


Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, 4.v.2008, 10:00 a.m.  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania

Holy Communion, ELW - Setting 5

## Jesu Juva !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who  
was and Who is to come!  Amen.

**“And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.”**

**--John 17:11**

We Christians speak of Our Lord’s ‘agony in the Garden,’ following the Synoptic narrative. As Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke tell it, Jesus leaves the Last Supper to pray in a lonely place, Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. We identify this as the ‘Garden’ of Gethsemane, only because we read about a ‘garden’ in Saint John’s Gospel, across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. As you know or may easily

imagine, there is an ongoing debate among scholars about exactly where Gethsemane and this ‘garden’ are located, and whether they are the same place. Another difference is the location of Jesus’ grief or ‘agony’ in the Four Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke place that in Jesus’ solitary prayer to the Father, abandoned by His closest Disciples, Peter, James and John, who have fallen asleep in utter fatigue, perhaps also in their own grief and anxiety over what is to come. But, in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus gives full expression to His spiritual agony in the very midst of all the Disciples, in His High-Priestly Prayer at the Table of His Holy Supper. It is on this prayer, the entirety of the seventeenth chapter of John, that the Proper Preface prayers of the Church are based in the Holy Communion Liturgy.

In John 17, Jesus pours out His heart to the Father in the full presence of the Disciples. He then leads them

out, all of them, marching from Jerusalem across the Kidron to the place where they will encounter Judas and those who have come with him to arrest Jesus. The grief and agony Our Lord expresses has a dimension to it making it even more painful than normal human anxiety when faced with death, and with such a death as crucifixion. We can imagine. He *knew*. He knew not only His own death, His own pain and humiliation and the silence of His Heavenly Father in response to this long and powerful prayer.

He knew also what lay ahead for those who remained faithful to Him and to His Father's Kingdom. He knew that He must leave them, not once only, but twice, leave them again and until the end of time following His Resurrection. In Our Lord's High-Priestly Prayer, the pain He felt on leaving them, on leaving *us*, sounds as profound

as that which He feared for His own life. He, Who knew more than anyone ever born, what it is to be forsaken, alone in the world, prays for His Disciples whom He now calls His friends, His Apostles who will be sent into all the world, establishing the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel by giving their lives and in almost every case laying down those lives. He prays that the Father will sanctify us against the day when that sacrifice is required. Earlier, in His Farewell Discourse which begins with the 14<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John, Our Lord told us not how but through Whom this cleansing and strengthening of the Church and all Christians would take place, through the Holy Spirit Who proceeds directly from God the Father, the Holy Spirit Who is, with the Father and the Son, One living God Who will never leave us alone, no matter how the world or the course of our lives leave us feeling alone.

It might seem unbelievable that anyone would actually believe strongly enough to follow Our Lord's new commandment of love of the enemy so radically that it would lead to that Christian's own death or bring that Christian to death's door. But, as I have pointed out repeatedly, coincidentally but gladly echoing the teaching of the last two Popes, the Century we have just survived and the one in which we are now living have been characterized to an extent perhaps greater than all previous Christian centuries by the gift of suffering of the Church through the martyrdom of Christians, leaving behind the witness of Confessors, those who have suffered persecution and have survived a while longer in this life, and by martyrs, those of whom their lives were required in the act of testifying to their faith under persecution.

Many such examples are to be found among the prisoners of war of the Japanese Empire. Ernest Gordon, who would later serve for a quarter of a century as Dean of Chapel at Princeton University, was proud to join the Scottish Regiment of Argyle Highlanders as a commissioned officer and to march off to serve King and Country, defending British Singapore, but he spent most of World War II in the humiliating nightmare of a Japanese prisoner of war camp, one of hundreds of thousands of Allied POWs and Asian forced laborers who built the Thailand to Burma railway with which the Japanese intended to invade India. Shortly after reaching his first internment camp, Gordon fell ill and unconscious with cholera and was taken for dead. He later woke up in a hut built to shelter dead bodies before cremation or burial.

Gordon's faint cry was heard by an enlisted English soldier, Dusty Miller, a landscape gardener with his father in civilian life, and a genuine Christian. Dusty had learned to notice the small things of the plant world and to take pleasure in this. He had learned a great deal of the Japanese language by necessity and through the camp interpreter and had also come to understand what it meant for the Japanese soldier to be confronted with an enemy who was willing to become his prisoner rather than fight to the death or commit suicide, a job for which nothing in their culture, education or military training had prepared them.

