

Sermon for Ascension Day, May 10, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Acts 1:1–11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15–23; Mark 16:9–20**

When I was growing up Southern Baptist, I knew about “footwashing Baptists.” But we Virginia Baptists didn’t do that in the churches my family belonged to. On Saint Mary’s home page photo rotation right now, there is a beautiful photograph from this year’s Maundy Thursday Eucharist of the washing of feet taken by Sr. Monica Clare. I confess that it was I who labeled the photograph, using language from my childhood, “Footwashing Episcopalians.”

Quite honestly, I suspect a far greater percentage of practicing Episcopalians, than of practicing Southern Baptists, have had their feet washed and have washed the feet of others. In John’s gospel and in the First Letter to Timothy, the washing of feet is a sign of relationship and love among believers.¹ But what we don’t have in the Episcopal Church, or in any normal Christian community are “snake handling Christians”—I said, “normal.” That goes for “poison

¹ John 13:1–20; 1 Timothy 5:9–10.

drinking Christians,” too. Yesterday when I noticed that I had a choice to preach on Mark’s gospel tonight, instead of the ending in Luke, I thought, “Why not give it a try?”

I didn’t know until I started working on this sermon that this passage, with its condemnation of non-believers, handling snakes, and drinking poison was the historic gospel for Ascension Day for Anglicans,² Lutherans,³ and Roman Catholics.⁴ It only changed to the end of Luke for us American Anglicans with the 1928 Prayer Book.⁵ Roman Catholics still use Matthew, Mark (including the blanket condemnation of those who reject the Good News, handling snakes, and drinking poison), and Luke in the three-year lectionary rotation.

For the record, Matthew and John don’t have ascension stories—they have resurrection appearances, but not stories of the Risen Jesus ascending to the

² Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 177–178.

³ <https://www.lcms.org/worship/lectionary-series>, (accessed 9 May 2018).

⁴ http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Roman_Missal.htm, (accessed 9 May 2018).

⁵ Shepherd, *Ibid.*

heavens. If you want Jesus ascending, you have to look to Mark, Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles.

Now condemnation of non-believers is not unique to Mark. Poison drinking for believers is referenced only in Mark. In Luke, the disciples can trample on snakes and not be hurt.⁶ Handling snakes is in Mark, and it's found at the beginning of the last chapter of Acts.

Paul was bitten by a viper⁷. The people with him “waited, expecting him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead; but when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.”⁸

Count me among those who prefer to be honest about what the Bible says and doesn't say. I believe Scripture teaches us everything God needs us to know to be a faithful relationship with God and others—that is to be saved for eternal life. But the Bible isn't about the perfection of this world or the Bible's own perfection. It's about God's revelation of God's plan for our lives in this world and in the world to come.

⁶ Luke 10:19.

⁷ Acts 28:3–5.

⁸ Acts 28:6.

In a sermon for the Ascension, Pope Leo the Great, who was bishop of Rome from the years 440 until his death in the year 461, wrote, “All that was visible in the Redeemer, has passed over to the Sacraments.” Our former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold adds to Leo’s words, “All that is in the sacraments has passed over into us.”⁹—not by us, but into us.

These words remind me of Jesus’ words to his friends at the supper before the Passover in John’s gospel, “If anyone loves me, he or she will keep my word, and my Father will love him or her, and we will come to him or her and make our home with him or her.”¹⁰

I don’t know that I’ve ever quoted former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, but he is often quoted as saying that in baptism we are drawn into “solidarities not of our own choosing.”¹¹ I don’t think it would be inappropriate in our time to go even a bit

⁹ From an unpublished address given at Virginia Theological Seminary on June 1, 2017, Frank T. Griswold, “The Ecclesial and cultural conditions that led to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and the achievement and legacy of the 1979 Book.”

¹⁰ John 14:23. My translation.

¹¹ [Re-Membering and Re-Imagining: Essays on The Episcopal Church: A Report of the Ecclesiology Committee of the House of Bishops](#), (accessed 10 May 2018), 4, n.9: “Attributed to Rowan Williams, who replied to a query about its origin that he could not find the reference, ‘though it sounds like me.’”

further: life itself invites us to “solidarities not of our own choosing.”

I’ve started reading a new book by neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga called, *The Instinct of Consciousness*. The subtitle is *Unraveling the Mystery of How the Brain Makes the Mind*.¹² I’m only in the first chapter, but according to the index, the human soul only comes up for discussion in this chapter that is called, “History’s Rigid, Rocky and Goofy Way of Thinking About Consciousness.” At this point, I don’t think Gazzaniga believes in God. He may be an agnostic. But I believe not only in God, but I believe I am bound by God in relationship with God and with all of God’s children.

I don’t know of another creature that has the capacity to appreciate what we call “beauty”—the beauty of things we see, the beauty of music, the beauty of things we create. Certainly many animals have the biological instinct to care and nurture others. Pets can be wonderfully attentive and playful, but the instinct and capacity to lay down one’s life for others is not

¹² Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Consciousness Instinct: Unraveling the Mystery of How the Brain Makes the Mind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

only from our biology, but from our God who knows what it is to love, to be in solidarities with the living and the dead that are not of our own choosing.

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

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