

Rev Dr Nathan John Haydon  
St Peter's Episcopal Church, Ladue  
Sermon  
7 June 2026, Proper 5 Year A

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Assigned Lectionary Readings:** Hosea 5:15-6:6; Psalm 50:7-15; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

### **Sermon**

The author Kathleen Norris writes in her book *Amazing Grace* about a time she was an artist-in-residence at a parochial school, teaching young children to write poetry in the form of the Psalms. She did this as a way to help children learn how to process their emotions in a format that was safe for them to express their hurt, anxieties, and even desire for revenge.

Norris says that there was “once a little boy [who] wrote a poem called ‘The Monster Who Was Sorry.’ He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him; his response in the poem is to [hurt his sister], to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: ‘Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, I shouldn’t have done all that.’” Norris goes on to discuss the sheer honesty of the child speaking through this poem, and how it fits in with monastic spirituality. She writes that if the young boy had been a monk in the desert in the fourth century, his elders, upon hearing it would’ve said that “he was well on his way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, 1998), 69-70. Edited for clarity and content.

Kathleen Norris offers this meditation in a section reflecting on repentance. Repentance is one of those words that I think people still hesitate to talk about because of how they have seen it used. If I say the phrase “repent, the end is near,” the image conjured in your mind is more than likely one of a wild-eyed zealot on a street corner shoving a toxic faith down people’s throats. Even if you don’t think that, I would bet that if I were to say to all of you to repent, that some of you would bristle, or maybe even become a little offended. Well, I am actually here today to tell you to repent, but I want to talk to you about what that means. I’m not telling you to repent because I think the end is near; I’m saying it because repentance is the deep root from where we derive true joy. And I think that, at least in part, it is what our readings draw our focus on for today.

“As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me.’ And he got up and followed him.” Matthew is sitting at a financial checkpoint, a tax booth, where he would levy charges for goods from travelers and merchants. While this system was widespread and crucial for collecting revenue in ancient Rome, these tax collectors were just as widely reviled. Roman authorities would place others in the role, such as a Jewish person like Matthew to collect revenue, but these tax collectors were considered sinful traitors, known to abuse the system and participate in the oppression of their fellow Jewish citizens. We don’t know much about Matthew’s background, but from our gospel reading today, it is clear that Matthew was judged harshly by others. And we don’t know why Jesus called to him, but we know Matthew responded because he was, at that precise moment, ready to change his heart. He was ready to not hurt others anymore, to not wreck his room, and to not wreck his town. The call that Matthew received from Christ is the same one that is constantly cried out to us: Follow me.

Follow me. That is the true meaning of repentance. It is to finally realize you need to change, and to know where that change has to happen. That is because within the constancy of our relationship with Christ, we are beckoned by God to continual change as a renewed creation. This is our message after Easter, after the Ascension, after Pentecost, and after Trinity Sunday: we are being invited into a relationship with God that is inexhaustible in its grace. We experience this in our daily lives when we realize we are not committing ourselves to an institution, but to the very essence of life, who says that he desires mercy, and not sacrifice; the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

We hold ourselves back through the oppression of guilt and despair, thinking that we are beyond the scope of grace. We hold ourselves back when we refuse mercy to others and refuse to receive the mercy in store for us. We hold ourselves back when we think it is through our offerings that we receive grace, rather than seeking the one who says "Follow me." I want to say this as plainly as possible: it is within the trust found in hoping against hope that we discover the grace that God showed Abraham, the grace that was shown to the woman with the hemorrhage, and the grace given to the leader of the synagogue that brought life to a girl who had died. The grace given to all these moments is the promise of restoration – the promise that what was lacking in your life, which you have tried to fill in so many other ways, is made whole; what was incomplete is made complete, and what was lost will be returned.

It is a joy to repent. Maybe not at first, because it demands honest change, but it is this change that leads to wholeness and restoration, a restoration found in the promise contained within the depths of a resurrected life. You are not a monster beyond the reach of mercy; you are a person whose heart needs to be made clean and consecrated in love. God is able to do what God has promised, working this glory in the barrenness of our hearts, bringing life, healing, and

hope, where we come to hear the words uttered to us in our openness: Take heart, your faith has made you well. Refuse the temptation of a hardened heart, the one that laughs and mocks when the potential for restoration and resurrection is denied, where our love is like a morning cloud and the dew that goes away early.

Thomas Merton wrote that “the man who is not afraid to admit everything that he sees to be wrong with himself, and yet recognizes that he may be the object of God's love precisely because of his shortcomings, can begin to be sincere. His sincerity is based on confidence, not in his own illusions about himself, but in the endless, unfailing mercy of God.”<sup>2</sup> We want to be right; God wants us to be honest. Recognize how much you need mercy, and you will start to see how much others need it too. Seek an unflinching honesty about yourself, and hold nothing back. Be like a child writing a poem who doesn't know how to obscure the truth. Believe in the One who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” In doing so, you are inviting God to permeate every part you, who will bring what has fallen in your life, what has fallen in your hope, and what has fallen in your soul to restoration and resurrection. Thanks be to God for this promise.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Barnes and Noble Books, 1953), 204.