Dusty had assumed an attitude of determined, militant, Christ-like love toward the enemy. The Japanese had permitted him to erect an outdoor chapel outside the camp perimeter, a perimeter which was only lightly

guarded because the prisoners had nowhere to go in the middle of the Thai jungle. The prisoners called this the ‘Church without Walls.’ Over time, amid indescribable brutalization of their bodies, many of the POWs chose the way of freedom for their spirits by following Dusty Miller’s example, though not all did.

Ernest Gordon was one of those who did hear and answer the call of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount as he saw this lived out by Dusty Miller. When other POWs learned of his aspiration to become a teacher someday, they begged him to teach them. Through a combination of black market connections and even the co-operation of the Japanese camp commandant—who suspended the rule against group meetings in this case—a ‘Jungle University’ was established. Commencement ceremonies celebrating the graduation of the first class in the liberal arts and

sciences were held. The Japanese officers and enlisted men were invited. To the POWs surprise, the Japanese accepted, and attended in dress uniform. Not all POWs were in attendance, however. A Major of the Argyle Highlanders took the opportunity to put into action his plan to rush and kill the guards and take over the camp. He only succeeded in killing six Japanese soldiers, and in bringing the wrath of the camp Commandant down on all the prisoners. The next morning, at assembly, all of the Major's co-conspirators were shot in reprisal. Just as a Japanese Warrant Officer was about to draw his sword to behead the Major, Dusty Miller stepped forward. Knowing that it was considered an honor in the Japanese *bushidō* code of military honor for a subordinate soldier to offer to take the punishment for his superior, Dusty whispered in the executioner's ear in Japanese that he would like to take

the place of the Major. Having looked at pictures of Christ Crucified in Dusty's Bible, the Warrant Officer, whether out of sadism or out of respect for the Englishman's faith, had Dusty Miller crucified outside the camp. The Major's life and those of the other prisoners were spared, with no further reprisals for the failed uprising attempt.

Thinking back on Dusty Miller's 'Church without Walls' after so many decades, Dean Gordon offers this comment on the Church in any place:

“So far as many of us could see, there were three definitions of the Church. There was the church composed of laws, practices, pews, pulpits, stones and steeples; the church adorned with the paraphernalia of state. Then there was the church composed of creeds and catechisms, where it was identified only by words. Finally, there was the Church of the Spirit, called out of the world to exist in it by reason of its of its joyful response to the initiative of God's love. Such a church had the atmosphere not of a law court nor of a class-

room but of divine humanity. It existed wherever Christ's love burned in the heart of man. The physical temple and the doctrinal affirmation are both necessary to the fullness of the Church—but both are dead without the Church that is Communion, the fellowship of God's people. Ours was the Church of the Spirit. It was not hidden in a corner, nor off on the periphery. It was the throbbing heart of the camp—giving life to it, and transforming it from a mass of individuals into a community. From the Church we received the inspiration that made life possible, the inbreathing of the Holy Spirit that enabled men to live better lives, to create improvements for the good of others, and to make kind neighbors. The fruits were in evidence around us: 'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, and faith.'”\*


It is the Church of the Spirit toward which we look forward this Pentecost and beyond, and it is for that Church that I pray. I pray that it may become a reality among you, as it already is, but in such a compelling way that this


Congregation will be eager to be that Church of the Holy Spirit in mission in this place. Some who have left us have said to me, and about me to others, that those fruits of the Holy Spirit are completely lacking in my ministry. If they are in any way right about that, it is because I love the

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\*Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, ©1963, 1964, 2002): 153.

Teaching Church as much as I love to teach, and I love the Church's great historic Tradition as a living Tradition which I have tried to honor among you. If I have tried to drag the classroom and the museum into the Church, may God forgive me. I pray that this Congregation and its future Pastor will possess all the attributed of the Church in full measure, that all may know and believe that, in this world, we have not been left orphaned but are the sons and daughters of a loving and

gracious God Who Himself stepped forward to pay the price of our folly.  Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever.  Amen.

