St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
September 13, 2026

Readings:
https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/APro19_RCL.html

Those who walk through our tiny parking lot in the back may have noticed that my small, rather old, black, much-loved VW Jetta no longer fills my spot. It was time and frankly it had been time for a while with 284000 miles. It had done truly exemplary service since I bought it in 2009 and I will admit to tearing up just a bit when it saw it get driven off for the last time just six weeks or so ago. I'll miss my little home on wheels that sustained smashed windows in a Metro-North parking lot and the impact of a bear, of all things, trying to run across the street in the middle of the night and running instead with an enormous thud I'll never forget into its driver's side door. I was fine and so, for the most part, was the intrepid little VW. I'll miss it for many reasons, but most of all I'll miss my visits with Mike, the mechanic who cared for it over a good number of its years. Mike's coworkers called him Big Mike, and while I never quite got *that* close to Mike, we had many great chats. I came to know Mike as a wise and good soul with a particular gift for handling difficult interactions with grace and kindness, a valuable gift indeed for one working in customer service. I learned a lot from him.

I remember one day in particular. It was an encounter remarkable enough that I wrote it down when I got home and even shared it with friends. I got to Mike's shop with my car early and there was already another customer in the waiting area. The customer was clearly anxious, agitated. I had brought work and had anticipated something of a wait, so I wasn't surprised to still be there when Mike came out to give the other customer an update. As Mike came through the door from the garage, the customer jumped up to get the diagnosis. The car would extensive repairs and it would take a while. The customer yelled, "Oh my God, what is wrong with you people? You should have told me that earlier! I need to be in New York in four hours!" Mike simply and calmly responded, "I'm so sorry. We didn't know earlier." The customer continued to berate him. When my work got done, that scene had passed, the customer had left, and I talked with Mike for a few minutes, telling him I was sorry to see him treated that way and congratulating him on staying so calm. And here was Mike's word-for-word response. "What I figure is- it's not me the customer's mad at. This is an anxious person. Who knows why they need to be in New York? I figure- give them the benefit of the doubt." I said, "Mike- that's really gracious of you." He said, "You know, we all have our moments." He smiled. "I've had mine too. And I've gotten a lot of understanding myself, even when I didn't deserve it. I figure I can give some too."

What Mike did, in essence, was to forgive. He offered understanding; he offered grace. And these are themes that pulsate vividly through today's lessons and in fact so much of scripture. They're centerpieces of Jesus's teaching, and we see them here too in both Genesis and in Paul. And: they are not easy. To forgive is not easy for any of us, especially a deep hurt. Yet Jesus seems to take it very seriously and it stands at the very heart of who he is, who he reveals God to be, and who he, in holding up a mirror to us, appears to believe we are as well when all is stripped away. It's worth reminding ourselves again that Jesus's prayer offers us much: daily bread, God's kingdom peace

and justice here on earth as in heaven, and more, yet only asks one thing of us, only one. It's that we forgive. That we forgive as we've been forgiven. That we give, in essence, that understanding or *grace* that's been extended to us.

But though this is clear, no, it's not easy, not easy at all, and I want to suggest today that what I learned in that moment with Mike allows a glimpse into a possible answer, the answer in fact that these lessons themselves suggest. How do we forgive? How do we extend grace? How do we give that gift from a place of hurt or anger, perhaps well-justified and perhaps from long ago? What I saw that day in Mike's model is what we see here today, and that's the possibility that grace can come from *gratitude*, that forgiveness can flow when we're able to feel thankful for all that surrounds us, all the evident beauty, all the ample gift, all the grace in fact that's gotten us each to this day and to this place.

Grace. It's interesting that *Grazie*, thank you in Italian, is *grace*. That *Gracias*, thank you in Spanish, is *grace*. I love nothing more than walking through this building at lunch time and hearing grace in all of the classrooms. Students look forward to being asked to offer grace and to choose from the many different short poems or prayers or songs offered over the school's seven decades. We will gather for lunch ourselves today as we head upstairs for our picnic and *all of this* in essence is our extended grace, our offering of thanks. The Great Thanksgiving, it's called, and before even that beautiful moment around the altar, we've sung and proclaimed our thanksgiving in hymns and canticles and in the sound of choir and organ. We stop the flow of our thanksgiving only briefly, and that's to confess and to ask for, of all things, forgiveness, the forgiveness that perhaps can indeed equip *each of us* in some small way to forgive, extend grace, offer understanding.

And so yes, finally, this is precisely what is before us today as Paul writes these strikingly real and raw words to the congregations in Rome. Why is Paul writing to Rome at all? My friends, here's what's going on, and it's quite remarkable. Paul's writing to the Roman church because its Jewish members, kicked out by Claudius, have come home! Claudius has died and the Jewish folks he expelled are now returning to Rome. It's been five years and now Jewish members, once insiders and the community's rock, are now essentially newcomers. Paul here uses the terms strong and weak and says "Folks, our returning members follow different dietary rules from ours and observe different holidays. We can show grace. We can show understanding. We couldn't be any more filled with joy and gratitude! We are so thankful. Our family is together again. Let the joy and the thanks and the understanding and grace flow."

It's gratitude that stands at the heart of Joseph's unlikely and heartrending gestures of forgiveness as well, of course, as brothers are reunited, a father is honored, and unity is restored. How could I not forgive, Joseph asks? Look at all God has done for us! Look at how God's work of love and mercy and redemption is being accomplished in us!" And so brothers who have behaved rather poorly, brothers expecting a grudge and "payback" receive instead reassurance and kindess, as we hear so movingly as the narrative concludes. That can't have been easy! Joseph was quantifiably mistreated, harmed, hurt by those who should have protected and supported him. Forgiveness didn't come instantly. It came in small steps. But he got there. Jesus's message today gets delivered in a story with something of a rough edge. But we get it. We've been shown such grace, such mercy, such love from the one who forgave even those who murdered him, even the friends who claimed not to know him when he needed them most. Into a graceless world, he brought endless

and limitless grace and he brings it to ours too, just when *we* need it the most. Into our own moment of bewildering gracelessness he says "Be vessels of grace. Bring grace. Show grace. Walk in the other's shoes. Let grace flow from a simple "grazie" for all we're given, for all we've been given. And with that grace, with that understanding and yes, with each step we take toward forgiveness, no matter how small, even if we need seventy-seven of them, that kingdom of justice and mercy and truth will indeed come, on earth as in heaven." Thanks be to God. Amen.