

The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost Sermon
St. Thomas Episcopal Church Oriental NC – 06-21-26
(Transcript)

I'm very grateful that you have invited me to be with you as often as I will be with you this summer. I've had the third week today. I have two opportunities in July and the last four Sundays in August and that helped me remember that I don't have to address everything all at the same time when there is a harsh saying of Jesus on a Sunday and make myself crazy that I cover everything in that one moment.

So the point that I'd like to try to make today and I'll bring it forward in a moment once I tell you a story from a comedian named Emo Phillips. Now he is a long-winded, sing-songy voice type comedian and when he tells a story it can go on forever. So I promise to get to the punchline quickly, okay, because it's a really good one against the backdrop of the gospel, the backdrop of what happened post the Council of Nicaea when we became far too powerful as part of the organized world as Christians and all the other parts that come in to empower and stuff get in the way of our relationship with the loving God that is Jesus that we claim to want to share in love with others.

So here is the story. After he's been through an excruciating story of being in the underground subway in New York City, which was quite funny, he finally comes out and starts to cross the Hudson River on a bridge that is seldom used and on it there is a man and the man looks like he's about to jump off and commit suicide and the only thing that Emo can do in that moment is try to talk him out of it, which would be what we would all do and in doing that he tried to find common ground. What is it that they were like and they both discovered they were Christians and they both discovered that they were from a part of the country that had all kinds of strange stuff but they had been in the same style church and they went through iteration of iteration of how they were alike until they got to the 32nd iteration and that one turned out to be, you that one turned out to be they were in disagreement and the punchline is so what else could I do but push him off the bridge and yell die heretic and you can see what Jesus is putting up with all of us when we hear the invective that is coming out of him as written in the gospel today in trying to make sure everybody gets their attention because there is truly a cost of discipleship.

It's how you handle it and where you get your strength from. So the theme that I think I've been praying about this week is this in light of our Lord's teaching on the cost of discipleship this sermon asks how do you share love with your family as a follower of Jesus? How do you share love with your family as a

follower of Jesus and frankly it's not easy. Okay so I'm going to tell you a little bit about my family and that's basically what the sermon is about a little bit of personal sharing and then I've got other weeks to continue to build on other stuff.

So hopefully today being Father's Day I can speak about my dad. My dad Samuel Leroy Thomas Jr. was born in 1918. He graduated from NC State in 1940 with a degree in ceramic engineering and he wound up in the steel mills in Pittsburgh and he managed to get out of there because first off who wants to be in the steel mills in Pittsburgh but it was World War II and he wanted to join others in fighting for freedom and so he wound up in the South Pacific as a lieutenant or an ensign first and a lieutenant junior grade on one of those ships that brought supplies into combat zones under fire.

Something he rarely if ever talked about much like others in his generation and so on a Father's Day today I remember partly him doing that and also the fact that somehow he managed to sire six boys of which there were only four birthdays. Within that brothers one two and three have their own birthdays four and five are twins and then brother number six shared a birthday nine years apart from brother number three. You think the two of them ever got over that? So the piece about the sharing is I have a family and we have a lot of people to talk to especially when the oldest brother starts to wake up at some point in his life marries well very young and somehow eventually finds his way into the Episcopal priesthood and then becomes the one who's the official Jesus person in a family that grew up in a Roman Catholic church because that's where mom took us.

We discovered years later that my father had been baptized in an Episcopal church in New Jersey. Dad had been moderately if not minimally religious in my upbringing. Later in life by the time he found the love of his life his third wife Betty he became active in a Methodist church and he and I actually one day had a conversation about God.

It wasn't particularly deep but it was particularly meaningful because somewhere in that there was the love of a father for his son that I had not seen before. He let his guard down enough one who had provided as much as he did through the years because that's how he was brought up and trained and I'm delighted to honor him in that way today. His family by the way the Thomas's Tristram Thomas just so that you know evidently we landed in the eastern shore of Maryland in the 1630s and we have roots that float back and forth between the Episcopalians, the Anglicans, and the Roman Catholics.

It's a funny history. My mother's family is a clearly Roman Catholic family because she's a De Martino from Bayside so when you see me talk like this you know where some of that is coming from and she made sure all of us were trooped into church but we got to meet some rather strong fathers there and I want to honor Father Skelly in particular and the witness that he gave us, Monsignor Skelly later on, as I wouldn't be who I am standing before you without the influence of that man who may not have been a biological father but he certainly was a priestly spiritual father. My mother was ardent in terms of how she understood Catholicism and yet I was given a gift upon my ordination she took communion from me.

She had been watching and realizing exactly where the barriers were and she said these are foolish watching that growth come forward. My wife Edna Marie who I will be celebrating my 53rd wedding anniversary with in October when I told her at that moment when I was about 33 that I was finally called to the priesthood her response was well I've been waiting for that for two years so her spiritual depth is profound as well that's why I'm really glad I've got a few more times with you so I can weave in a few more stories. I'm more interested in how I've been able to speak with my brothers because that's the hardest place sometimes to speak with in family that direct relationship especially when you are the strongest seeming oldest brother all right so the first thing that I would label for you that I have learned the hard way about what Jesus is saying is learning to listen

Listen deeply if you think about your relationship with Jesus what is one of the things you call for Jesus hear my prayer listen to me okay God let me have this deep relationship with you. This is at the heart of what I think Jesus is crying for when he's coming to say separating he's basically saying you're not doing it well you think you've got it all figured out if you place your trust in me and let me walk with you and I've talked about this before all of a sudden maybe you'll be able to listen better and be in deeper relationship and give a gift you didn't know you were ready to give at a moment you needed to give it as I've said before may the blessing of God find you when you least expect it and need it most and maybe being able to share that blessing when you least expect it and need it most brother number two in my order is somebody who is a deeply caring man but organized religion after he went through it through in kids wasn't right for him but in his retirement he works at the food pantry he does a whole bunch of things he's always been caring he had a relationship at one point which we thought was going to be perfect the love of his life but this particular woman also had a relationship with a group of Christians that had an understanding of how life ought to be lived and it was so strict love couldn't permeate its boundaries to embrace my brother which is sad and so that's at the heart of what I'm simply saying here but the key thing that I want to bring

before you is somehow he and I were able to have an evening I quietly sat there and he led me into a conversation where I was able by listening to also be caring and not judging nor judgmental and the beautiful thing is well my brother and this woman are not in the deep relationship they might have been in they've been able to obtain a cordial relationship of seeing each other from time to time in places and I speak I say that speaks to his strength of character and his ability to find his own means for things and maybe, maybe, I was a small part of how Jesus might have given him some strength to see the days forward without overtly pointing to I'm sharing the love of Jesus do you see how careful we have to be sometimes in order for people to hear us they don't need to know the authorship they need to know the feeling and the reality of what it is to give the gift you or I need to know where our strength comes from because I know I can't do it alone when I call out and I cry out to Jesus be my God and I believe that's what the heart of the gospel is especially that we're hearing proclaimed today we make the good news known when we realize it's Jesus who we're proclaiming not ourselves maybe I should be quiet now.

All these words are for the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.