



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Bears_ - The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost- 9_19_2021

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm not much of an outdoors person. I really don't enjoy hiking or biking or camping. And my sister at this very moment is with her husband in an RV in Montana at the Glacier National Park. And this is just a foreign concept to me. I do not understand why she's doing this, but my sister loves to remind me that she and I are not the same.

So I thought I'd just make light. And a couple of days ago, I said, "Well, hey, how's the packing going?" And she said, "Oh, it's so annoying. Apparently in Montana, it's going to snow. So she's like now not only do I have to pack everything, I've got to make sure I've got a parka, I've got my winter boots, and my bug spray and my bear spray." And I said, "What, bear spray really? Like, what do you do, spray it all over yourself and repel everyone, including a bear?"

And she said, "No, no, you don't spray it on yourself, Manisha. You have the bear spray and if you walk and you happen to encounter a bear, you wait until they get about 20 or 30 feet close to you, and then you spray this can of really, really highly concentrated pepper spray. And it comes out at like 70 miles per hour and it creates this fog that's supposed to prevent the bear from going forward so you can hightail it out of there." And she said, "But you have to make sure that you're not downwind from the bear because then otherwise it goes straight on you."

And I was like, "This is a really dumb thing. This is not going to work. It seems really flawed." And she said, Well, that's okay. That's why we're going to bring a gun." So my natural question was, "Why wouldn't you use the gun in the first place?" And she said, "Well, in Montana, state law allows you to possess the firearm in the park, but federal law does not let you discharge it." And I thought the same thing that you're probably thinking right now, I thought, well, oh my gosh, isn't that the same problem those disciples were facing when they were talking to Jesus? Right? You all were thinking that, right?

I know, it's just crazy! I mean seriously, right? Those disciples, they were facing a very hostile environment where their lives were at stake, where the people and the nation was at stake. They were being oppressed by the Roman Empire. They

were living as occupied people and they couldn't live under their own rules and their own laws. So when Jesus shows up, the Messiah, the One sent from God to save them, they were like, aha. We have our gun and they were ready to obliterate their enemies with their firepower.

But Jesus, Jesus of course leads them in a totally different direction. Instead of brandishing artillery, He brings a little one and He says, this is how you deal with lions and tigers and bears. You welcome a child. It's no wonder those disciples were afraid and terrified because a child is no match for a bear. So what does this mean for us disciples of Jesus? I mean, how is welcoming a child going to solve any problems that we face as adults? We need something to deal with the threats in the world, and we need an arsenal worthy of a fight. How do we become the greatest when we can't use our own guns?

In the '90s, there was a campus minister who was at Stanford. And he was the campus minister to the wonderful college students, but then he decided that faculty needs some ministering too, as well. So he decided to create a little group for any Stanford professors that were interested in going. And so it was a weekly group and he called it Faculty Fellowship. And there were about a dozen Stanford professors who attended. The whole purpose was just to gather and meet every week. And after a while it became so popular that they had to do a break off and off they went and made another group for all of the physicians who were at the Stanford learning hospital there.

And then they made another group a couple of years later for all the physicists who were at the Stanford Linear Accelerator. Why was this so successful? Well, these are Stanford professors. I mean, they achieved what many of their peers dreamed of. They didn't have to argue about who was the greatest. They were the top of their field, but when they came together, a miraculous thing happened. They left their greatness at the door. At the first faculty fellowship, the first professor got up and they decided one would share every week. And he disarmed everyone by sharing about his disintegrating marriage. The following week, the next professor shared how she was struggling with her teenagers. And then another one shared about their financial troubles.

They weren't interested in putting on airs and impressing anyone. They felt the presence of God when they were just being themselves. So the campus chaplain put it this way. "Without intending to, we discovered that the holy grail of human greatness that we pursue, rank, wealth, recognition, power, title, privilege, and prestige can exact a high personal price. Professional success doesn't protect us from human vulnerabilities. And sometimes it prevents us from experiencing the fullness of God's kingdom. Now, I know what you might be asking. That's lovely, but it seems just a tad naive, right? Why is it that greatness and excellence prevents us from seeing and experiencing God? Is it really that black and white?

