W Thomas – Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost Christ Episcopal Church, Elizabeth City NC – 10-19-25

I think you know as I preach here that I find principle-centered leadership, I find finding the guiding values, spiritual principles most important in how I live in this world, and hopefully you find a similar way to live in the world, such as following the promises of Holy Baptism. The Apostle Paul writes, and so this is where I'm jumping off from today, and his second letter to Timothy, *for the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths (2 Tim 4:3)*. It's a very expressive phrase, so I think I'm preaching this today.

This sermon is about not losing heart in a world overwhelmed by what the Apostle Paul calls itching ears, as we seek to share with utmost patience the love we have found in Jesus Christ. Now, as I move along in this, there'll be a turn. I'm grateful to be with you when I make that turn.

You are indeed my friends, and it is a place where I can share some deep moments with you, so be ready for that. I need to set the stage for it. To speak to listening, you heard me almost in my very first sermon with you speak to the rule of Saint Benedict, and the rule of Saint Benedict as it opens with John McQuiston's little meditation*, which I handed out, and I still have copies if anybody really needs one.

Attend to these instructions. Listen with the heart and the mind. They are provided in a spirit of goodwill.

The first rule is simply this. Live this life and do whatever is done in a spirit of loving kindness. Abandon attempts to achieve security.

They are futile. Give up the search for wealth. It is demeaning.

Quit the search for salvation. It is selfish. And come to comfortable rest in the certainty that those who participate in this life with an attitude of compassion will receive its full promise.

That's against the backdrop of Paul talking about sound doctrine and about itching ears, which obviously speaks to what Paul writes to listening, and what it is to listen with the ear of the heart and the mind, what it is to be a caring and loving community, such as Benedict helped pull together with a marvelous rule that has sustained itself for 1600 years and, frankly, is a basis of how we Episcopalians gather from our heritage of the church in England. So all of those

pieces fall into play, but the turn that you're giving me permission to make today, I didn't know I was going to make until Thursday, because on Thursday, as I'm preparing to go away next weekend, I'll be leaving Wednesday and Edna Marie will be driving up, and we will make our way to Chappaqua, New York, where I grew up as a child, and I went to Horace Greeley High School, class of 1970, and we are having our 55th reunion. And there's been an awful lot of excitement about gathering again.

We kind of like each other, we decided, after our 30th one-year-late reunion, and it's quite a lovely time, and yet one person will not be here. Her name is Andrea Wasner, and if I had the privilege of preaching at Andrea's funeral, I might say much of what I'm about to say right now. And as you are my friends, I hope you will see how this connects to live this life and everything you do with an attitude of thanksgiving or loving kindness, what it is to listen with the ear of the heart, and then there will be a closing expression that I believe ties it all together.

Andrea is five days younger than I am. I remember sending a Facebook birthday greeting to her as I want to do with my classmates, and the string of joy and the reminder that please come to the 55th anniversary, and yes, she'll be there, and da-da-da. I had no idea she was this sick.

I had seen her back in the fall of 2017 at her home in Chatham Mass on the Cape Cod. We had visited, Edna Marie was with us, and Edna Marie said, she's lovely. And I said, oh yes, and as a 16-year-old boy, let me tell you how much I enjoyed her loveliness from afar.

She's a woman who has lived life and settled in with her husband, Jimmy, who died far too early, lived and worked at a restaurant, in as the bookkeeper, and did all kinds of community awareness building. And I remember when I first saw her again at our 30th reunion one year late, so this would have been 2001, in the fall of 2001. Do you have your calendars working in your heads right now? What it was like to travel anywhere in October of 2001.

She had decided that we had not ordered our lives to have a 30th, so she'd do something, and she invited us all to Chatham, and a whole bunch of us showed up. And when we gathered, we discovered, really, we needed each other to cope with the vicissitudes of the world that we had truly experienced as we passed what was once the Twin Towers on our way to Cape Cod. It was a wonderful time for me to also discover a woman of faith, who actually talked to me finally, which was lovely.

And she said, you know, if I was living here or two, I might actually come to your church. I took that as high praise. And over the years, we would have a little conversation on Facebook or an email.

And then 2017, great moments with great smiles. And then to have the message come last Thursday, that somehow suddenly an illness had cropped up. And while she paid in advance, and all of that, we were going to be diminished by at least one.

We know how many others were being diminished by, because at age 73, we're all keeping track of who's there. Some of you may understand this. And what it is to be formed as a community at a tender age and not realize how important it was.

And then over time to discover the depth of support that will come with walking with one another. That is one of the best ways that I think that the role of St. Benedict helps us hear what it is to be community, what it is to find sound doctrine, to push back against what our itching ears might get us to want to explore, because stability, sticking with it, being in your place, is a core virtue. Testing it with conversatio moram, meaning being willing to change, all undergirded by obedience and humility.

Obedience meaning one who hears, because Obedire means to listen. I say this because as I came to observe and know Andrea, she was deeply a woman who listened to her community. She cared for others.

She didn't aspire for greatness. She aspired to walk with those she loved and to meet those she didn't know. And that was really quite special because she would help organize events to support the poor, fundraising, etc. in her town. So I'm going to leave you with this thought as I posted it, as I wrote a brief reflection to the 100 or so Facebook friends that were, oh my gosh, what happened? You all know this. You've heard me say this before, it's the Scottish blessing.

But as I offer it moving forward, I'm going to have it infused with her sense of loving kindness. Her living this life with the fullness of compassion. Living what Jesus would call us to be when we are at our best.

And as you know the words, as you've heard me say before, you may have heard other preachers speak it. *Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk with us. So make haste to be kind and be quick to love.*

I know that the class of 1970 will be gathering on Saturday and remembering those who are not there. It will be as if we were hearing the strains of empty chairs and empty tables from Les Mis. We will be walking in what the Celts would be calling remembering them in the core ground of our high school, that thin space where all things touch you in a way that you don't expect and your hair stands up on the back of your head.

And hopefully, hopefully, we will be able to look at one another and remember life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us. So make haste to be kind and be quick to love. I thank Andrea for showing me how one can live that prayer so fully.

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

- *Always We Begin Again: The Benedictine Way of Living* by John McQuiston III