



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

Over the past summer, I've been engaging in a personal inventory. A personal inventory is one you often do when you want to determine and reflect on your life and name the things that you've done and name the things that you've left, undone, and try to make amends. But personal inventories can also be about finding out and assessing and discerning what your driving value is, what your purpose is, what your priorities are, who are you.

And so this has been an incredibly fruitful time for me. I've been experiencing that sense of self that comes through that self-examination more powerfully than ever. And one of the things that I've discovered is that I love my job. I was at a point in my career 27 years in, and I had just finished a degree at Michigan that I've talked a lot about, an MBA and I was watching all of my classmates go and try new things. Instead of feeling excited for them, I began to feel this deep sense of peace. I began to feel this sense of security in who I am as a pastor, of how privileged I am and humbled I am to be the rector of Christchurch Cranbrook, and the work that we do together.

And most of all, I found myself in awe of this Christian tradition. This incredible body of belief that I have the privilege of speaking about every week, the Christian tradition, the scriptures, the hymns, the theology, the work, the history, all of it is an unbelievable fund of incredible insight and wisdom. It is infinitely deep and infinitely vast. And it humbles me that I get to spend my days thinking about it and trying to make it stay alive into this world and stay relevant to this world.

And I have been particularly taken by the Bible. I've been doing a lot of Bible study this summer, and I have developed and learned about a way of thinking about the Bible, which works not only in looking at the Bible as a whole, but also the Bible in a particular passage. All of scripture has a certain kind of pattern. It all comes in the midst of a crisis. Scripture never comes to a community when things are going well. It always comes to a community when they're facing crisis and difficulty and opposition and suffering.

And when you experience suffering and difficulty and opposition, you have the tendency, and scripture evidences this. You have the tendency to break things

down into a binary between good and evil, sacred and profane, and just and unjust. It is what we do as humans. It's the most natural thing we do, and you see it all the time in the scriptural narratives we read. And yet what makes something scripture is there's always an invitation to see through those binaries, to see through that either/or and find a kind of place of repair.

This happens in the scripture as a whole. If you look at it from start to finish, you'll see a crisis. You'll see a binary. You'll see a movement through to reconciliation and repair. And the work that you and I are called to do as Christians is to make that scriptural pattern, our own pattern of our life, to find it in the Bible and to find it in our lives.

And today's gospel is a wonderful example of that because this is a thorny piece of scripture on the surface of it. Jesus is coming, exhausted from having arguments with the Pharisees over what is clean and what is unclean, a binary, in other words, and He flees outside of the traditional boundaries of Israel into the places beyond. Another binary. And He encounters a woman, who comes to Him begging for healing, and she is a Gentile and He is a Jew, yet another binary.

And Jesus reaches out after losing an argument to her. And this is always disturbing to us because we don't want to see Jesus lose an argument. It's like watching the home team fall short, or is that too close to you Michigan fans? Oof, that was rough. No one wants to see Jesus lose an argument, but He does. As a wonderful Irish poet that I love to read, says “The woman was a wrestler because she took his weight and used it against him and pinned him with the kingdom of God.” And so the woman wrestler wins. And in that moment, Jesus suddenly sees that there's this new way of being in the world, this new way of living that even astonishes Him.

And then in the second part of our reading from Mark today, Jesus is moving towards Galilee and someone comes to Him with a person who is suffering from a speech impediment and from a hearing impairment, and they ask Him to cure this person. Jesus places His hands on him and then spits and then touches His tongue with it, which is kind of gross, and says in Aramaic, *ephphatha*, be opened. And that suddenly releases the man from captivity. That person would've never been able to move into the Holy of Holies in the temple, but Jesus cures Him and says that He is included.

Everything I think in today's gospel is an opportunity for us to see through those binaries, to that repair that is the work of the Kingdom of God. And that is the work you and I are called to do as we delve deep into the scriptures, to see through those false divisions that we often construct and to find our way to that place. It's not a compromise, it's a repair, a transformation, a change, a conversion, a release. *Ephphatha*: be opened.

