

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 7, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: 1 Corinthians 9:16–23; Psalm 142; Mark 1:29–39

The town of Capernaum was abandoned in the 11th century. By then, it was an Islamic community. In 1894, the site of the ruined town was purchased by Roman Catholic Franciscans in Jerusalem and by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem. In the early years of the twentieth century,¹ archeologists would uncover the ruins of a synagogue and of an octagonal church built over a house by it—perhaps really the house of Peter and Andrew. It is literally a few steps away from the synagogue. People could have crowded together outside of it. It is worth noting that they wait until evening, when the sabbath is over, to bring people for healing.

Now about demons. In John’s gospel, Jesus never casts out a demon but is accused of being possessed by demons.² Demons and unclean spirits—I don’t know enough to know the difference—are not common points of reference in the letters of Paul and the Revelation to John. It’s only in the synoptics, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and in Luke’s second book, the Acts of the Apostles, that people are possessed, and demons are heard by Jesus and obey him to be silent and to leave.

There was a big debate when the New Testament began to be translated into English about whether the Greek words for “baptism” and “church” should be translated as “washing” and “congregation” or “assembly.”³ We live in a world in which we know what synagogues are in our day. But what were they in the early first century, when the temple was the place of worship? Probably more like a town hall where lots of different things took place. Yes, there seem to have been scrolls of the

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capernaum>, (accessed 7 February 2021).

² John 8:48–52.

³ See the concluding section of “The Translators to the Reader,” of the Authorized Version of the Bible. My edition is: *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments and the Apocrypha* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury Press, No Date).

Hebrew Scriptures—at least in Nazareth, according to Luke—but not everywhere.

Dr. Mark Davis grew up in a Pentecostal Church and eventually found his way to the Presbyterian Church (USA). He shares his profound unease with those who teach that Jesus is still healing people and raising the dead for those with faith. Instead, he thinks that Jesus' healing has a lot to do with restoring people to their relationship with others. The leper is cleansed. The sick are made well. They are no longer burdens on family and society.

In 2015, he wrote about what he thought we can do: “We will honor the power of being in community with one another in the face of our weaknesses, our fragilities, and our brokenness.” In words that may haunt all of us during this pandemic, he continued, “We will honor the power of a human touch, when someone anoints the head with oil and embraces another, as the community gathered in prayer.”⁴

I wasn't sure there would be anyone at Mass yesterday. But it turned out there were nine of us. One was a Roman Catholic newcomer—he needs a church where is entirely welcome. He found us online. I hope he feels called to return.

Yesterday my church email inbox exploded with the news that the dean of the Washington National Cathedral has an invited prominent evangelical pastor to preach on a Sunday. It came from the Reverend Steve Schunk, priest-in-charge, at Regeneration Pine Plains and St. Mary's Cold Spring. On the Washington Cathedral's Facebook page, he found these words, “We're thrilled to welcome one of America's best-known pastors and authors to the Canterbury Pulpit as our guest preacher on Sunday, Feb. 7. Max will be preaching on how God can bring calm to our chaos, and you won't want to miss it . . . You won't be disappointed!”⁵

⁴ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2015/02/the-holy-one-in-unholy-places.html>, (accessed (7 February 2021).

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/WNCathedral>, February 3, 2021.

Father Shunk wrote, “This is what Max Lucado, pastor, speaker, and best-selling author” has said: ‘How will homosexuality impact our culture? What about the spread of disease? If gay lifestyle and gay marriage is endorsed-what follows? Polygamy? Legalized incest? If we can’t draw a line, will lines be drawn at all?’ ” Shunk also noted that the Washington National Cathedral is the same place where just over two years ago, Bishop Gene Robinson interred Matthew Shephard’s ashes. “It was at the [cathedral] that [Bishop Robinson] said, with tears in his eyes, ‘Matt: you are safe now.’ ”

You may have read in the newsletter that on Friday, Barbara Klett was buried at Trinity Church Cemetery and Mausoleum in Hamilton Heights. She died on January 29. Earlier last week, David Duffy, the funeral director at Redden’s Funeral Home called me. With the storm arriving, it wasn’t clear when the burial could happen. It turned out to be Friday. At the grave there were six of us, four sextons, Dave, and I. Dave and I had some time in the hearse. Dave completed schooling for his profession in 1982 and began working with Redden’s. Speaking with Dr. Leroy Sharer yesterday, Leroy knew from the 1980s that Redden’s was the only funeral home downtown that buried AIDs victims with compassion. There are still demons that await casting out by the righteousness of the Son of God. Set us all free, O God, from the bondage of sin.

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

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