



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 executive MBA at Michigan and one case study that I really enjoyed was the case study about GoodBelly. GoodBelly is a non-dairy probiotic drink. And it's made of pureed vegetables and fruits, apple juice, and some probiotic proprietary blends. And the people of GoodBelly were somehow trying to market this wonderful product because when people would see it in the cold section, they would pick it up and they would read the ingredients. Pureed vegetables and fruits, apple juice, and a proprietary probiotic blend, and somehow they weren't immediately taken in by the product. It just seemed like ruined baby food to them.

And so they tried everything. They tried to place it midway so that the people who are health conscious would hit it right at the heart level. They tried up so that you would see it when you were looking up at the other yogurts. They tried it lower in the cases. And they also tried it on the end of the case. And they did studies, very careful regression analyses to see how people would interact with the product. But then, they discovered that there was one thing that worked incredibly well. And it was by offering samples. They set up little tables. They had some staff there. And when people would walk through, they would offer them a little part of the GoodBelly promise. Every color in the GoodBelly product line was there in these little cups.

And for some reason, people were able to make that leap. They were not willing to pay several dollars for something that they suspected that they would detest. But, if you offered them a sample, they would be pulled in, and they would try the GoodBelly, and they would discover that it wasn't god awful. And they'd buy it. And so the company survived on the basis of these samples. Those little things. Nothing else matched. It was the sample that somehow gave people that claim, that entree that removed the barriers to their being willing to buy GoodBelly.

Now, I found this incredibly interesting because I am somewhat of a professional sampler when it comes to things in grocery stores. I have amazing gifts as a sampler. I am the best sampler I've ever seen. When I go to Costco, I know exactly where to go. I go there hungry, I leave full. You can't be distracted by the electronics. You have to move right to the back, where you see these wonderful people with these little displays trying to give you a sample of something.

And the interesting thing about most samples is they're not actually introducing a product. They're not hoping that you actually buy the product. The samples are there to somehow remove any barriers and to give you this sense of freedom and obligation and to put your

endorphins in the right place. And that's why the samples at Costco, for example, are fatty and salty and sweet.

And I've noticed that there are times in which I will start running to a sample in Costco before I even know it's there. I was there once and all of a sudden I saw this huge group of middle aged men, kind of slow jogging, and I decided, well, I got to go too. And I'm kind of walking with them, slow jogging, and I said, like, what is it? And one guy took mercy on me and whispered out of the side of his mouth, pigs in a blanket. And by the time I got there, this poor person who was in charge of it just couldn't keep up with the demand.

But I thought to myself, where is the mystery in this? How many of us don't know what pigs in the blanket taste like? How many of you have tried pigs in the blanket? All of you! Why do you need a sample of that? It makes no sense. It makes no sense. And still I waited my turn. And they were delicious. You could have a bag of 250 pigs in a blanket for about \$15. It was amazing. Love that store.

I also have a whole strategy for Whole Foods. Whole Foods often puts these little cubes of cheddar cheese – because none of us have ever had cheddar cheese in our life. Right? It's new. It's from England. Not every cheese is cheddar. And they put it over by the cheese display and so you go in there and I get the tongs and immediately I skip all the fruits and vegetables and I get about five cubes. And then I walk around the salad bar and I wait for the crowd to change and for the person behind the cheese counter to be distracted with something else. And then I go back and I get five more. Oh, look, cheddar cheese. I've never had that before. It's delicious. It's wonderful.

And the point of it is to remove every barrier. The point of it is to make you feel free. The point of it is to somehow think that you're getting a deal and all of those things, that feeling, that endorphin rush, that sense of comfort, that is what is the purpose of the sample. It has nothing to do with the product.

Of course, the best samples are immaterial. They happen on your cell phone or when you're scrolling Facebook. You get a little sample of something that you might like. And the purpose of samples in every form is to remove everyone else in any barrier between you and the product so that you don't have a community that might steer you in one direction or another. So you don't have a partner that says, do we really need this?

The point of the sample is to somehow create and narrow your choices, all the while making you feel free, you see. It's part of a whole economy that now reigns supreme, that now claims us more than we could ever imagine. You and I are being channeled. We're not taking advantage of a free market. We're being channeled through a careful cultivation and curation of our experience so that we get something that we think is going to make us happy. And that is how late capitalism works.

Now I bring this up today because we as a church are called to embody a different economy. Our economy does deal with things you can touch and feel and taste. There is money involved in our economy. There's also time and talent as well as treasure. But all of that economy is not based on enticing you and removing every barrier between you and a

product. All of our economy is based on God's gift of God's self and Christ. God does not give samples, and nor do we. We don't give you a sample of a liturgy, we invite you into the mystery and power of the liturgy. We don't give you a sample of the Bible, we invite you into Bible study. We don't give you a sample of service, we give you an invitation to move deeper into relationship.

