

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, March 15, 2026**

The Fourth Sunday In Lent (Laetare)

**Festal Evensong**

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz

on

1 Kings 19:9-13; Philippians 4:4-8

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## **Give Up Your Self**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

This Lent, our Evensong Sermon Series is centered on Five Habits of Christian Life.

Fr. Gioia spoke to us regarding Confession and Spiritual Direction,

Focusing us on the healing, the love, the forgiveness of God available to us;

Mo. Lee-Pae spoke on Eucharist as a, “holy habit that forms us into Christ.”

A beautiful phrase.

If you’ve not read or heard these sermons yet, I urge you to look them up:

On the website,

On our YouTube channel,

You won’t be sorry. You’ll receive real spiritual nurture, real food for the soul.

Today, we talk about prayer.

Now many of you will have heard that famous quotation, frequently attributed to Kurt Vonnegut:

I am a human being, not a human doing.

I am a human being, not a human doing.

Leaving aside for a moment that being and doing are both inter-related activities—

Being human must surely involve the doing of human-ness,

An actual and active participation in and living out of one’s humanity—

The virtue of the sentiment “I am a human being, not a human doing”

Is in the insistence that who and what we are and the value of who and what we are

Cannot be reduced to mere productivity.

The accidents, circumstances, and vicissitudes of our labor do not speak our humanity true,

And the expectations our culture has of us that we be endlessly productive

Are actively destructive of human flourishing. And we are exhausted.

So far so good.

What’s missed so often, though, in our particularly absurd and solipsistic age,

Is that the product most in demand,

The thing we are constantly encouraged, expected and enjoined to produce is: our self.

And producing our selves and selling our selves and reinventing our selves

And all on a massive global industrial scale,

Given the all-pervasive poison tentacles of social media

Is exhausting

Even more so on account of the confusion between being human and being our selves,

Producing our selves has become, it seems, what it means to be a human being.

The irony is: we're so busy being our selves and producing our selves

That we've no time to be human at all

No time to actually do our humanity, to live our human-ness fully;

Plenty of time for "actualizing" an ephemeral, never truly stable,

Always volatile and only ever aspirationally real "self"

That vanishes the moment you try to look at it.

Particularly in Lent, when the traditional practices of fasting and abstinence,

Of giving something up,

Can become notional or merely curious or quaint,

I want to urge you: give up just one thing for Lent,

Give up this one thing: your self.

Give up your self.

And beloved: prayer is the practice of giving up our selves to God;

Of being gradually dispossessed of the laborious burden of our selves

And discovering who we truly are in, with, and through Jesus Christ, the love of God incarnate,

Who reveals the fullness of his and our shared humanity

in the light of the fullness of his divinity.

Now, many of us struggle with prayer.

Particularly, many of us struggle with the idea that we don't know how to pray,

That there's a right way to pray, and we fear we've never found it or it's beyond us.

So the idea that prayer is a practice of giving up our selves to God

May sound like a lot, like it requires some extra form or method

Or words or technique or something

To make it real or right or good, which only makes it easier to convince our selves:

We don't really know how to pray.

But insofar as prayer involves communion with God,

Relationship with God, in fact, presupposes it...

Our lives are already our prayers. Our lives are our prayers.

The breath you're breathing now: that is a love letter to you from God.

And the moment you're aware of it

Is the moment your breath inhabits the prayer it already by nature is,

The moment your breath becomes your yes to God's love for you.

It's not magic, though it is wonderful;

It's not a special technique, though it does require practice.

And we are all called to this practice. We are called to pray our lives to God

Because we are called to relationship

Because our humanity depends on this relationship in order to be fully human.

So you know how to pray. You do. We do. Prayer is as available to us as our breath.

It's right there: an opportunity to let go of our selves and to be held by God.

A matter of shifting our attention.

Indeed, if we are truly to let go of our selves,

To become aware of how God is present in every part of our lives

How God touches and compassionates every part of our lives with the goodness of his love  
If we are to yield to that presence, that compassion  
If we are to give up our selves, we must refocus our attention away from our selves.  
I've quoted Simone Weil on attention before, but Simone Weil is very helpful here  
"Absolutely unmixed attention," she writes, "is prayer. If we turn our mind towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself. ... Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the 'I' disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be Conceived [the infinite fullness of the majesty of God's love]."

When Paul enjoins us in Philippians to think on what is true, honest, just, pure, lovely, good,  
He's not advocating a Pollyanna approach to the world or our selves  
He's not telling us to ignore the suffering of the world, the pain of the world,  
Our own suffering and pain,  
He's not counselling us to refuse to see our shared broken-ness,  
Nor suggesting we turn our eyes away from the needs of others,  
Nor shrink from addressing the rampant violence, sin and death that plagued his world  
And continues to plague ours  
No: Paul is fully aware that attention is to the spirit what food is to the body  
And if our attention is on darkness, we will be formed by darkness and filled with despair  
But if our attention is on the good, indeed, on the Good One Himself,  
Who stands in the midst of the darkness with those and in those who suffer and are oppressed  
We will be formed by God's own goodness and filled with it  
And we would not fail to do the good and to be the good  
We would not fail to be fully human in the fullness of our love for others,  
In our attention to the Image of God in others,  
And no darkness, physical or spiritual,  
Could stop us from shining with the light of the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

If we can manage to pray, to become aware of God's presence in and with us  
To draw our attention away from our selves and toward that presence  
Giving our selves up  
We would learn from the Still Small Voice,  
The sound of sheer silence that speaks from the ground of our souls  
What it is to be human, to participate fully in the human adventure  
To become who we truly are.  
If we can take on this practice and give up our selves,  
The world would know us as a people of prayer  
Not because we told them of our thoughts and prayers and did nothing,  
But because, formed by God in prayer through our quiet attentiveness to his gentle love,  
Giving up our selves, resting in him and living from that rest  
We would meet the world with our lives, with our love, with the Life and Love of God  
Living and ablaze in us.

Beloved. If you would be and become who you truly are,  
Fully human, fully alive,  
I urge you to give up your selves.  
I urge you to pray.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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