

Sermon

The Rev. Andrew J. Stoessel

St. Brendan's Episcopal Church, Deer Isle, ME

16 Pentecost, Year A, September 13, 2026

The Second Sunday of the Season of Creation

Proper 19, amended for the Season of Creation

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 23a; Matthew 18:21-35

Let us pray.

Eternal light shine in our hearts

Eternal goodness deliver us from evil

Eternal power be our support

Eternal wisdom scatter the darkness of our ignorance

Eternal pity have mercy on us

That with all our heart and mind

and soul and strength we may seek thy face

and be brought by thine infinite mercy

to thy holy presence.

- *Alcuin of York*

Please be seated.

This prayer came to mind as I thought about our readings this morning, and our celebration of the Season of Creation. I discovered it, or rather it discovered me, in a small devotional book I frequently turn to, "A Celtic Liturgy", written and compiled by the Rev. Patricia Robson. She is a priest in the Church of England.

The prayer is from Alcuin of York. Alcuin was born near York, Northumbria, about the year 730 and died in Tours, France on May 19, 804. He was a clergyman – a deacon – and was a noted teacher, educator, and poet. His life and ministry are celebrated in the Anglican and Episcopal Church on May 20. Echoing this prayer, the Collect for his day says, "Illumine our minds, we pray, that amid the uncertainties and confusions of our own time we may show forth your eternal truth."

We probably can discuss at length what exactly “eternal truth” is. What scripture tells and our faith holds, “eternal truth” has at its core love and creation. “God is “love” we say, and all things come into being through God. Stemming from this also is the sense of mercy and redemption and restoration. Through the grace of God things and creatures are called into being. Then, even though they may die, there is a sense of regeneration, restoration, or if you will, resurrection. New life, sustained, balanced. We know all too well how out of balance life can get. Hence, we seek or long for restoration, redemption. Even resurrection.

In his Letter to Episcopalians on the 25th Anniversary of 9/11 [*read to the congregation at the beginning of this morning's service*] Bishop Rowe alluded to the uncertainties and confusions of our own times when he noted “the divisions and fears of our common life since 9/11/2001.” However, as we heard, he added, “As Episcopalians, however, we know there is a better way. We saw it then in the extraordinary witness of first responders, and especially the heroic relief of our own St. Paul’s Chapel in lower Manhattan.”

Last Friday, 9/11, my wife, Sue, and I watched a brief segment of a film narrated by Tom Hanks about the water rescue of 500,000 people by hundreds of boats on 9/11. It took nine hours. Mr. Hanks pointed out it was the largest water evacuation since Dunkirk, where 350,000 people were evacuated. Through the immediate call and coordination from the Coast Guard, the 9/11 rescue was an immediate response of captains and skippers in the area. Recalling the day, one of the boat captains said, “It was the greatest day of my life, helping those people in a moment of crisis.” Of course, he was not talking about the destruction and loss of life from the collapsing towers, but rather the reaching out to people in need, confusion and fear as a result of that attack. We are reminded that while God does not create suffering, it exists. Into the brokenness, injury, and harm, God’s grace, compassion and mercy flow. This captain channeled this. There was no mention of God or faith; he simply embodied it.

Alcuin’s prayer uses the word “eternal” as a petition with all positive notions: Eternal light, eternal goodness, eternal power, eternal wisdom, eternal pity. Later in the prayer come the words, “infinite mercy.”

In them I'm reminded that I am connected into something that extends well beyond the temporal state of my being. Beyond my small dot of existence, and yet still intimately connected and intertwined into this eternal truth. Being thus interconnected and intertwined, my actions have consequences, for good or ill. Now, if only I could remember this during the day, and not just in a moment of silence in the morning! Still, the prayer helps!

In this Season of Creation, I choose for a second reading this passage from the Talmud. This passage is one of the suggested readings from a "A Guide for Episcopal Parishes – Perennial Edition 2025" for the Season of Creation the Diocese of Maine has made available. Our liturgy this morning draws from the material. (*The Guide was compiled by the Rev. John Elliott Lein and the Rev. Dr. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas.*)

In this brief story, is a reminder of creation always unfolding and growing, and sustaining when supported and cared for. As we heard, the man simply plants a tree for the benefit of the generations that will come after him, just as he has enjoyed the bounty and shade of trees that grew before his life began. It is a sustainable practice. One that keeps a balance, and one that stresses our inter-connectiveness and interdependence that extends beyond our physical and temporal horizons.