God does not deal with samples because the point of Christian community is relationship and transformation and change and becoming part of one another. And that's where freedom is found. Not by seemingly being able to somehow attend to every need or desire you have, but by being in community and being transformed by that community around you as you love one another and love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

That is the divine economy that Jesus puts in place when He gives Himself. And you can see this divine economy in everything that we have before us in our readings today. You see it in our readings from Deuteronomy when we get the warning from Moses in Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy are Moses's last sermons, so tradition tells us, to the Israelites before he dies. And he says to them, beware, do not think that your prosperity has come on the basis of your own effort. Everything you have been given has come from God. And that speaks to one of the ways, one of the rubs between the divine economy and the free-market economy, because we have that tendency to think that it's all due to us, the better and better things become. And so Moses's words, his sermon is to remember that everything has come from God.

You see an element also in our readings from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, where Paul is talking about how the people of God have been called to work generosity in their lives that goes with the grain of God's generosity to them. Christian discipleship is not a tit for tat. It's not a transaction. It's not, I've got to be good to God this much because God has been good to me this much. Christian community is to be shaped by God's own character as revealed in Jesus Christ. And so the decisions we make about our economy, our work, the way we manage ourselves, our time, our talent and treasure, these have to go with the grain of God's greater economy to us. We become part of that economy. We become larger as a result of that gift. We become part of something bigger than ourselves and don't get closed in on our narrow feelings.

And finally, we have that incredible line in Jesus's gospel to us today in Matthew, which is, we're not ten made clean. Jesus is inviting people to be in relationship. To give thanks is to actually step into relationship. It's not to somehow reciprocate something in like or kind because we cannot give anything in like or kind to God. We can only give something of ourselves that is powerful and transformative to us as we join Christian community.

Now I raise this all before you, of course, because we are in the midst of a pledging season. But I also think that this divine economy is what is lying behind our whole theme for this year of making room for God. Because God's economy is an economy that makes room and operates from abundance. And it happens not by samples but by these wonderful expressions, these sacramental gifts that we give to each other, which involve, often, time and talent and treasure, but are key to us finding our humanity in God. And that's what a

pledge is. It helps us make plans certainly, but it is your gift to become part of something bigger.

This past week, I've had one of those weeks that you have as a leader of a nonprofit today in which there are so many challenges. And I had an incredibly challenging day and so I picked up a gift that was given to me on my first day at Christ Church Cranbrook. It's this prayer shawl that Susan made for me. These prayer shawls have a prayer that goes along with each knit in the shawl and I covered myself in it and I wrapped myself in these prayers and I claimed them as my own. I said, this is the gift that God has given me. I need these prayers today. And I felt stronger because of them. I felt part of something bigger in my life. I felt that relationship of transformation.

And I know that maybe Susan was thinking about this day ten years later, but it is something that has guided me at different points, through thick and thin, in good times and bad, as I've tried to be here with you at Christ Church Cranbrook. A pledge is not unlike this gift, which continues to make more of me and continues to make more of us and which transforms everything we do.

The second thing I want to say about this divine economy is to do with the seasons that we're in. I love capitalism. There's a reason why I'm getting an MBA. I think it's a fantastic system. It beats every alternative, but it cannot be your God and it cannot be your religion. And we have known this for a long time. The painting I have before you on the bulletin is by Joachim Beuckelaer. It was done in 1570. This is the early days of the Reformation and this was done by a Northern European artist. You have this incredible image. It's in the National Gallery in London and I saw it in person. It's about 12 feet high and about 20 feet or maybe 30 feet wide. It's like walking into a veritable kitchen, and you can almost smell the meat that is there, and you can almost feel the heat of the hearth, and you can almost hear everybody talking to one another. It's incredibly beautifully done.

And it has this kind of personification of a promise of prosperity. It's powerful. And, yet, there is a small thread to this that says everything. It's at the far background of the painting in the left corner of the painting you see a little door that's open. Inside that door is a depiction of Jesus and Mary and Martha from John's Gospel, chapter 10. Mary, who is sitting at Jesus's feet and listening, Martha, who is distracted by much serving, they are sitting at Jesus's feet and Jesus is at the center. And this painting is a reminder to the new prosperity, to the rising middle class of his audience that this gift of prosperity that they're receiving had to be such that it still made room for God. And it's an invitation for us to walk through the kitchen and, like Mary, to sit at Jesus's feet.

And as you go through this holiday season, which has now gotten so crazy, such that I'm not even sure when Thanksgiving is happening. I mean, it's just we just blow by it. We go right to tinsel right after Halloween. As you go through this Thanksgiving, take a moment to walk through that kitchen and into that room and sit at Jesus's feet. Take a moment to give thanks to God for that relationship, because that's the end of Thanksgiving. The point of Thanksgiving is to give thanks to God and to step into that relationship. And as we go through Advent and Christmas, in which we have always had a mash-up of things, and we

try to somehow understand that complex Christian walk of waiting for God, and also celebrating the gift of God with us, take a moment and walk through the kitchen, walk through the distractions, walk through all the obligations, walk through all the celebrations, and find the space where you can sit at God's feet, at the feet of Jesus, and make room in your life for your Savior.

All of these things, I hope for you as we go through this liturgy of giving ourselves to God, because I know in my heart that this is the way we will be healed by returning as that wise Samaritan did and by worshiping Jesus and finding himself renewed and transformed and set in motion on his way.

Amen.