



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.

I have a love-hate relationship with Facebook. I hate Facebook because I think it breeds social competition and creates the conditions for misery, because we know that comparison is the thief of joy. I also hate Facebook because it spreads this certain disease, which causes normal, rational people to make incredibly stupid decisions called FOMO, fear of missing out. I have seen so many relationships tested because of seeing a chance for giving in to that fear of missing out and doing something that they regret. And finally, Facebook creates the most amazing echo chamber. If you want to hear the sound of your voice, just post something political on Facebook and I guarantee you, the algorithms will reward you. You'll be facing yourself in the mirror and you will just find yourself getting wound up.

But I also love Facebook. I love the fact that it connects us. I meet people again for the first time and I see them in a new context and I think of how powerful the relationship we had. And I also get strangely from Facebook, a sense of belonging. And this summer I had one of those moments where I had that connection with a parishioner that I had when I was working as a priest in New York City in 1998. Her name is Lisa Shaw and she attended a twenties and thirties group that I ran when I was working in New York City at Grace Church in New York.

She was working for the Office of Management and Budget in New York City. And since living in New York City, she's moved to Portland. And she worked for a while in government there. And then she's now in academic administration for a college. She's one of those people who kind of makes the trains run on time, who moves the papers from one part of the desk to the next, who makes sure the forms are filled out, who exercises incredible judgment.

And on her Facebook feed, there was this really beautiful little picture she posted, which is on your bulletin cover today. And it happened sometime around July. It was this little Jesus, this tiny little kind of claymation Jesus. One of her coworkers, knowing that she was an observant Christian and an Episcopalian when it was time to give her a little gift, put this little Jesus right on her desk. And you can see right there this little Jesus with His hands out to kind of say, here I am, and a little smile in front of all of those stacks of government reports and that incredible inbox from

hell, which is stacked higher than the walls. We've all seen that in our life of work, many of us, right? Those inboxes that just fill us with dread.

And yet here He is just being beautiful. So happy to see her. I was enchanted by this little Jesus, and I thought for a while that I might put something in the comment section like, well, that is a beautiful little pea-sized Prince of Peace, or what a beautiful mustard-sized miniature Messiah. But I've realized that I can't comment on anything in Facebook without getting some kind of blowback. So I just backed away and I hit the heart emoji.

But I wouldn't let it rest. I sent her a note, Lisa, so great to see you. Hope you're well. Where did you get that little Jesus? And she immediately wrote back with the link to the Amazon and I bought 350 of them. And about three weeks ago, I gave them out at service and everybody took them. And then people wanted more. So last week I bought 150 and I gave them away at service and people wanted more. And so this week, I bought a hundred. I thought how deep is this market? And in fact, just getting to this service alone, I only have about 15 left, so I'll bring some next week.

I've been sharing this little Jesus because I do have a goofy side. Yeah. But that's beside the point. I shared this little Jesus because I actually wanted you to have some agency in your Christian life. I wanted that little Jesus to go with you into your workplace. I wanted to see you know the comfort of having that little Jesus in your life, that He was with you. And I wanted you to experiment with the ways you could give that little Jesus, at a moment of love and connection, to create a kind of connection with that person to say, I love Jesus too. And even more importantly, Jesus loves you.

And you'd be amazed who has done this. After I gave away Jesus the first time, there was a lot of pictures that came where people put little Jesus on their dashboard, looking back on them. And I didn't ask if the driving improved. I didn't ask if their temper was moderated. They didn't get angry. But I knew that Jesus was with them and that was a nice little reminder. And I heard that one of our members was at brunch after service and he saw a minister having a kind of weary brunch with his family after the service that he had done, and he went over and he placed the little Jesus on the table to remind him that Jesus loved him.

And just before this service, Terry told me about the birthday party they had for him to celebrate his birthday. And his grandchild, when she saw the cake and all the candles, put little Jesus on the cake so that her grandfather would know that Jesus loved him. But perhaps the one that moved me the most was a parishioner who told me that she had been struggling with a kind of addiction. She had discovered that she was a compulsive debtor. And a compulsive debtor is like someone who is a compulsive spender, but it's only gotten worse.

