SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 11, 2026
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Matthew Moretz
on
Proverbs 3:1-18; 1 John 3:1-15

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Evensong Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My grandfather, Vernon McCalpine, is why I'm Episcopalian. His family came over the ice in Detroit. They weren't supposed to, but now they're here, and now my family is in this country, at least that part of it.

He used to take my sister and me to a playground in Sand Hills, Augusta, Georgia. My mom would always say, "Oh, Dad, why do you take them to that one?" I think she was more worried about the trash, but there was a tree there, a big oak tree. It was said, and this is only oral history because I can find it written nowhere, that this was where they hung people.

That's where people who needed killing got killed.

So I didn't really like going to that playground. But I did. I had a good imagination as a child, unfortunately. Maybe it was a bad imagination in this case. That tree wasn't haunted. It was like it was breaking through something. It was like a tear, a rip, a doorway into some horrible time and horrible place.

What does it do to a community to know that human beings, children of God, deliberately got together to kill another human being who lived among them? What does that memory leave behind?

The New Testament reading is John talking about the future God has promised to God's children. John writes about God's love, but also about the unfinished work of God in us: "It does not yet appear what we shall be."

What a beautiful thing to think about, that God is not finished with us.

Children represent the possibility of the future. All these choices that lie before them. Oceans of time, oceans of choice, oceans of energy.

We can readily imagine what they might become. We can readily imagine that they might become better than us. That's the hope.

But what about someone who has done something terrible?

The difficulty is that some things people do are genuinely dreadful. They are a breach, a rip, a tear in this world.

But Christian mercy does not require us to diminish these things. The wounds of Christ never go away. Even in the Resurrection, his wounds are not diminished.

Mercy must never require us to pretend that evil is small.

In Proverbs there is a lovely image of the heart as a tablet. “Write mercy and truth upon the tablet of your heart.”

Truth means naming the evil that was done. It means acknowledging guilt. It means honoring the suffering of victims.

But then there is mercy. Mercy is something applied undeservedly. It recognizes that the guilty do not lose their humanity.

Justice should not simply become another name for vengeance. The right to punish is not automatically the right to kill.

Every human being possesses dignity, and a person can deserve punishment without ceasing to possess it.

The Good Shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep to seek the one that is lost. Being lost does not make the sheep worthless.

We cannot guarantee repentance. But the possibility matters.

Victor Hugo warned about laws that do things that are irrevocable and irreparable. Human courts are fallible.

What do we hope to learn from execution? What will we become?

John writes, “We know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren.”

Our Christian journey is to learn what it means to love one another and to move from death into life.

Wisdom is a tree of life.

We long for a world that does not ask us to pretend evil is harmless, but one in which we can confront evil without allowing evil to determine the character of our response.

We can hold truth and mercy together upon the tablet of the heart.

“It does not yet appear what we shall be.”

We have not yet finished becoming the people God calls us to be.

May God give us courage in the face of darkness, wisdom in the administration of justice, tenderness toward those who suffer, and humility before the mystery and dignity of every human life.

May God teach us, even in the darkness, to move from death toward life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.