



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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

On Tuesday, this past Tuesday, I participated in the great democratic experiment by sequestering myself along with 40 other people, and we counted absentee ballots for Royal Oak and Ferndale. There were about 17,000 of them. And it was my first time and it was a fascinating process. I can report to you that it was actually really super impressive. There were tons of checks and balances throughout the way, including having people from the different parties working on ballots together. There were challengers who roamed all the way around and watched all of us and oversaw the whole process. And there were these constant checks and balances of the number of ballots from the beginning of the process to the end, making sure that the numbers matched the numbers that went in, the numbers that went out.

And I was at a table of six people. There were three Jews, two Christians, and an ex-Catholic. And then the man who I sat across from, who I spent the most time in conversation with had left the Catholic Church because he disagreed with everything that they stood for. And even though I did invite him to come to my church, he said, "Yeah, I lean more Unitarian than Christian." Now, my job at the table, it was small. They handed us envelopes that had been slit open, and so I had to take the ballot out of the envelope with the secrecy envelope covering what was inside. I saw no votes. And I would look at the envelope and I'd look at the top of the ballot stub and see if the numbers matched. And if the numbers matched, then I would put the envelope aside and hand the secrecy envelope and the ballot to the next person. And that's all I did all day from 7:00 AM until 4:00 PM

Now, even though we were done at 4:00 PM, they didn't allow us to leave until 8:00 PM. Why? Because the polls were still open and we had seen votes. So we weren't allowed to leave the place. We were not allowed to have our cell phones. We couldn't even have a Kindle that could have been attached to the internet in some ways. We had no ability to connect with anything. And if I wanted to go out to my car to get something, a police officer had to escort me to make sure that I didn't get out there and tell the world what I saw about these votes. So we were stuck in this room.

Now, luckily, the ex-Catholic had counted absentee ballots before, so he brought a deck of cards. So two of the Jewish men and the ex-Catholic taught

me how to play Euchre. And even though they assured me that it was way more fun when you do shots, it actually was quite enjoyable and it made the time pass. There were two young women there too as well. One was Muslim and one was Hindu, and they were 21 years old and they were studying pre-med at Wayne State. And they seemed to be in charge of everything. They were telling all the tables what to do and how to do things, so I asked them if they had had some sort of special training. And they said, no, we've been doing this for years.

And it turns out that in 2020, they were 19 years old when the pandemic hit, and they're pre-med students, so they have a deep compassion for others. And they were worried because they heard that most people who worked at absentee ballots were older and they didn't want anyone to go and expose themselves and have problems with Covid back then when we didn't have vaccines or anything. So they volunteered to work at the August, 2020 primaries, and they had been working the elections ever since then. And I asked them, I said, why do you keep doing this? And they were like, we love this experience of working with diverse people for the good of our community. And these women also had very opinionated thoughts of what was on the ballot, and they weren't afraid to share what they thought of the big issues.

You know, as I reflected on the day when they finally released us at 8:01 to go home, and I was driving back, I was struck by two things. First, I was so surprised at how sacred the day felt. I mean, there's something about being with a lot of people who don't agree with each other. And being together for 13 hours, being committed to something greater than each one of us individually, that just really felt holy.

The second thing I was surprised about was how satisfied I felt. It didn't matter what the outcome of the election would be, and it didn't matter how simple my role was, I felt like I did my part. I felt like I was called to do something and I did it. Sacred and satisfying. I actually think that's a universal desire for all of us to experience the life we have as sacred, to be connected to the divine, to have meaning beyond ourselves, to have some sort of relationship with others that is mystical and yet tangible. And to be satisfied with our lives, right? To find that the way that we're living our lives is indeed doing some good in this world is providing the best that we know how and we feel like we have some sort of integrity in how we're living. That brings us satisfaction.

Is this the desire for your life? My spiritual director is fond of telling me that my deepest and holiest desires are actually Jesus's desires for me. So could it be that Jesus actually wants each of us to have sacred lives that are satisfying? I don't know. If you read the gospel for today, it looks like Jesus is promising us the exact opposite, right? Here we have Jesus who's assuring us that everything you see, it's going to be gone. Everything's going to be turned upside down,

and there ain't nothing sacred. It's all going to be sacrilegious. And the disciples aren't going to experience deep satisfaction in following Jesus. They're going to experience deep sacrifice, including their freedom and maybe even their own lives.

And there's no vision that Jesus is sharing with the disciples to say that you could have a life filled with goodness and accomplishment. He tells them, no, there's going to be doom and gloom, and there's going to be problems with the earth and problems among people and problems that'll cause death and destruction and disaster. And then he ends with that chilling prediction of those scary end times for those who follow Jesus. You will be betrayed. Even by your parents and your brothers and your relatives and your friends, and they're going to put some of you to death, and you're going to be hated by all because of my name.

