

W Thomas – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon - St Thomas Episcopal Church Oriental NC – 07-26-26 (Transcript)

O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. For God invites us to live and love like Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, help others to do the same. This sermon celebrates four priests and a bishop, as I explore what the Apostle Paul wrote at the close of chapter 8 in his letter to the Romans.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Now if you were with me a couple of weeks ago, you know I spoke about the impact on me of the Reverend Peter Fleming, who recently died and I was there last week at Kanuga, where I celebrated and wept with his family, and at the same time we all stood and were there when his ashes were interred in the holy ground of the Chapel of St. Francis, where my wife and I will eventually be with all the others that have been part of that healing community of faith that we first found 34 years ago, and that's a whole other story. But when I was thinking about this, I was looking at it from the viewpoint of who has helped me, and then I ask you to be letting this float in the back of your head, who has helped you understand and find a connection to the idea that nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so I decided to settle on, and it became tricky if anybody discovers what I've done, on four priests and one bishop, and see if I could speak a little bit about how each one of them touched me, much the same way in longer fashion I spoke two weeks ago of how Peter Fleming touched me. And then I've got notes on the bottom here, and you'll have to remember these people later on, but their story is bigger and won't fit in to this particular time period. So, the first of the four priests, and we have a young woman who has found her way into the Episcopal Church and hopefully has discovered, I am dressed in a way that looks like a priest, and that's the way I discovered the Episcopal Church.

My daughter was about three months old, and we had to get the baby done, and we didn't know where to go, and it was suggested that we might try the Episcopal Church, because for some reason I was not going to go to a Catholic church. And we were at Westboro, the little church in Westboro, and the priest Jack Lawton came out dressed like this, and all of the sudden he opened up the Book of Common Prayer, I started to follow him, and I knew the words!

And it was like coming home. But the reason he's important in my story is what I'm going to say.

You'll hear this each part of the way. Jack Lawton, Father Jack, being an invitation. You'll hear the word invitation again.

Being an invitation. Because my experience with church had been more a demand rather than an invitation to come forward. And when he visited us at home, he actually came to the house.

It was a relaxed setting where I was allowed to ask questions. And I didn't get the, well, you should have known that already answer. We began to explore things.

And my daughter likes to say that from her baptism, which occurred about four months later, and then six years after that, when I found my way into seminary, again, another story, she says her baptism is what prompted me to begin to take seriously a calling to the priesthood. It was an invitation, and how Father Jack gave me a sense of what pastoral ministry should be was the blessing that came from invitation. And I hold him dear because he died far too early in a car accident with his wife.

And yet, as he died, I know that he knew that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus, because he had already demonstrated that to me. The second person I'm going to speak to, the second priest on my particular list, is one that I did meet in seminary. He was the rector of the church in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, which was where Nashotah House, while nearby in Delafield, was right there.

Nashotah House was right on, and that's where we would go to church. Patrick being a son of the House, the term, he was of all those nature, and yet he was much more charismatic than anybody I'd ever met. The way he would wrap hymns like Alleluia #1 around the gospel text.

He did that every week. He said, I do that so that when people come in, they learn a hymn within a month, and they feel a part of the community. And one of the things that I found most from Patrick was the fact that he embraced my family.

He could listen carefully. He knew how quickly my family had wound up in seminary. Again, another long sermon on another story for another time.

But within four months, as Christmas came, we were beginning to run out of money. Those things happen. And my wife reminded me of this man who showed up at the front door of the expensive apartment off campus that we had been renting, dressed in a Santa suit, who gave us a check for \$500.

We didn't know it was Father Patrick for months. When I say the words, I believe, upon receiving a communion, I am emulating as best I can Patrick, because that's how he received communion at the altar. And he is always, it's going to be one of those weepy things, he is always there with me.

The care and concern that he had for others. And sadly, he too, died too young. But again, full of the conviction that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

When I was ordained in 1989, I was fortunate enough to be called to be the Associate Rector of St. Anne's in Sayville, New York. And the rector there was a very energetic Father Robert Schwarz. As a matter of fact, he gave me the hymnal prayer book I'm using today that I finally had rebound because it was all falling apart.

And inscribed in it, it says, St. Barnabas Day, 1989. Dear Bill, welcome from your family at St. Anne's, Sayville. Remembering Jesus' words to our parish, Behold, I make all things new.

