20th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Berkeley Johnson
on October 18, 2026

Exodus 33:12-23 / Psalm 99 / 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 / Matthew 22:15-22

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

Good morning! It is a joy to be back here with you, where it all began for me in CA and here in SLO, at St. Stephen's.

This is the first place I prayed when I came here to interview for the Canterbury campus-ministry position in 2007, almost 20 years ago now. Right there, in that front pew, discerning, asking mostly for God's will, and not mine, to be done.

And here we are in 2026. Needless to say, a few things have changed since then, both inside and outside the walls of St. Stephen's. and yet we process onward, faithful to the challenge of resisting the forces of greed and, as today's gospel lesson says, malice so present in our everyday lives, and bringing healing and hopefulness to a broken world, one seemingly small act of kindness and compassion at a time.

In today's gospel reading, we have the well-known attempt by Jesus' opponents try to trap him, and Jesus' brilliant response, which allows him both to affirm not only that everything belongs to God, but also that nothing belongs to Caesar, without his adversaries being able to do anything about it.

But I want to start first by looking at the epistle reading for today, from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, and we'll work our way back to the gospel later.

Now this is a really significant reading, because according to biblical scholars, this is the earliest known New Testament document that we have.

So let's think about that for a minute. This is the beginning of the earliest letter we have in the New Testament. What does it tell us?

Paul speaks of bringing the message of the gospel to them before any gospel has been written. Notice he says the message of the gospel came "not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit…"

It tells us that there is, before any of the gospels were written, an early Christian community of faith, already laboring with steadfastness of hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Does this give anyone else chills?
What else does it tell us?

By becoming imitators of Christ, that they, and by extension, we, become examples to others. I think that's a really important point.

And yes, importantly, this earliest written document also contains a couple of key facts: it identifies Jesus as God's Son, whom God raised from the dead.

And it affirms, as I said at the outset in my opening petition, that our God is a living God.

This opening to Paul's letter contains the building blocks for the doctrine of the Trinity: we have the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all present in this passage.

And on and on we could go; you get the point – there is a lot here – and more we haven't touched on. But before we move to the first lesson from Exodus, there is one more important word Paul uses in this letter, and that is "chosen", when he says he knows that God has chosen them because of the Holy Spirit's presence when the word was brought to them.

So now, contained within the first ten verses of the earliest New Testament document we have, the concept of chosenness has been expanded to include the early Christian community and movement.

I was first introduced to a different understanding of chosenness while I was at seminary – the Episcopal Divinity School, in Cambridge, MA, from 2004-7. At that time, the President and Dean of the seminary was Steven Charleston, a Native American member of the Choctaw Nation, who had previously been the Episcopal Bishop of Alaska.

Now, before I even went to seminary, Steven had been the preacher at the ordination of my Bishop, Tom Ely, of Vermont; and he was so funny, I wasn't sure exactly what was going on…I was still fairly new to the church at that time.

But as we came to know Steven during our time at EDS, my classmates and I all felt blessed and enriched by the experience. And yes, his humor remained a consistent part of his preaching.

But one of the more poignant and memorable lessons Steven taught us, that has always stayed with me, was on this subject of chosenness. He told us that part of the reason the Choctaw people could affirm the truth of the Exodus account when the first Christian missionaries brought the Bible to them, was that it mirrored their own story of how God, or the Great One, had chosen them, right down to a Moses-like figure leading them to their promised land.

His point was that the story of the Choctaw people was no less valid than the story of the ancient Israelites, just because one tradition was written down and the other was an oral tradition handed down through the generations; rather, it revealed the truth of the way that God interacts with and chooses God's people.

So, this speaks right to the heart of what Moses says to the Lord in this first lesson: “we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.”

Now, on the one hand, that verse doesn’t necessarily have to be read “to the exclusion of others”, but I also know there are other verses elsewhere that tend to do so.

And in thinking about that, I’m reminded that scripture can often start out fairly provincial and exclusionary, but then it becomes more inclusive as time goes on. And things don’t really move in the other direction, do they? We don’t ever really go from being inclusive back to being exclusionary. And if you’re thinking, Berkeley, have you been reading the news lately, I have; I’m just not talking about the current state of our government, or world affairs, I’m talking about how things tend to progress throughout scripture; but if it feels like our society is going in an opposite direction, I’m not going to disagree with you.

Many groups of people mentioned in the Bible, Eunuchs and Gentiles chief among them, start off as excluded groups, only to end up being included later.

So, what do we do with that sort of scriptural ambiguity – scripture is back and white – God’s law is clear and unchangeable, right? Well, except maybe for that exception we read last week, where Moses actually pleaded on behalf of God’s people and convinced God to change his mind about the disaster He planned to bring on them? Hmm…

No. As we enter more deeply into scriptural analysis and awareness, we uncover more and more that causes us to wonder, causes our hearts and minds to burn with the desire to know more, to come closer to God, and understand God’s purpose and plan for our own lives more deeply.

That desire is how I ended up up here; it’s what led me into lay preaching. It’s what causes me to look at the 4th verse of today’s Psalm:

4 "O mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity; *
you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob."

….and be reminded of the time, several years ago now, when we brought John Dominic Crossan here to SLO to lecture, and he shared his understanding of the notion, woven throughout scripture, of the Householder God,; the God of scripture is not only the Judge, God is also the Householder, the One who cares for us; for it was the Householder God, the Lover of Justice, Crossan taught us, who built equity right into the fabric of Creation, by making the Sabbath its crowning achievement; who established equity, in the form of rest, for everyone and everything, as a key principle of his plan to execute justice…because God knew, already too well, where our basest instincts would lead us, didn't He?

So, remember, when you are having those awful conversations/arguments about descending into socialism or whatever ism is being hurled at you, that as faithful Christians, we are asking for, we are calling for, we are crying out for justice, for equity, for a more equitable way forward for all God's creatures, all of God's Creation, and not just for ourselves. And because we're at the higher end of that distribution network, we're ostensibly making an argument against our own self-interest, which is why, I have come to believe and understand, we encounter such furious resistance from those who wish to maintain the status quo.

But persevere we must, and I wonder if somehow this whole journey has now in fact led us back to this morning's gospel lesson. How do we remain faithful to God while paying taxes to Caesar?

Now, I don't know about anyone else here, but yes, I will confess, I do pay my taxes. And I know our tax dollars do often end up funding systems and structures that injure and destroy God's people and harm God's Creation. That is why I am always moved by that line in the general confession we sometimes use – where we ask for forgiveness not only for the evil we have done, but also for the evil

done on our behalf – or in the Litany of Penitence we recite as part of our Ash Wednesday liturgy, because they remind us of our corporate responsibility, our collective culpability, as tax-paying members of a modern-day society that is often driven by forces focused on profits and return, that run counter to, or seem to ignore, God's call, God's demand, for justice and equity.

So, what can we do about that? Is that what this gospel passage is even about? I think, in a way, it is. I think, to the extent that taxes paid to Caesar went to fund an occupying force that ultimately publicly executed Jesus himself, that that might have some applicability to our present-day struggle with our government and some of its policies.

So perhaps voting in favor of positions, or working, or speaking out, on behalf of causes, that will better fulfill God's command to create a more just and equitable society, are tangible ways we can turn our tax dollars into a blessing instead of a curse.

And finally, let us remember that everything begins here, at Your table, O Lord, with a Feast of Thanksgiving, one of our earliest Christian traditions, where all are fed, and all are welcome.

And help us to see, Father, that Christ's body, taken, blessed, broken, and given, is the means by which we become we become living members of that mystical body, called to go out into the world, to love and serve Christ in others. Amen.