



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

## ***Finding Christ in the Crowd The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost 6/27/2021***

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.

One of my favorite chapters in the history of sports and culture happened in 1964 in February, when the Beatles, after having arrived in New York city and performed at The Ed Sullivan Show, traveled to Miami, and they were supposed to meet the world champion boxer, Sonny Liston. But Sonny Liston, when he heard that the Beatles wanted to meet him, according to a beautiful account of this by George Plimpton, said, I don't want to meet those sissies.

And so they decided to go to the challenger who was then known as Cassius Clay and was about to become Muhammad Ali. And they went to Ali's training camp. And as soon as they came in, they were just completely stunned by the sight of Ali and the charisma of Ali. They were kind of overwhelmed. They had expected to be the star of the show. And this guy showed up and just kind of took control of the meeting and began to clown with them and talk with them and trade banter with them.

He was the antithesis of a fighter. They were expecting someone who would be kind of slow, unable to articulate what he had to say. And instead they went into like a whirlwind, the words and energy and joy and freedom. And the Beatles' photographer at the time took several pictures. One of them is on your bulletin and I'm going to put it up here. This is a moment where Ali is basically pantomiming a knockout of all four Beatles, and they're dutifully following suit. These pictures are priceless.

After the Beatles left, Ali turned to one of his handlers and said, who were those sissies? And I've always found this to be a really powerful story, because it's a story about how we deal with prejudices, and it's how we deal with our preconceptions about things. And more importantly, how we deal with life itself, whether we see life as a series of improvisations or life as something where we have to control and manage what happens. Ali's power at that moment was his ability to set aside his own prejudices, his own ability to kind of want to manage and control things, to be open, to be ready, to be able to improvise and to suddenly be by those things liberated and joyful.

And I have to tell you something. When I was interviewed at Christ Church Cranbrook, I had just read this chapter in George Clinton's writings. And I had been kind of set up for the walk walkthrough Cranbrook by the Bishop telling me about its power and about its wealth and about all the esteemed people that went in there. And I decided in that moment that I was not going to be Sonny Liston. I was going to be Muhammad Ali, almost more than I usually am. I was just so open and so engaging Tom Booth didn't know what to do with me. Surprise, surprise, here I am seven years later, and we're still improvising and we're still being joyful and we're still moving forward.

And I also think in this story, there's something about being open even when you have a bit of bias or maybe suspicion of something new. And it's important for us to note that Plimpton was probably being a gentleman when he said the word "sissies" in what he wrote. And this is something to note in the midst of Pride month. Sonny Liston probably thought the Beatles were not masculine enough to meet him, that they were not true examples of what a man should be. And Ali did not necessarily hold to a different opinion, but he decided to be open and he decided to engage. And this was part of the kind of charisma, the spirit of Muhammad Ali. Despite his own beliefs, he had this ability, this maybe deeper belief to meet people as they are, who they are, and to see them as something to be lifted up. It didn't matter who you were. It was a remarkable quality.

Now I say all of this to you because I want to give you an insight into today's reading from the Gospel of Mark. And the place I want to begin today is right at the center of that passage. To paint it quickly, Jesus has been asked by a leader of the synagogue to go heal his daughter, but on His way there, He's moving through a crowd and a woman who has been suffering for years from hemorrhaging, she's been bleeding and her money has followed the flow of her blood. She has been losing money and being ruined in the process, trying to find some kind of healing. She sees Jesus and she reaches out to Him and touches Him. And suddenly power comes from Him in a way that even surprises Jesus.

And for many, many years, biblical interpreters have often seen this move as one of desperation as this woman, as the wretched of the earth, because you see she was ritually unclean. And she was not to touch or be in the presence of other men. She was supposed to hide herself until the bleeding had stopped, which of course it never did. And so the woman's decision to see Jesus represents a moment in which she decided to be open. She decided to trust the openness of Jesus. And when she decided to be ready, when He walked through, she didn't make an appointment. She took advantage of an opportunity.

And it's a moment in which the woman decided to improvise, to be fearless. And she reached out and she touched Jesus, thereby of course, according to the law,

making Him unclean. But in fact, she had countered a power that made her clean and everything around her clean. And that's an incredible moment in the history of the gospels. The woman touched Jesus and suddenly she was healed.

And in the Gospel of Mark, I want to suggest that this meeting between the woman and Jesus represents in some ways, the key to understanding what happens at the end of Mark when Jesus dies, because at the institution of the Last Supper in Mark 14, Jesus engages in words that actually image what this woman did. He speaks about the Eucharist that He's about to institute, and the cup of wine as the blood of the covenant.

And this is the second time in Mark where the image of blood comes up. He speaks about as well the pouring out of that blood, which would make everyone clean. So Jesus, in a sense, is drawing a comparison in Mark's gospel between His own work of reconciliation on the Cross and the woman's deep improvisation and healing that we find earlier on. And this again is a way of highlighting this woman as a saint, the work she did as incredibly holy, as a kind of person who almost alone in the Gospel of Mark gets it.

So in this, you see not only the fact that the woman acts with agency and power, but you also see that the woman by the very nature of her action gives us a window into the resurrection, because of course this passage happens in the middle. It's like a nesting doll around the rest of the passage. And at the end of the passage, Jesus goes with the same kind of ritualized improvisation, He goes and raises a young girl from the dead.

You and I are called to be ritualistically improvisational. That's the implication of today's gospel. You and I are called to be open, ready to set aside our biases so that we can enter into the power that comes when we look for Jesus hidden in the crowd. You and I are called to be ready to see Jesus because such things are the core of what it means to live a resurrected life.

And I cannot promise you that you will meet future celebrities like Muhammad Ali did, and I cannot promise you that everything will work out in a way that you can see as a healing moment. Because when we become vulnerable, there's always some kind of risk and danger in it, but there's also resurrection. And there's also, most importantly, resiliency when we learn to improvise and we learn to be ready because we see things as they are. And when we look for Jesus, hidden in the crowd, we find a way forward every time and we find the joy and liberation of the gospel.

Wherever you find yourself today, wherever you negotiate and work this week, all the faces you see, all the meetings you go to, all the work that you do, may you be similarly open and ready and looking for Jesus.

Amen.