Maybe one can argue that if you really do want to experience the sacred and satisfied life, you should do what that ex-Catholic did and join the Unitarian Church. Don't follow Jesus. Except there's this, Jesus tells the disciples that when they're handed over to the authorities, they don't have to prepare their testimony. Why? Because Jesus said, I'm going to be there with you. I will give you the words. I will give you the wisdom. I am not going to abandon you. I will be present with you even in the worst of circumstances. I will be there.

There's a book called *Torture and Eucharist* by William Cavanaugh and it's about the church in Chile under the dictator Pinochet's regime. And Cavanaugh was working when Pinochet was in power in some of the poorest neighborhoods in Chile, and he began to research the torture that was happening to people who would go missing. Cavanaugh came to the conclusion that the purpose of the torture was not to get information out of people. It was to make them feel utterly alone, to make them feel like they were cut off from everyone else, that they had been abandoned and no one could hear their cries. And the regime wanted this because they didn't want people to gather together. They wanted people to be afraid of being with one another. They didn't want people to have coalitions and talk to each other and figure out how to do something against what they were experiencing. So they took people away and tortured them.

Cavanaugh argued that Jesus's institution of the Eucharist was the ultimate response to torture because the Eucharist brought every body together in the one body. In the body of Christ, the Eucharist binds us to one another and to God. And so when they were torturing the single person, they were actually torturing the whole body of Christ, and you couldn't separate the person from Christ's body. So even in the worst of times, Jesus does not abandon us. The body of Christ does not abandon us. This is the assurance that allows our life to remain sacred, even in the worst of possibilities, and to have some peace

knowing that we can remain steadfast and stay the course regardless of the outcome. By our steadfastness, we gain our souls in the midst of peril.

On Monday, I was talking to Father Bill and he asked me, what are you preaching on? And I said, oh my gosh. It's the apocalyptic vision in the Gospel of Luke. You know, all that end time stuff. It's awful. And sometimes when I talk to Bill, I really wish I had a tape recorder because he just off the cuff says these really blindingly brilliant things. And I'm like, wait, what did you say? And I can't quite remember how he said it, so I'll say it in my own words. He said that these visions of the end times in the scriptures, the stories that we hear from Jesus and the prophets about what it's going to be like, these aren't meant to scare us, but they are meant to allow us to live more fully life here in the present.

In other words, you can wake up to seeing that your life is already sacred and satisfying. Why? Because Jesus is in it. And Jesus is taking care of you, and it's Jesus who is going to save us from death and destruction in all circumstances. And all you need to do is remain steadfast to that promise. Steadfastness is not a new idea in the Christian tradition, but it's not something that we emphasize currently today. But I think steadfastness is so important for us, and it's simply this: stay the course, have forbearance in the midst of all the peril and all the change in your life, and remain committed to doing what you have been doing throughout it all.

And this is what Jesus is saying to us. This is what the prophets say to us. Remain steadfast. Trust God is at work. Do what is right and good to the best of your abilities, even though it may be minuscule in the scheme of things. Don't change your course based on the chaos that surrounds you and you will experience the sacred life. And you will find deep satisfaction because you have remained steadfast.

There's one more aspect about your life that I'd like to tell you about, and it's about one more piece of being steadfast. Your steadfastness should include regular and habitual connections to the life of your congregation. And I say this because the church is one of the few places in the world where you will regularly encounter Jesus in unusual ways and in mundane ways, but you need to be with Jesus often and regularly so that you will know and recognize him wherever you are.

And I think that's why election day was so powerful to me. Why? Because I've been trained by the church to know when I see Jesus. The church teaches me that when we work together in unity, I know that it's deeply satisfying and I know that all I need to do is open up some envelopes and play some Euchre, and God is there. And I know that when I witness pre-med students who come over and over and over again to do their work, even though they're super young, I know

that that's God present because I recognize God, because I see Jesus regularly in my church.

I implore you to be steadfast in your life with the church. Come regularly to worship. Regularly. The ex-Catholic, he was joking. He's like, yeah, when I vote, I vote early and often. No. Come worship. Come worship early if you want. We got late services too. But come worship early, late, and often. Eat the Eucharist and be fed by the God who's making us one. Sing robustly. Look for wonderful opportunities for formation events and music events, and fellowship activities and service opportunities. Be grounded in the presence of Christ. Remain steadfast and you will find your life to be sacred and satisfying. Because you know what? That is Jesus's desire for you.

Amen.