Now, as I thought about that moment in *ephphatha*, I was thinking about the kind of best way to mirror that whole movement in scripture in our lives, because I think that that passage, *ephphatha*, that moment, that word captures something incredibly important about the Christian life, which is that the Christian life is not about incremental changes. The Christian life is not about simply following a tradition. The Christian life is not about simply reading the Bible. The Christian life is not simply about coming to church. It's about making a radical change in your life, and it happens through this moment of release. *Ephphatha*: be opened.

That's something that you and I have to face in our lives. When you and I experience death, when you and I experience difficulty, when you and I experience obstacles, when you and I experience challenges, when you and I experience limits, when you and I experience oppression, you and I are called to experience and claim that release, that opportunity to be opened.

So what does it look like? I found an image that I think is powerful and I want to share it with you today, and it's from the story of Helen Keller, who was an early disability activist in the 20th century. Born in 1880, died in 1965. Born in Alabama, she was stricken as a child at 19 months old and was rendered death, blind, and mute. And a woman from the north, from the Boston area, Ann Sullivan, who herself was blind, came down to Alabama in 1887 to work with her.

And Ann Sullivan was herself a survivor. Her parents had died. She had been raised in an almshouse. She was placed among the criminally insane and it wasn't until there was an inspector who came through, on the part of the state, that she begged to be brought to the Perkins School of the Blind, and she finished as valedictorian. Ann Sullivan was a genius and a person of faith. In her valedictory speech, she dedicated her life to God and to her neighbor and said that is the meaning of life. She did her own personal inventory.

So Ann Sullivan comes down to see Helen, and the first night she confronts the Kellers with the fact that they own slaves during the Civil War. They had a rip-roaring fight, and then somehow the next morning came and Helen and Ann began working together. And there is a famous scene that has been captured in movies imperfectly in which Helen learns the word water. And that scene is often seen as this great moment of triumph, but it actually happened in the most gentle way.

In her own autobiography that Helen Keller published when she was 23 years old, 1903, *The Story of My Life*, she described it this way – and I have, by the way, on the bulletin, a picture of the water pump where this all takes place. That's the actual water pump of the Keller family. She writes this:

“We walked down the path to the well house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one

hand, she spelled into the other, the word water first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as if something forgotten, a thrill of a returning thought. And somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that water, W-A-T-E-R, meant the wonderful, cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free. There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

"I left the well house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with a strange new sight that had come to me. On entering the door of the house, I remembered a doll that I had broken in a fit of temper earlier that day. I felt my way and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears for I realized what I had done, and for the first time, I felt repentance and sorrow.

"I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were, but I do know that mother, father, sister, teacher were among them. Words that made the world blossom for me like Aaron's rod with flowers."

For Keller, there was a moment in which she discovered the power of the right word. And in the midst of discovering that power of the right word, she discovered herself a new identity and a new relationship, and she discovered God. She experienced a kind of spiritual awakening. That is what is at stake for all of us when we are faced with difficulty or oppression or opposition or death or disease or despair, we tend to go looking for words. We look for ways to capture what's going on in our lives. And when we discover those words, suddenly we find a new sense of self, a new way of seeing ourselves in relationship with other people. And internal to that, we find God.

My father, when he was able to change the word for his alcoholism from sin to disease, experienced a profound change. He saw himself differently and it allowed him to develop something that had eluded him all his life: a relationship with God. And all of us have that need for words. And those of us who have ever struggled with a way of capturing a word that captures us, that does our own life work justice, knows the power of that word and knows the power of that identity, the power of those relationships, and the incredible blessing of knowing God.

This is what is meant when we say *ephphatha*, be opened. Jesus spoke a word and the man experienced a new relationship, a new sense of identity. He was no longer stigmatized. He was no longer marginalized. He was part of the center and God was proclaimed. This is what the woman experiences when she says the word faith and so places everything at Jesus's feet. She experiences a new relationship, a new power, a new identity, and God becomes present in her life in a new way.

You and I are called to do this kind of inventory this year. You and I are called to delve deep into the word of God, which is our deepest resource that we need to claim and own at this time now, more than ever. Faced as we are with the difficulties of our day, you and I are called to engage in a kind of reparative reading of that text and to find our way to those wonderful words, *ephphatha*, to be released, to be made whole, and you and I are called to know that word is Jesus. Let that be our test. Let that be our task this day, this year, and always.

Amen.