many people move away from the city when they retire or want to live near close relatives. We have many older parishioners, but we celebrate fewer funerals here than I did in Indiana. As the years for me have passed, fewer Sundays in Easter Season challenge my ability to control my emotions when we sing.

Today's gospel lesson is from one of the two gospel lessons, both in John, that I try never to read aloud or chant in worship, Daily Office or Eucharist, the Healing of the Man Born Blind.² The other is the Raising of Lazarus.³ The Man Born Blind story begins, it seems, with Jesus walking away from the temple. He sees a blind man. "[Jesus] spat on the ground . . . and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Silo'am' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing . . . Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes."⁴ When blind, the man was

² John 9:1–41.

³ John 11:1–44.

⁴ John 9:1–7, 14.

rejected by his family, his community, and his religious leaders. And when he could see, he was rejected by the same people. They cast him out of the temple. Jesus himself sought him, found him, and asked him, “ ‘Do you believe in the Son of man? . . . who is he, sir, that I may believe . . . Jesus said . . . it is he who speaks to you.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe’; and he worshiped him.”⁵

My favorite book on John is Sandra Schneiders’ *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. The first chapter is called “Entering into the Evangelist’s Perspective.” Its first section concludes with these words, “There is no question that the purpose of the Gospel is the mystical union of the disciples with Jesus in God through the Spirit.”⁶

One of my favorite prayers entered the Prayer Book in 1928, and it’s in the present book too. Its title is “For Those We Love.” I close with it today:

Almighty God, we entrust all who are dear to us to thy never-failing care and love, for this life and the life to come, knowing

⁵ John 9:35–38.

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 15.

*that thou art doing for them better things than we can desire or pray for; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*⁷

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

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⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 597; (1979), 831.