And she was in a place where she was really struggling to buy something really expensive that was \$3,500. And she did something that all people who struggle with addiction do. She began to engage in this elaborate rationalization as to why she could make this purchase, why it was okay for her to make this purchase, why it was due her. And she opened up her purse and there lying down with his arms stretched out, was little Jesus. And she said, I can say no to this. It was a reminder to her that God was there, that she could surrender as we have to do with addiction and to give up that power to God. And she closed her purse and walked out of the store without making the purchase. And that was a victory.

And this is precisely what I hoped would happen. Because there is this deep connection between how we play and how we heal. There's a deep connection between re-creation or recreation. The roots of recreation is recreation being made new through play and recovery. Talk to anybody who struggles and works on their recovery. And it's an elaborate work of play. You have to improvise all the time. You have to find a new community. You have to problem solve a way out of a tempting situation. You have to find ways to give up to God the control that has served you so well for your life. There is a connection between recreation, recovery. And I want to suggest there is a connection between recreation and repair. The relationships that we can rebuild often come when we make a kind of bid of play, when we try to play with things and we offer a kind of invitation to play.

There's a brilliant anthropologist. His name is Johan Huizinga. And he wrote in 1938, perhaps the most definitive account of play in civilization. The book is entitled *Homo Ludens* – humanity or humankind at play. And Huizinga says that play is something that is so elemental to a civilization. You learn everything by watching how that civilization plays. Play is not just an experience of freedom, but it defines freedom itself. Play is always governed by rules and yet somehow embodies those rules so that they don't come from outside, but they come from inside. Play is something that is endlessly creative of meaning and creates space that goes beyond ordinary life and enables us to imagine something new. Play is an act of identity.

And so it's not that civilizations give birth to play and different forms of play. It's that civilizations and cultures themselves are in active play. And at the end of his book, interestingly enough, Huizinga gives as an example of play on a national scale, the American election. He said American elections are just a national sport, an immense moment of play whereby that culture reinvents itself. And when I read that over this week, I thought, yes, an immense moment of a blood sport. That's what American elections are now in which people play for keeps and they play in a very serious way.

But one of the problems I think that's going on is that we have no longer the capacity to play with each other. We've lost the kind of rules of play. We've

forgotten that collective activity that play creates. We've gotten locked in the echo chambers created by social media. Play is creative and play is essential. And the only way we're going to get ourselves through this mess is through learning to play together again.

Now, all of this is my way into this beautiful, powerful gospel from Mark because we see in Mark this moment of play. You can see it in the words themselves. Jesus puts a child in their midst. And the Greek for child is *paidion*, and the Greek for play is *paidia*. We define play by what a child does. We define who a child is by defining play. And Jesus, in putting this child in the midst of the disciples, is trying to enable them to imagine a new way forward, given the difficult news He gave them. Jesus has told them that He will die, He'll be killed, and He will rise again.

And that forces them into a spasm of organization. They are all trying to figure out how to carry on the kingdom work of Jesus without Him. That's what's going on in today's gospel. I'm sure you've heard a sermon that says, aren't these disciples being completely full of themselves by thinking who is the greatest? In fact, no, using their own understanding of politics, they were trying to figure out who would be the successor to Jesus. Because if He's going to die, who is going to carry on this work? And so in determining who is the greatest, they're simply trying to manage something that is awful, a crisis. But Jesus engages in an incredible act of play. He places a child in their midst and He invites them to see in that work that the child does in life to find their own way of being disciples.

And one of the things we know about children is that they play. That is what it means to be a child. It's almost their vocation, as it were. I'll never forget when I was working at an American reservation with the Lakota Sioux, there was a little girl there who was so withdrawn and so protected the entire time I was there, and for some reason I decided I would try to create as safe a space for her as possible. And on the fourth day of being with us, she began to play. She didn't need my protection anymore. She was safe and secure and able to do what she'd always been able to do, which is what she was always meant to do, which is the play.

