

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 25, Year C

A Sermon Preached by Berkeley D Johnson

on October 26, 2025

Sirach 35:12-17 / Psalm 84:1-6 / 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18 / Luke 18:9-14

*May I speak in the name of the Holy, Living, and Undivided Trinity;  
one God, now and forever, Amen.*

Good morning!

As Fr. Ian said, I have a history with this church. We came here as a family in 2007, the year I graduated from the Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in Cambridge, MA. The EDS Cambridge campus no longer exists, it has since been sold, so I feel very fortunate to have gone to seminary when I did, as there weren't a whole lot of graduating classes there after mine.

Following graduation, I was called here, to San Luis Obispo, to serve as the campus minister for the Canterbury Club, which is the name often used in the Episcopal Church for its outreach to college students and young adults. I served as the Canterbury Chaplain for thirteen years, retiring in 2020, as Covid had forced the ministry online, for the most part, and it felt like it was time to hand it over to the next generation.

Along with the Canterbury position, which was part-time, I began working as a Hospice Spiritual Counselor in 2011. I have continued in that role for the past fourteen-plus years, and recently, this past May, I also joined the staff of our local non-profit, Hospice of SLO County, as a grief counselor.

So, if anyone wants to talk with someone who understands what it's like to cobble together a life in ministry after seminary without getting ordained or becoming a priest, I'm probably your guy.

All told, I've probably preached about 150 times now over the years; I've done about fifty or so funerals or memorial services as a Hospice Chaplain; a few weddings, a few end-of-life baptisms; and if you do the math, over 10,000 visits to our hospice patients and their families.

I will say, I didn't expect to be quite this busy at this age, but the work is endlessly fascinating and rewarding. I've often said, even if I won the lottery, I wouldn't quit my job. I would, however, adjust my schedule.

But we all have to do something. Even if we retire, we find things to do to contribute. We volunteer; we give back. There is only so much golf one can play.

As I tried to discern, with the Spirit, what to talk about with you today, the first thing that came to mind was all the loss that has occurred here over the past several years since I have been gone. Over the years, I have accompanied many of you on those journeys with your loved ones through my work with hospice, and there have been several recent deaths here as well of people I knew and who were dear to all of us.

And it seems appropriate to acknowledge that and talk about it today, as this is the last Sunday before the upcoming autumnal triduum of All Hallow's Eve, All Saints, and All Souls' Days, when we commemorate and remember these and other deaths.

Thus, it's interesting that this was the Sunday I ended up being here to preach, isn't it. If you look at the readings for today, they're practically screaming at me to talk to you about stewardship and giving, but I'm not going to go there. I know you have been hearing all about that, and it struck me as odd, if you will, to come in here for just this one Sunday, and talk to you about giving. So I will leave, in the capable hands of your fellow congregants and parish leaders, the task of talking with you about stewardship and our common life together as a community of faith.

On the other hand, being with people at the end of life, normalizing what they're going through, affirming and supporting their loved ones who are caring for them, and now having the honor of sitting with those loved ones and accompanying them on their grief journeys, seems very appropriate to raise or lift up today as we journey together toward the holy and sacred three-day observance which commences this coming Friday.

The reading from 2nd Timothy even has Paul pointing toward his own death; the imagery that he is being "poured out", that the time for his "departure has come."

And lest we think he is being self-congratulatory or overly confident of his own righteousness, one of my favorite commentators, David Lose, writes:

"These verses are filled with hope...Paul's certitude is hope...his vision is directed to what is often called an eschatological hope...a hope directed not only toward some future justification, but a present hope; it is a hope in the present moment that transforms the 'now' in which we live."

Paul's certainty can, and I would argue should, become our certainty. Lose writes:

"It is the certainty that God works through us at all times, for the community, in the community, and with the community. Eschatological hope is the knowledge that Christ is present today. It 'sees' the world with different eyes, with eyes that are not confined by the restrictions of self-interest."

