



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.

As many of you know, I'm getting an MBA at Michigan, and at the end of our marketing class, we received these three life lessons from our professor. Having spent the whole time talking about marketing, the students asked him for three life lessons and he's been doing this for years. And so he offered his three life lessons and this is what they were:

Be passionate, not emotional.
Be greedy, not envious.
Be neither happy nor unhappy. Just be.

And the students all nodded gravely and wrote this down. And I asked myself, did I pay for this? And I found myself at first a little bit surprised and irritated that he had let this slip into everything. But he was trying to do his best and I don't hold it against him. I just found it horrific advice. I mean, it's bad advice if you're a marketer, right? In marketing you want to drive right past the passions and touch the emotions and trigger a response. And in marketing, you do not want people to even think about greed. You want to create and cultivate an experience of envy. Consumer dissatisfaction happens best when we are comparing ourselves to the Joneses. And if you want to get someone to purchase something from you, you don't want them to just be, you want them to experience consumer dissatisfaction. You want them to be unhappy until they buy your product, which will solve all their problems.

So it wasn't even good advice for marketing. And what about life? Now, I think that standing behind these three axioms was actually the frank recognition that life is difficult, life is a struggle, suffering is unavoidable. That there are things that happen to us that break our hearts daily, and because of that, when we go searching for happiness, sometimes it's better to just give up the chase and accept being. And I know that when it comes to things like envy, these things are unavoidable and they bring out the worst in us. So maybe just being greedy is a good idea if that's the only option available.

And finally, emotions are so difficult, aren't they? I can spend a week where everything is fine, but if my emotional state is not right, I am tossed and turned and I can't rest, and I am restless. And so the idea that somehow I can be passionate can seem like good advice. And running through that recognition of

difficulty in suffering, that difficulties will hit us in the form of sickness and death, that these things are unavoidable. I find this advice a kind of advice of quiet quitting on life. Give up on higher purposes and just be.

Now, there are many strong beliefs and venerable traditions of philosophy and religion that will tell you that this advice is solid. But Christianity has a very different way of looking at all of these things that are mentioned. Christianity recognizes the fact that there is suffering and struggle and sickness and death, and that faces us day in and day out, and there is no escape from these things as long as we are living in this world. It doesn't matter how much money you make, it doesn't matter how good of a marketer you are, you will face struggle and suffering and sickness and death and brokenness. Whether it's the dissolution of a marriage, a struggle with addiction, with any kind of slings and arrows that you run in in your career, you will suffer. It's a given.

And Christianity recognizes that we are beings of wants and needs and desires. Some of them are good, some of them are bad. We are full of emotions. We get envious in a second. We find ourselves captive to strong feelings, but Christianity does not counsel us to cultivate an attitude of detachment from these things. Christianity tells us that all of these things must be transformed. That God gave us our emotional lives, as chaotic as they can sometimes be, because these things are a gift that can be transformed by God. And God gave us our envy so that it can be a source of transformation.

And God gave us a desire to be happy and not just to be, because God has come to us and given us a destiny of being with God forever. Because the vision of the human that animates Christianity is as that humanity is revealed in Jesus Christ. This is not a vision of the human that recognizes only our mortality and becomes resigned to that. We believe that God in Christ has become mortal and human, so that in the midst of our mortal and human lives, we know that God is with us and that God loves us. This is what Christianity believes. It's a religion of transformation, a religion of change. A religion of not just repentance, but of reconciliation and love.

Now, all of this is important to keep in mind as we think about today's gospel from Matthew, because Matthew is here seeming to only arm the bomb of our desires to quietly quit this world. Because if you are like me and you read this, you realize that there is no defense when it comes to these words of scripture. You might have avoided murdering people, and I've come closer to that than any of you need to know. And I have been angry and I suspect you have too, in as far as uttering that someone is a fool. If you drove here even on the relatively empty roads of a Sunday morning, it's possible in this congregation today, there is somebody who yelled, "You fool!" as you were driving your car. And as far as insulting people, I've done that and you've done that. We've all done that.

And the same goes for the other things. When it says that it's not just about whether or not you commit adultery, but whether or not you look at someone with lust that you have sinned. Well, I work out at Equinox. And when it says that we should leave our gift on the altar and go be reconciled to our brothers and sisters if there's something that they have against us. Hmm. Sometimes I've done that too. I've let my life make my religion into a kind of sacramental machinery, and I haven't been transformed by it. And when I have left my gift on the altar, God has made a powerful change in my life and in the lives of others.

All of us have something to fall under in this scripture, in which we are addressed in one way or another as complex, as emotional, as broken beings, who God nonetheless calls us through these commands to transformation. And one of the things that has been heartbreaking to me the older I get is the extent to which these words can sometimes be weaponized to exclude others and shame others. Because when we read that if the eye sins, tear it out, that usually is a moment in which we tend to point to people whose eyes go to a different place than ours do. And to say that those are the people breaking the laws, not us. And when we read that, if your hand sins, cut it off, many times people tend to pick only those sins that we cannot stand to punish others for in their misdeeds and not to all the ways our hands have not been pure. This scripture has been weaponized to shame others and even to shame ourselves and even to create a kind of culture of hiding so that we do not behave in church the way we behave the other places we inhabit during the week.