And children in antiquity, they were not just known for being capable of play or destined to play. Children were not seen as innocent in antiquity. And this idea that children are innocent, that they are pure, that they somehow know more about God than we do. This idea actually emerges in the 19th century when we came up with a whole concept called the little redeemers, that if you really want to know about God, ask a child. That did not hold in antiquity. And for those of us who have ever had children, we know that children are not innocent either. We know that that's just a myth that we tell ourselves to enable us to close our eyes at night.

But in fact, children were in antiquity, the weakest and neediest members of a society. Children had to trust because that's all they can do. They had to hope

that they could be cared for in a way that protected their dignity. They looked for protectors and they looked for people who could lift them up, which is of course why when they saw Jesus, they ran to Him. Because they saw Him as He is.

So when Jesus puts a child in their midst, He is inviting His disciples to not only identify with the play of children, but He's inviting His disciples to see how this kingdom He's bringing into being draws upon that power of learning to be weak, of welcoming that child, and by creating a safe space for the weakest among us, for the one who gets overlooked, the one who has no option but to trust us.

This is something the early church knew from the beginning of Christianity. In the second century when the Christian Church was being persecuted with deep kind of bureaucratic efficiency for the first time by the Roman Empire, Justin Martyr, the great apologist, wrote the emperor and he said, we have a different method of being. We have a different set of values than the emperor. We actually rescue children. It was the practice during those days in the Roman Empire, if you had a child who was ill, or a child who was handicapped in any way to place that child on a mountain and to leave it. And Christians from the beginning would go and rescue those children and raise them as their own. Such was the kingdom values that drove the church. Such was the belief that in welcoming that child, they were welcoming Christ.

And this is something that this church has always done from the beginning. The second image I want to show you, today you're seeing it at home, but you have it right below in the middle of the bulletin. You can see it right up here in the reredos on the left side. It's of deaconesses, who in the early 20th century advocated for the end of child poverty, child labor laws. And you have these deaconesses gathering children and leading them out of a factory so that they could go to school, so that they could be children. So they would have that chance to play and recreate and experience that powerful experience of identity formation.

We have done this in the past, and what's interesting about this fresco that I find captivating is that advocacy for the end of child labor was an early 20th century thing. So when they put that on the fresco in 1928, they were not celebrating some kind of history. They were actually being like CNN embedded reporters giving you live coverage. This is what Christians do. We protect children. We protect the vulnerable. We welcome everyone because in welcoming everyone, we welcome Christ. And it's what we do today. It's our way of engaging in play. It's our way of engaging, not only in recreation, but as Jesus indicates in today's gospel, it's our way of connecting recreation and resurrection. Because Jesus is not charting a policy or plan. He's not putting out a new org chart for the disciples. That's basically what they're doing. In their own way, Jesus is inviting them to engage in this incredible, creative, wonderful, playful act of becoming His disciples.

This year we are doing some wonderful things as a church. We have created incredible space for children. Our youth ministry and our children's ministry is thriving because we've created space for them to play. Physical space, space for the youth to gather. We've taken them seriously and it's been magnificent. And we provided opportunities for play. One of my favorite things we do over the summer is we have that finding joy opportunity in which you can encounter each other and are most vulnerable. Learning to play pickleball on a broken pavement. All the things that we do that is so beautiful when we see each other, laughing and connecting.

And this year we're going to try something really powerful with our Thriving Families Initiative. We're going to try to connect and carry on the work that we did when we were welcoming 41 refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine, all of whom are now independent because we welcomed them, we cared for them, we gave them wraparound services, and we set them on their feet, and they walked into this new life that they have.

We are taking the immense risk to engage in an act of play that imagines new possibilities for us to move upstream in our outreach and to circle and unwrap a set of families from Pontiac so that we might move the needle with them too, so that they might find self-sufficiency too, so that they might know Jesus too. Because in welcoming someone in Jesus' name, we give them the picture of Jesus that they might have been searching for their entire life, that picture of Jesus and us.

So what game are you playing? What kind of play is God inviting you to do? What incredible act of recreation will things like a little Jesus inspire you to do? This is our task this year. This is our work. This is our opportunity. This is our life.

Amen.