How well we know this feeling, when we pour ourselves out, when we volunteer, when we give of ourselves in service to the community. This is the work I left the practice of law to do; that's how strong the call was. I had no idea at the time where it would lead, but the truth is, I wouldn't have ended up doing any of the work I have done in ministry if I had gotten ordained. It would have been something else entirely. But the Spirit knew, even if I didn't, and it was through surrendering, finally and stubbornly and resignedly – yes, I was a piece of work,

I'm sure – that my life was transformed by the work I was called to do: chaplaincy, spiritual care, and now, grief counseling.

And lest we get too full of ourselves, we have today's Gospel lesson to remind us that we don't justify ourselves through our work, our actions, our piety, our giving, or our service; justification is God's business.

Again, I found Lose's commentary on this Gospel passage the most helpful: he takes the Pharisee's utterance, "God, I thank you that I am not like those other people" and says before we judge the Pharisee too harshly, perhaps we should reframe his plea in our more modern vernacular, and he gives the example of our use of the phrase "there but for the grace of God go I", and asks if we haven't uttered something similar ourselves at some point.

Lose asserts:

*"This is what makes the parable so hard to preach. Indeed, what makes it a trap. For as soon as we fall prey to the temptation to divide humanity into any kind of groups, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee. Anytime you draw a line between who's 'in' and who's 'out', this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side. Read this way, the parable escapes even its own narrative setting and reveals it is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God: God who alone who can judge the human heart; God alone who determines to justify the ungodly.*

*"This parable is therefore only preached well to the degree that each time we try to interpret it... we find ourselves with nothing to claim but our [own] dependence on God's mercy."*

And this brings me back to the pastoral part of my sermon, because the tax collector's plea, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" is one I have utilized as part of

my prayer practice; and I guess I never realized or recognized the connection between this Gospel passage and my own prayer practice until this past week as I was preparing to be here.

In the course of my journey through life with the Episcopal Church, which began in my early 30's, I encountered a workshop where I was introduced to Anglican Prayer Beads. I don't know about you, but I love having something tactile to hold and roll in my fingers as I'm praying, and I have found at times when I am most forlorn, most despondent or desperate, that I go searching for my prayer beads.

Since I don't know how many of you are aware that we have a prayer practice in the Church involving prayer beads, I thought I would mention it this morning, and I even brought some with me if you'd like to check them out after the service.

But the reason I'm making the connection with the parable in today's Gospel is that along with the prayer beads there are these little pamphlets that have prayers you can utilize as you hold the beads; and one of the prayers is "Christ Jesus, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Now, I don't really think of myself as a "woe is me, a miserable sinner", kind of guy, when it comes to my faith and overall theology; but yet, I have found this prayer, and this prayer-bead practice, to be a very powerful, comforting, efficacious, and central part of my prayer life. I just had never made that direct connection until now between this morning's Gospel passage and that prayer.

So, in a sense, it's just dawning on me now, how and why we pray this prayer; why it's so powerful: it's because Jesus is teaching them, if you feel lost, unworthy, and are earnestly seeking reconciliation with and before God, if you want a prayer that can really be transformational, here you go.

And I can't conclude without acknowledging the Eucharistic imagery in 2nd Timothy, the parallel with Jesus' body being broken, and his blood being poured out, a sacrifice to God.

The great Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote of the Eucharist, that Jesus, in taking, blessing, breaking, and giving the bread, was calling his disciples, and by extension, us, to mindfulness: if we would just eat this one piece of bread, if we would just take this one sip of wine, mindfully, we would have real life.

So let us take time, to be mindful: of those we have lost, of how we might live, of how we might serve, of how we might pray, and of how we might, through the Grace of God, return to our homes justified, not because of or through our own righteousness, but because of God's great mercy; and how we might partake mindfully of the Feast at God's table, where all are welcome, and where we don't draw lines to distinguish who belongs and who doesn't, who is in, or who is out.

Amen.