Loving his name, Bob. I was fortunate to have this incredible mentor who allowed me, based upon how he set up the organization of the parish, to have the ability to say no about certain ministries that were across the street, rather than on the parish grounds themselves. But more importantly, I have two memories of him which fit right in.

And one of them was, he was energetic because the theme I have for him is being available. Being available. And at my ordination to the priesthood in December 20th, 1989, he missed being there when the preacher was preaching.

He showed back up in time to lay his hands on me as a new priest. He had gone down the street to the funeral home to do a funeral because somebody was in need. I had a long time of working my way through the balancing act.

I like the fact of being available, but you have to be careful. The more important thing I learned from him was what he did with his watch. Now, I have an Apple watch.

This Apple watch is full of all kinds of impacts and all kinds of things that happened. He had a watch from 1989 that he could program to go off and go ding at 9 o'clock in the morning. And we'd be sitting somewhere like having coffee and all of a sudden the watch would go ding and he'd say, stop, I have to spend 30 seconds in prayer.

And he would stop everything around him and he would pray. That reminded me always. And Bob, in his mid-90s, is still alive.

And I know nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus because I've met many other people who have been touched by him. Two of them were members of my parish when I was in New Jersey. The next person on my list, if you've seen, I've had being an invitation, being a believer, being available.

My theme for Rob Droste, who is a fairly recent friend, is being a disciple. Being a disciple. When I came to the diocese of, what diocese was that? Yeah, it was New Jersey.

And I was in Middletown, New Jersey. He had joined the bishop's staff as a canon for creating a disturbance. That's not what his title was.

But he was basically teaching discipleship, which was upsetting the apple cart in a lot of places. And getting people to think about what their mission in ministry should be. And he was doing a really, really good job having an impact on the diocese.

And Rob is still alive. He's no longer working there. He's doing other things to build up the church as best he can.

But you are the recipient every time I preach. I am the recipient every time I preach of a reminder of nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus if I am but his disciple. For God invites us to live and love like Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

So that people are drawn to Christ. It's got the invitation, but it's actually a version or a definition of what it means to be a disciple. And if you think about it, being open to hearing what God might use you to when you least expect it and need God most.

Or another way to say it, nothing will separate you from the love of God if you are sharing the love of God. And finally, in this list as I've gone through here, I now have being a prophet. I could take an hour to speak about the Rt. Rev. Furman C. Stough, known as Bill Stough.

One time Bishop of Alabama in the 1980s who joined his good friend Edmund Browning to help build up the church when Ed Browning became the presiding bishop. And I met him when I was the associate at St. Ann's and met Bill. I'd gone into New York City to steal ideas on stewardship. And as he was then assigned by the Bishop of Long Island to come out and do the stewardship teaching in our church.

I learned how to teach the Pearl of Great Price story, which the gospel text could have given me permission to use today. I'll save that story for another

time. But the important thing is Bill Stout was there at St. Mark's in Warren, Rhode Island.

My first parish after leaving Sayville. I have talked about that parish a tiny bit. It's the parish where I went and I thought I knew lots of stuff, but I really didn't know how to listen yet.

That's a bigger story. And Bill Stough came and was the preacher at my institution of my rectorship. And in that, as we were getting ready to go, it was time to have lunch before the service.

My son Adam was about 10 years old and Bill Stough in his purple shirt, me in my black shirt, clergy, looked at Adam and he said to Adam, where would you like to go to lunch? Where do you think a 10 year old would want to go to lunch? (*Congregation cries out, McDonald's!*) Exactly. And we all trooped into McDonald's and Bishop Stout had the fun of explaining to the counter people why we were dressed in purple and black. My son Adam has been a priest for 18 years.

There are a lot more to that story, but I have to wonder what seeds were sown. And I know that Adam and myself will certainly say to you, nothing can separate us from the love of God that we have found in Jesus Christ. And I'll leave you with this one thought and then give it a summation.

Bill Stough said to that congregation, this is why I called him a prophet, because a prophet is someone who speaks the truth. And we often don't want to hear it. He got up there and you've experienced me from time to time standing before you in this form of pulpit.

He said, the man you've called to be your rector has a lot of energy. If you're not ready for a priest with a lot of energy, you've called the wrong priest. And my sad story is I wasn't ready to manage the energy, nor were they ready to receive it.

And it became as close to a problem as it could have been. Thank God for the people in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, of which Bill Stough helped arrange. But again, that's another story as well.

