

## **W Thomas – The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC 08-31-25**

If you listen closely to our opening collect, which said these words, graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and bring forth in us the fruit of good works through Jesus Christ, you would notice that a collect does a pretty darn good job of summing up what just might follow in the various passages of Scripture. And in the passages of Scripture that we have today in particular, we have a passage of Scripture in the Epistle lesson that ends, do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. And in keeping with the the whole theme of what is going on, within Jesus's message to those he's having a meal with, both coming those coming to the table and those who are hosting, is actually a foreshadowing of what we may hear later in Luke 22, when Jesus says words to this effect, I came not to sit at the head of the table but to serve.

So you have a reminder of what our place ought to be because there is so much aspect of transaction in our world and what Jesus is trying to call attention to is that grace is unmerited. You get it totally and completely. I love you is what he's saying and sadly he has to prove that on the cross because that's the only way our little brains can get a sense of what's going on.

But it's really more a matter of what are we to do in response to, as I have said, God's initiative and our response. And in the passages today we have an insight into how Christians before us have tried to struggle and live into these same thoughts of how do we respond and be these people that don't necessarily have to earn God's favor because we already have it, but can we be an extension of God's love, which is really what Jesus is speaking to and trying to get across. So what I hope to explore in the next few minutes is the following.

This sermon seeks to listen with deep obedience to Jesus as he teaches that all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted by taking to heart and practice St. Bridget's table grace, which I have conveniently printed on the back of your bulletin. So we'll come back to that in a few moments. Let's talk for a second about some guiding values and principles I have brought forward before.

When I talk about obedience, I'm living in the beginnings of the 600s when St. Benedict shows up and creates a rule for those gathering together in what we would call a monastery. And he would speak to stability, which is sticking with it, staying there. Obedience, *obidier*, one who listens because its root word is *obidier*, to hear, comes from listening.

And then conversio more, conversatio more, meaning conversion of life, more fully, completely understanding who God created you to be, perhaps with the generous heart that's always been placed in you, but perhaps got misplaced somewhere along the way. And it all is undergirded with that notion of humility, which I have found, as I've said to you before, a wonderful definition by a psychologist who wrote Jesus, the greatest psychologist who ever lived, strength under control. You don't give anything up, you just give it to God and God uses it.

And that's an aspect of what humility could be. And so as we're entering into the relational stuff that Jesus is trying to get across, the first thing he is saying, don't be so worried about yourself. You don't have to sit at the head of the table.

I know and love you already. How can you be most fully you? And where are you best placed to be part of the love that Jesus brings, or in the way we pray the Lord's Prayer, thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven? How can we be part of bringing forth and being that good news? So here's my premise and why I bring in St. Bridget's Table Grace, or more to the point, I bring in, and I'd like you to flip to the back of your bulletin, so you have it in front of you, all right? We can all be looking at it at the same time, just for when I get here. Sometimes it's tricky to get to the back of the bulletin.

Here we go. You will see the banner to it says [thomascahill.com](http://thomascahill.com), and I believe that we are best, especially as Episcopalians, because we favor the fact that we have brains that we're allowed to use, and we're supposed to work our way into the premises that we seek to understand. It's a little bit like living fully into St. Alan Selms' faith-seeking understanding, and when I first discovered the works of Thomas Cahill, his first book, I love the name of the title, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, and there are six books in this series, and I've listed here on the back, if you go to [thomascahill.com](http://thomascahill.com), he has since died, but they're the *Hinges of History* series, and in it he takes you through as if you were a seminarian, going through the great book study of what it is to be a follower, a person of faith, and it's a really powerful exposition with a great sense of humor.

You know what the word wry is? W-r-y? You'll read a passage and you'll go, oh, that's funny too, and you'll learn it. I first encountered St. Bridget's Table Grace in the writing of Thomas Cahill when he was taking the readers through that strain of Christianity that found its way by the trading routes in like the third and fourth century into what we call Ireland, and how that unique culture, which was more family-based, not hierarchical-based, gathered together, there'd be an *anam cara*, a soul friend, that would walk with you. So you have

some differences there that eventually get settled at the Synod of Whitby in about 666 AD, read all about it and how the Irish saved civilization and whatever, but that's when we took the Roman customs and the Celtic customs and kind of merged them together.

Do you want the rest of history lesson? No, I don't want to do that now, but it's really fascinating. The important piece to take from this is that St. Bridget might have actually been considered ordained. She might have actually been not just an abbot, but perhaps had the power of what we would call a bishop.

You'd have to really, it warps our minds at times, but it's how authority was shared and shared well. But she was one who was listened to as a soul friend, who could bring about wisdom, and the reason I bring you the prayer or the table grace, it's that it's evocative of how Jesus is calling us to serve the weak, and you listen carefully to what the calls were in the letter to the Hebrews, etc. So when I'm looking at this, let me read this to you slowly and follow it with me.

I should like a great lake of finest ale for the king of kings.  
I should like a table of the choicest food for the family of heaven.  
Let the ale be made from the fruits of faith, and the food be forgiving love.

I should welcome the poor to my feast, for they are God's children.  
I should welcome the sick to my feast, for they are God's joy.  
Let the poor sit with Jesus at the highest place, and the sick dance with the angels.

God bless the poor,  
God bless the sick,  
and bless our human race.  
God bless our food,  
God bless our drink.  
All homes, O God, embrace.

If you were to take a moment and walk through the 200 years or so that Christ Episcopal Church has been offering love in Elizabeth City, can you find those touchstones where we have been at our best living into how this table grace calls us to be, where we might not seek to sit at the head of the I can see some examples right now as we live going forward. I know at times talking about a golf tournament of all things, but when you go deeper, it's what does the golf tournament provide? It provides that which can offer sustenance, because it's designed not to support the buildings of the church, but the people that the church cares for in the larger community as outreach. That is the simplest way

of saying that if there's a call to stewardship out of all of the scripture that's put before you today, is to simply remember that a steward is a manager, and we're called to manage all that God has given us.

And so I leave you with this grace to ponder, and Thomas Cahill as a guide, to walk through the history that brings us fully as the larger church as we connect with the history of who we are in the last 200 years, and what is it to be those who can live fully into Jesus's call not to sit at the head of the table, but to serve as he serves.

All these words I offer in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.