

Sermon for the Day of Pentecost, May 20, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: Acts 2:1–13; Psalm 104:25–32; 1 Corinthians 12:4–13; John 14:8–17*

Unlike most celebrations of the church year, today's celebration is not about an event in the life of Jesus, but about the Holy Spirit. According to Luke's second book Acts, the apostles are waiting in Jerusalem for Jesus' promise to them to be fulfilled. The church continues to experiment to find a gospel lesson for Pentecost that undergirds our reading from Acts.¹ My own suggestion would be that we read the John's narrative of Jesus' death in which Jesus says, "It is finished," and then he hands over his spirit to his friends who are with him.²

But before I get to Acts, I want to address something about what I would call the hard words in today's gospel lesson from the fourteenth chapter of John that we have heard—and not pretend that we didn't hear them. This lesson is from John's narrative of the

¹ The 1549 Prayer Book appointed John 14:15–21. Since 1552 the gospel was extended to include verses 22–31. In the 1979 Prayer Book, the first gospel listed is John 20:19–33 (under the influence of the new lectionary of the Roman Catholic Church), with the option of John 14:8–17.

² John 19:25b–30.

supper before the Passover. Jesus says to the men and women who are with him,³ whom that night he will call no longer call disciples (students) but friends⁴ and on the morning of resurrection, brothers and sisters,⁵ “He who believes in me will also do the works that I do . . . If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.”⁶

John doesn’t record any miraculous works that Jesus’ friends do in his name. The only miraculous works done by apostles, including Paul, are only in Acts, where Jesus’ “apostles”—“those who are sent”⁷—heal the sick⁸ and raise the dead.⁹

Jesus’ words about what he will do in John are not conditional like those in Matthew where Jesus says, “If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it

³ See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 183-98; Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 93–114.

⁴ John 15:15.

⁵ John 20:17.

⁶ John 14:12–14.

⁷ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀπόστολος,” 123.

⁸ Acts 3:1–10, 14:8–18, 19:11–12.

⁹ Acts 9:36–42, 20:7–12.

will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”¹⁰ John’s Jesus says, again, “If you ask anything in my name, I will do it.”¹¹ Some significant ancient texts actually omit this verse in John.¹² Because it is a hard saying, I think the scholarly consensus is that these words may well go back to Jesus himself.¹³

I remain troubled, not unbelieving, but troubled by the problem of evil. Beyond the great mysteries of health and life, of sickness and death, we know that in our world real and very cruel evil exists. It’s not a new reality or force.

Where was God when Cain killed Abel?¹⁴ Where is God today when people—not sickness, not accidents—kill other people? I don’t think we should dwell on evil, but Jesus’ words to us that we are to pray that we may be delivered from evil is not a magic formula, but words that should have real meaning for us and remind us of our real dependence on God.

¹⁰ Matthew 18:19.

¹¹ John 14:14.

¹² Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Corrected Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 244.

¹³ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), II:635; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 400.

¹⁴ Genesis 4:1–16.

Now to Acts—and it's possible that more than a few people here really don't know anything about Helen Keller, who was born in rural Alabama in 1880. Before she was two years old, an illness of some kind left her deaf and blind—and until she learned sign language, basically mute. She died in 1968, an enormously influential American of her generation.¹⁵

The turning point story of her life was the centerpiece of the 1959 play *The Miracle Worker* and the 1962 movie that followed. The story was taken from a letter written by her teacher the day it happened.¹⁶

In 1886, Anne Sullivan graduated from Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. That same year, Helen's parents sought a teacher from Perkins for their daughter who could not speak. Sullivan accepted the position. In a letter Sullivan described the moment Helen made the connection between a hand sign and an object. Helen was holding a mug under a water pump. Anne was pumping with one hand and making the hand signs for water in one of Helen's hands at the

¹⁵ <http://www.perkins.org/history/people/helen-keller>, (accessed 20 May 2018).

¹⁶ Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life With Her Letters (1887-1901) and Supplementary Account of Her Education, Including Passages from the Reports and Letters of her Teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, By John Albert Macy* (www.gutenberg.org, 2013), 135,191.

same time. Helen drops the mug—a pitcher in the movie, but a mug in the book—when she is aware that she now knows the signs for water. You can watch the scene from the movie that earned both Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke academy awards on YouTube.¹⁷ After that, Anne Sullivan and Helen were off to the races.

I suspect it was relatively easy for Helen to learn words for objects and basic emotions like hunger and love, but I wonder how Helen learned words like “why” and “because.” As a toddler begins to use these words, there is sheer pleasure for them in just saying a new word—and an answer doesn’t matter. But that changes pretty quickly. Our brains with our biological capacity for abstract thought and awareness will grow until we are in our mid-twenties¹⁸—and I strongly suspect that the brain is always re-arranging itself to take on more.

I think it is fair to say that in all human lives there are God moments, moments when we human beings become aware of the presence of something greater

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUV65sV8nu0&t=7s>, (accessed 20 May 2018).

¹⁸

<https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?ContentTypeID=1&ContentID=3051>, (accessed 20 May 2018).

than ourselves. I'm a believer. From my perspective, even people who assert that they don't believe at all in any God, who consciously and purposely reject any awareness of that that comes their way, remain, I believe, in relationship with their creator, with God.

Some Christians I have met never speak of experiencing a particular moment of conversion. Their experience of Christ has been more or less lifelong. Perhaps it happened and was simply experienced as another quiet point of their journey in life. Others who have experienced God powerfully have been led to seek out others who believe, to learn from others the grammar, if you will, of belief. There are so many variations. Christianity at its best respects both the "I" and the "we" of the journeys of believers believing.

The most important point for Luke's narrative of the apostles' day of Pentecost is not Luke's understanding of the how of the gift of the Holy Spirit was given, but its proclamation that the Good News is for all people. It's taken until the twenty-first century for human beings to know through genetics, not just that we are all descended from a medium-featured, medium colored, community/tribe in Africa that still exists, but

the differences among us are slight.¹⁹ And those genes that shape our skin and hair color are the most misleading in reality of differences between us, among us.²⁰ We are all precious in the sight of God. I think if you and I learn to act as if others are precious to us, the Holy Spirit may find a way to get to whatever part of our lives that needs the Spirit's help to begin to grow into true compassion for others.

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

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¹⁹ Spencer Wells, *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 56–59.

²⁰ Adam Rutherford, *A Brief History of Everyone Who Ever Lived: The Human Story Retold Through Our Genes* (New York: The Experiment, 2017), 235.