In our first lesson, the people of Israel are definitely looking ahead at both immediate and future horizons. A future land and settlement await. However, immediately, they face a transit that seems impossible: across a marshy sea, with an Egyptian army close at hand to recapture them. Moses, whom God has instilled with super-natural powers at this moment, pushes back creation itself – the waters of the Red Sea - to create safe passage. The waters close on the army that follows them. We hear of dead Egyptians washing up on the shore. The Egyptians, however, are part of God's creation, too. In a well-known passage from the Talmud, God rebukes the angels who were about to sing praises for the Israelites safe passage. God stopped them and asked, "The work of my hands is drowning in the sea and you would utter a song before me?" Here we find an inkling of the "infinite mercy" of God, concerned about all of God's people. There is no joy as enemies perish.

Infinite mercy is found in our gospel lesson.

The theme is clear: forgiveness.

Jesus wants us to know that we are forgiven. He wants us, as the church, to be a forgiving people, and a forgiving church. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," he tells his disciples to pray. "Pray without ceasing," Paul tells the church at another time.

If you remember from last week, the gospel dealt with conflicts and offenses between members of the early church and laid out steps on how to resolve broken relationships and injustices within the community. This morning, seeking more clarity, Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. He asks, how many times should one forgive, seven? Like us all, he asks for manageable and achievable steps. Seven is a complete number, like the seven days of creation. Jesus says, no, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Those who remember the King James Version of the Bible or other translations, will know that this sometimes listed as seventy times seven. Seventy times seven is 490. Whether seven, seventy-seven or 490 times, Jesus takes the question to a different realm. As one commentator wrote, "this is celestial arithmetic: we must 'do it in our hearts.'" (I apologize that I don't recall the commentator who said this, but I felt it bears repeating.) Jesus meant 'seventy times seven times seven times seven' – to infinity. Jesus insists that forgiveness should have no limitations.

It is important to remember that "forgiveness is not carelessness or indifference to wrong. It is not permissiveness or the absence of any sense of ethical standards. On the contrary, there can be no forgiveness without standards and values being violated, without persons and relationships being hurt, without a loss so deeply felt that efforts at restorations are pursued. From a distance, forgiveness may look like condoning or permissiveness, but in reality, forgiveness takes the violators, the violated, and the violation most seriously. To be forgiven is to be taken seriously. Forgiveness does not abrogate but fulfills righteousness." (*Frederick Craddock, "Preaching Through the Christian*

Year, Year A," by F. Craddock, J. Hayes, C. Holladay, G. Tucker, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg PA, c. 1992, p. 441).

This is hard work. It gets tricky. I'm sure Peter was also thinking of "yes, but what about an instance such as..." We can create a list in seconds. "What about a mass shooting? What about a terrorist attack? What about acts of domestic violence? The list can grow in the heartbeat. No doubt, this hard work. It may take the work of a lifetime in some cases, the work of generations. We are to be forgiving not just to one another, but to creation as a whole.

The poet Wendell Berry wrote:

"To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want." (*Wendell Berry, The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural, Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1981, 281., taken from A Season of Creation: Guide for Episcopal Parishes 2025*)

Can we forgive our enemies, and pray for them, as Jesus has commanded? This is something that must be wrestled with in our faith, and in our church. Can we forgive ourselves? Again, challenging work.

Our Lord tells us to continue to search our hearts, to seek forgiveness and to forgive as well. Saint Francis once said, "It is pardoning that we are pardoned." With a forgiving disposition, the Spirit will take you and me to a new place, a new creation, restored, renewed, resurrected. A place where we may become people of the kingdom.

Hence, we pray:

Eternal light shine in our hearts
 Eternal goodness deliver us from evil
 Eternal power be our support
 Eternal wisdom scatter the darkness of our ignorance

Eternal pity have mercy on us
That with all our heart and mind
and soul and strength we may seek thy face
and be brought by thine infinite mercy
to thy holy presence.

- *Alcuin of York*

Amen.