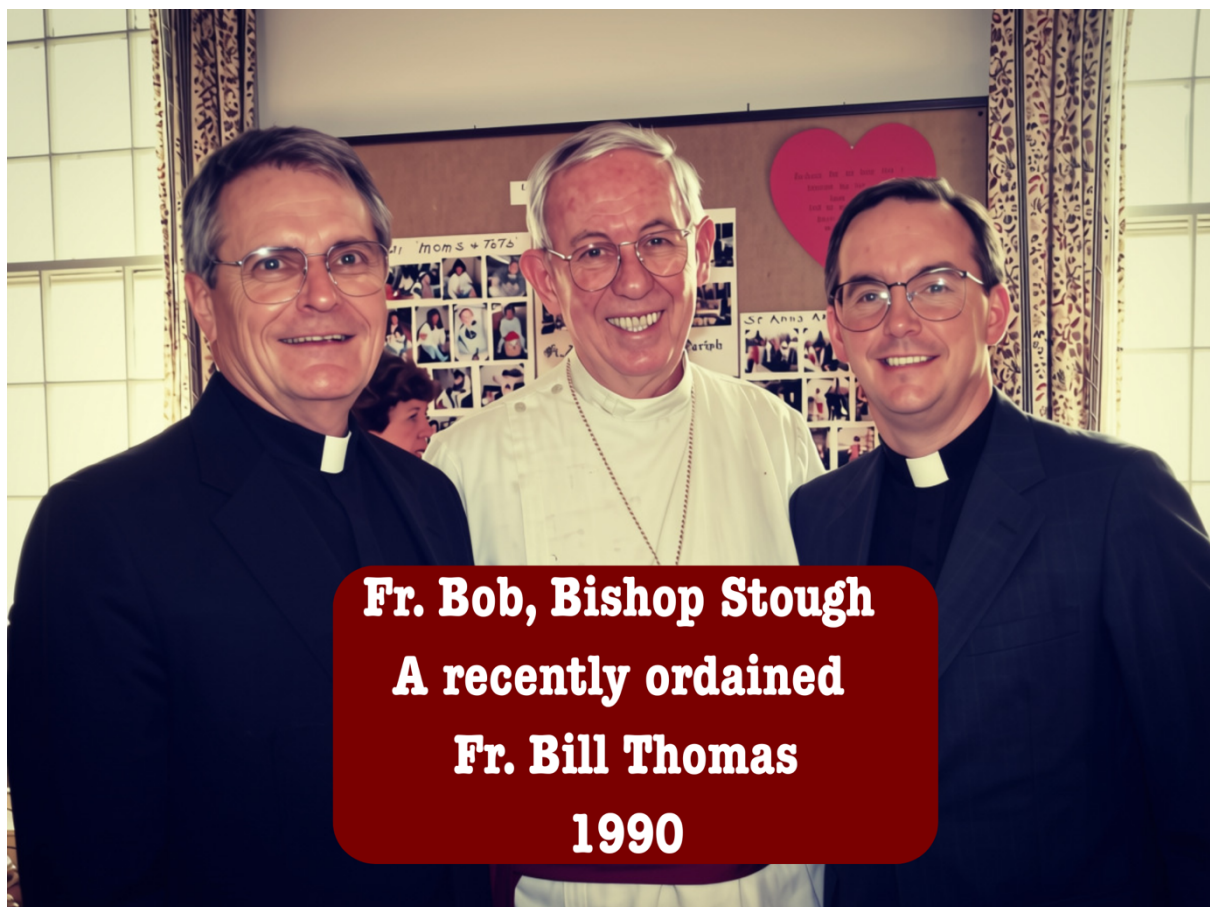
All of these stories build to this one thing for me. Being an invitation, being a believer, being available, being a disciple, being a prophet. None of those things are limited to clergy.

Just hold on to that. But in essence, all of the people I've described had a common theme. They were all willing to be teachers because they shared deeply of themselves, their strengths and even their doubts.

But they put the fullness of their belief in that Jesus Christ was their Lord and Savior and nothing, nothing could separate them. And so I leave you with this question. Who has touched you in such a way that has helped you feel that nothing can separate you from the love of God you have found in Christ Jesus? Are you able to tell them that? And if not, hold them in prayer and tell them.

And find somebody to share the gift you've been given in much the same way. For God invites us to live and love like Jesus. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, help others to do the same.

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



Fr. Bob, Bishop Stough
A recently ordained
Fr. Bill Thomas
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