I once served a small congregation that was mostly made up of people who are blue collar. So the majority of folk didn't have anything greater than usually their high school degree or GED. And I have to say that when I was at my most crass, my most worst self, I felt like that church was the island of misfit toys. Everybody was just broken. We had drug addicts, we had people who had just all these diseases and were always struggling with something. We had people who were really poor and couldn't make ends meet, and were always asking for help. We had people with mental problems. And we had a family where the mom and the dad both had major learning disabilities and they had children who had inherited as well. And it was like this really big problem for this whole entire family. And they were kind of high functioning, but they were going to have to figure this out for the rest of their lives.

So I was trying to create a fellowship opportunity and try to get children and youth and adults together. And I thought, oh my gosh, let's have an intergenerational night and let's do something kind of fun. So I said, oh, we'll have a pizza party. Everybody loves pizza. Doesn't matter what age you are. And then of course, because I'm a geek, I'm like we have to do something churchy. So I decided that it'd be really fun if we wrote our own creed.

So, you know, the thing that we say that we believe in, I said, oh, we can write about everything we believe in. I just had this wonderful vision of the whole church gathering and all of us talking about God and eating pizza.

So I opened up the church. It was a cold February night and just that family came. And I was like, well, this is a disaster. I should just cancel. I'll feed them some pizza and send them home. But they wanted to know what we were going to do together. And I was like, oh my gosh, I can't believe this. So I looked at them and I said, well, we were going to write a creed, but why don't you just tell me about what you know about God, the Father, God, the Son, God, the Holy Spirit, and I'll write it up here. And let's just talk about how we know God.

And I really thought that I was just going to do all the work that night. And I couldn't have been more wrong. I actually never had a chance to contribute. They knew God better than me. What I learned is that what happened that night was that my disposition needed changing. My interior way of being was so unwelcoming, so judgmental, so hostile that I almost missed seeing Christ in my face.

So they wrote an intergenerational creed. I think it's in your bulletin. It's a little piece of paper if you want to pull it out. This is from the disabled family.

We believe in God, the Father who created us, gave us life, and gave us freedom of choice.

We believe in God, the Son who puts others before Himself, sacrifices Himself for us, is obedient and shines.

We believe in God, the Holy Spirit who picks you up when you are down, comforts you, gives you a shoulder to cry on, helps you get better, provides strength and gives you spirit.

Amen.

It's nothing fancy. But I'm going to say it's as powerful as any creed that any church father has written. What I have learned is that it is precisely when I act like I know God better than others that I actually know God the least. My judgmentalism, my critique, my disdain, my ability to laugh at others, all of that. And every time I turn up my nose, I'm reminded of that Peanuts cartoon, where Linus says to his sister, Lucy, "Why are you always so eager to criticize me?" And Lucy responds, "I just think I have a knack for seeing other people's faults." And then Linus says, "Well, what about your own faults?" And she says, "Yeah, I have a knack for overlooking those."

What faults you and I have. Do you know who overlooks them? Jesus. Every single one of them, and creates this amazing nurturing environment for you and me, and then welcomes us little ones.

I realized that I have great hubris because the truth of the matter is that it's you and I who are differently abled. And we have been welcomed by Christ. Your final hymn today on page 17, that second verse blows me away. If you want to turn to it and look with me, we're going to sing it at the end.

Sing how he came forth from heaven,
Bowed himself to Bethlehem's cave,
Stooped to wear the servant's vesture,
Bore the pain, the cross, the grave,
Passed within the gates of darkness,
Thence his banished ones to save.

Jesus has created so much space for us. Jesus has welcomed us fully and completely and wholly. Whoever wants to be the first must be last of all and servant of all. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Let that whoever be you and me. Let us be the ones who know that Jesus welcomed us. How could we not throw open our arms and welcome every single other human? And let me tell you it's way more better than bear spray.

Amen.