

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 24, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: *Jeremiah 3:21–4:2; Psalm 130; 1 Corinthians 7:17–24*; Mark 1:14–20*

I'm a graduate of the University of Virginia, which was commonly called when I entered in 1972, "Mr. Jefferson's University." I suspect that for many years that titled has not had as much use. The Vietnam War was ongoing with no end in sight; the draft for soldiers was real. When the birthdate lottery happened, to see where one stood in the next year's draft, I was in the student newspaper's office watching the Associated Press teleprinter. None of us knew that night that ours was the year the draft ended.

One more detail from my time. It would be decades before Sallie Hemming's relationship with Jefferson would be recognized. Their descendants, Hemming's and Jefferson's, are now very much a part of the story of Jefferson's life and home, Monticello. The reality of their relationship was known when I was a student: the anti-war newspaper was called, *The Sally Hemings*.

I don't often think about Jefferson. But he's part of my history. If you don't know Ron Chernow's biography of Ulysses S. Grant, it's worth reading. I heard a lot about Grant growing up and attending public schools in Virginia. Almost everything I learned about him was not right. The Monticello Foundation is a leader among historical foundations in its commitment to telling the truth. We can't rewrite history. But it was on their website that I first read, "Thomas Jefferson enslaved over 600 people in the course of his life. Four hundred men, women, and children lived in bondage at Monticello." Nothing like that was said aloud when I was in school. Slaves were "servants." For some time now, as individuals or as groups, enslaved persons at Monticello are always described whenever mentioned for the first time in a narrative as, for example: "enslaved cook

Ursula Granger.”¹ I don’t like to remember that I went to segregated schools until I entered the seventh grade, not to mention the memory of segregated public restrooms when I was a little boy. All people are still not equal across the globe. I know no person of color personally who has not experienced racism and fear.

I bring up Jefferson today because his original and justly famous design for the university’s buildings was radically altered after a fire destroyed the university’s library in 1895. Modeled on ancient Rome’s Pantheon, it’s known as the Rotunda. In front of it was greensward known as the lawn. There was a row of five houses for professors and single rooms for students between them on either side of the lawn. Opposite the Rotunda, there were no buildings originally. There was a view of distant mountains. Stanford White designed the building, Cabell Hall, that still blocks this view.

If memory serves, there was no department for religious studies at the university until the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike the College of William and Mary, a colonial foundation of the Church of England, the university was secular from its founding.

Somewhat surprisingly, above the columns of the Cabell Hall’s main entrance has words, not from Jefferson, but John’s Gospel, and not in English but Greek: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”² When Cabell Hall was erected, every student had to know enough Greek to read it to enter the university. I wish I had more Greek in my background. That said, I know clergy who do but who don’t use it.

Few passages of scripture are more well-known than today’s lesson. I remember being surprised, disappointed in myself, when a few years ago, I realized that Gabriel, grammatically speaking, wasn’t asking Mary to agree to be the mother of God’s son. He told her she would be. Yesterday, a similar surprise came to me with the text of today’s gospel lesson: Jesus

¹ <https://www.monticello.org/mulberry-row/people/ursula-granger>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

² John 8:32.

said, “Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men.”³ But there’s no command, no imperative verb, in the Greek text.

The Reverend Dr. Mark Davis agrees with the standard Greek to English New Testament dictionary that the word translated as “come” is an adverb, not a command. He suggests that it has the sense of, “Whaddya say guys.”⁴ The dictionary offers a phrase we hear a lot already from our new president, “Come on, man.”⁵ So, “Come on after me, and I will make you become fishers of people.”⁶—the Greek here is inclusive.⁷

Jesus does not force himself on others. In the course of his ministry, Jesus will issue orders to demons—and they will be obeyed. Men and women will make their own choices. Matthew picks up and slightly alter Mark’s story of a rich man who kneels before Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”⁸ When he tells Jesus that he has followed the commandments since his youth, the scripture says, “Jesus looking upon him loved him and said to him, ‘You lack one thing, go, sell what you have, and come follow me.’”⁹ The man stands and walks away.⁹ Jesus the Lord still loved him.

For the record, in Matthew and Luke, Jesus is not said to love anyone in particular. In John, four are said to have been loved by Jesus, siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and the unnamed disciple we meet at the supper before the Passover known only as the disciple Jesus loved.

Jesus was a carpenter, not a fisherman. But his ministry is to fish for people.¹⁰ We believe his Holy Spirit has given us the faith that we will rise

³ Mark 1:17.

⁴ Searle 179.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rX11rRMKyhE>, (accessed 24 January 2021).

⁶ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/01/dangerous-succession.html>, (accessed 23 January 2021).

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *s.v.* “δεῦτε,” 220.

⁸ Matthew 4:13–22.

⁹ Mark 10:17–22.

¹⁰ Searle, 184.

to a new life in the world to come after we die. I trust that what my gut tells me is true: those who have died who knew us and loved us do not feel apart from us now, though we are separated from them by our mortality.

I do not know why some of us know we are already in his net; why we left something behind at some point in time to become his follower. The net is large, and many people do not realize or can believe that Almighty God is a fisher of people.

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

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