But I don't think Jesus wants us to interpret these scriptures that way. And this goes even for the command regarding divorce. We tend to use that command as a way of feeling superior to another. But in fact, all of us who are married for longer than 10 minutes know how challenging marriage can be. These scriptures before us are an invitation to transformation and transparency before God. And so as I was thinking about the sermon this week, I decided to come up with my own axioms.

The first is don't give up. Give in to the growth God is creating in you. Don't give up when you encounter suffering and struggle and sickness and difficulty. Give in to the growth that God is doing in you today.

The second is don't fear loss for loss makes new life possible. Jesus is not speaking plainly when He says, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. But Jesus is being clear that there is always some kind of loss involved when it comes to changing our lives. We have to let something go, whether it's our ego, whether it's the things that have done us no good, whether it's a relationship that is only causing sickness in us, whether we are being drawn, we always have to face loss. And the promise of

the gospel is that we should not fear that loss because loss makes new life possible.

The third is do not miss. Do not miss an opportunity for reconciliation and transformation. This is what Jesus is saying when he says, leave your gift on the altar. Go be reconciled to your brother or sister. Think for a moment what that gift represented when Jesus said it in the first century. It meant not just going to church and pretending like everything is fine. It was actually the money that you would take to buy this offering, which was to help you get through life and to atone for your sins. Leave that atoning gift that you have spent your hard money on. Leave that on the altar. Walk away from it, count it as a sunk cost, if you will, and find your way to your brother and sister so that you might be reconciled and transformed.

And finally, when you fail - and we will all falter and fail. When you fail, remember that you are enfolded in God's infinite love. Because there is no way we can take part in a program of transformation without somehow failing and faltering and letting others down and letting ourselves down. That is the nature of life when we're faced with sickness, suffering, difficulty, tragedy. Failure is part of a program in which you are living into a humanity that God has created so that you would spend eternity with God.

Now, one way to summarize what I'm trying to say is instead of quiet quitting on life, what I'm saying is that you should be willing to dare greatly, to coin Brene Brown, who does the work of God in many ways, as well as Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt gave that original admonishment to dare greatly when he gave a speech in 1910 in Paris and it was on the responsibilities, the civic responsibilities of being a republic. And it was all about striving. It's the person in the arena who has tried and failed, who is the true hero, is the person who dares greatly.

But there are two things I want to reinforce today. Because what I'm trying to say today isn't just about transformation. It's about what and how we are being transformed by God. And to help me say that, I had you all take a look as you came in at the art for today on the bulletin cover by René Magritte. And this is a piece that was done in 1929. It's of this beautiful eye, and Magritte is an early surrealist, and he's the one who has the man with a chapeau, with the green apple in front of him.

And this painting today has this eye that's looking into the sky. And you can see the reflection of the sky back on the iris of the eye. CBS, when it was starting out as a broadcasting company, actually took this image and made their logo of the eye that was CBS for so long. Maybe still is. I don't watch TV. But Magritte calls this the false mirror.

You see, on our own we want to see the sky, we want to see, but in fact, the sky is impossible for us to see because we have idealistic distortion. We have the inability to see things as they truly are. It's the nature of being human. We cannot see ourselves in the sky. It's a false mirror. But what we really need is to see ourselves as God sees us in Christ. And that shift is critical in transformation to see ourselves as God sees us in Christ with the merciful gaze of Jesus.

The second image I want to give up to you today is actually a song that Claire performs really, really beautifully called Doubting Thomas. And I'm going to have her just perform it. And I've placed the words in your bulletin as a kind of meditative prayer that you can use, and it's about someone who is struggling to get on that path of transformation, and takes a final step after admitting all of his failures.

What will be left when I've drawn my last breath
Besides the folks I've met and the folks who know me
Will I discover a soul saving love or
Just the dirt above and below me?

I'm a doubting Thomas
I took a promise
I do not feel safe
O' me of little faith

Sometimes I pray for a slap in the face
Then I beg to be spared cause I'm a coward
If there's a master of death I bet he's holding his breath
Cause I show the blind and tell the deaf
About his power

I'm a doubting Thomas
I can't keep my promises
Cause I don't know what's safe
O' me of little faith

Can I be used to help others find truth
When I'm scared that I'll find proof that it's a lie
Can I be led down a trail dropping bread crumbs
To prove I'm not ready to die

Please give me time to decipher the signs
Please forgive me for time that I've wasted

I'm a doubting Thomas

I'll take your promise
Though I know nothing's safe
O' me of little faith
O' me of little faith

Don't give up. Give in to the growth God is creating in you. Don't fear loss, for loss makes new life possible. Don't miss an opportunity for reconciliation and transformation. And when you fail, remember that you are enfolded in God's unfailing love. Amen.