



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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

This past Friday, just this past Friday, the Episcopal Diocese of Michigan's 189th convention convened. And every year the clergy and laity from all 70 churches throughout our diocese, we get together to do the work of diocesan gatherings. And the bishop leads the proceedings. I have to say Bishop Bonnie Perry makes these kind of mundane meetings just super fun. She's very lively. She makes us all laugh. She's like this excellent master of ceremonies.

So on Friday night we had our first business meeting at the convention and one of the order of businesses that we have to do in the beginning is we have to determine which clergy can vote. Now, many of you know that I am ordained a Lutheran pastor and for a while there, we Lutherans were given voice, but not vote at the Episcopal Convention. And maybe I made a little bit of a stink about this because at the Lutheran Conventions, those Episcopal clergy serving in Lutheran congregations get both voice and vote.

So when the diocese changed their constitution two years ago to give Lutherans voting privileges, I was delighted. And on Friday, when Bishop Bonnie announced at the Friday's meeting that all Lutheran clergy who were present could vote, she actually said in front of the whole gathering, Manisha, I know this makes you happy. I felt so important. I was like, I got singled out. I got recognized by the bishop.

But my night wasn't over, because after the meeting, like good Episcopalians, we had a cocktail hour, and everybody was milling around, and the bishop came over to me and had this really long conversation. She talked to me, a Lutheran, in the Episcopal convention, and I felt so privileged. I was like, ah, I'm special. And there's a biblical term for that. I was favored.

And I began to wonder, is this something that many of us are looking for in our lives, to be favored? There's something really powerful about being chosen, to be recognized, to be set apart from the billions of people that fill the lands. But to receive favor from a human being is one thing. What about receiving favor from God? And that is what our scriptures talk about. Do any of you have that?

My sister, my little sister Bina and I, we don't see each other very often. Maybe twice a year now. So we use a chat app to keep in touch with each other. We

chat about really important things in our life. We chat about really not important things in our lives. And since we're sisters, we keep it really real. And oftentimes we argue with one another. She complains, Manisha, you're working all the time. And I'm like, well, you don't do anything at all.

And so we just talk about everything. We talk about world events. We talk about philosophy. We talk about how our kids always manage to drive us crazy. We talk about how we have to continue to train our husbands. And we talk about the never-ending battle of cleaning our houses. And sometimes, ever so rarely, we talk about Bhagwan. Bhagwan is the Gujarati word for God. Bina is not a Christian.

So, the other day, after the Israel Hamas war started, she sent me a chat message. She said, I was going to pray to Bhagwan, but it seems silly. And this caught me off guard. And so I thought, well, why wouldn't she pray? And I called her and I said, what's going on? And she said, Manisha, I'm not under any illusions that I'm that important. And that's when I realized that she's probably not alone in thinking that way. I think we tend to determine whether we deserve God's time or whether God even wants to listen to us.

But Jesus Christ does not operate on merit. The gift of intimacy with God has been freely given to us through God's grace. And I'm so struck by the exchange that Moses has with God. And I need to remind you that Moses murdered a human being. He killed a man. And yet, this murderer appears before God and speaks to God as if they are the closest friends. And there's this beautiful back and forth and exchange between them. And Moses can share with God all of his internal and external struggles. And he shares what he's worried about. He shares that he's nervous and he needs lots of assurance. He keeps asking God for more and more. And God responds with this beautiful openness and willingness that is breathtaking.

This kind of dialogue, this kind of back and forth where you're pouring yourself out, where you're showing your heart and your spirit, where you're cajoling God, where you're sharing your longings and your fears. This is the kind of relationship that you have with a God who favors you, where you trust God to see you just as you are and still not think ill of you when you bear it all, and still hear God endearingly call you by name. But I think that sometimes the temptation is so great that we think, well, not me. Not today. My needs are too small. My ways are too corrupt. I haven't done anything to merit God's favor.

Recently I committed a transgression. Something I'm not super proud of. It made me feel lower than low as a person and felt like I messed up being human. And I admit that I first thought, I'm so not worthy to take this mess to God, but then God called me by name, just like the bishop. And God said, Manisha, I am

gracious to whom I'm gracious. And I show mercy to whom I show mercy. You have both from me. I had God's favor.

Here's the thing, Jesus keeps reminding us that this God is not out to get us. This God doesn't want to trap us, doesn't want to point fingers at us, doesn't want to ultimately condemn us as sinners, and that's why Jesus is so exasperated with the religious and political leaders of the time because they actually believe that God was keeping track of what happens and how we do here on this Earth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? Is it lawful? You know what that is? That's just shorthand for can I screw it up so that God no longer wants to talk to me or can you screw it up so God no longer wants to be with you?

And Jesus keeps saying to them, in essence, you cannot lose favor with God. That's why I'm here, to prove it to you. Nothing will separate you from God. And so this is what this means to me. You have work to do. To borrow the theme from our stewardship season, you need to make room for Jesus Christ. You need to know that Jesus favors you, and wants an intimate relationship with you, and that there's this beautiful back and forth, and that means that you have to up your game in believing that God will never look at you as not worthy, but is always calling you by name. Can you hear it right now?

See, this is one of the main purposes of churches. It's one of the reasons that I invite you to keep supporting the church, because it is our job here to keep bombarding you with message after message that God is seeking you, God will chase after you, that God keeps coming after you so that you can know that whether you're anxious, whether you're angry, whether you're ashamed, whether you're prideful, God still wants more than anything in the world to be the center of your life. Because when that happens, God continues to transform you and you don't have to be doomed to a life filled with anxiety, anger, shame or pride. It is the privilege that you have because you are favored by God.

Now, I have to share with you that this was about us being personally favored by God. But Moses, he also asks for God's favor toward a nation. What does it mean to be a chosen people? What does it mean to be a chosen nation? Over the past several weeks here, I've been thinking a lot about these biblical promises from God of making nations and blessing them. The origin stories of Israel are compelling for us because we trust God to be faithful to His promises and His word. And God promises in the scriptures to be present to the people of Israel, to give them the Promised Land, and the Israelites in turn are called to keep the Commandments and follow the holy law of God.

But by the time that Jesus is born in Jerusalem, the Jews are in a state of diaspora. They have no homeland, but they were called to live wherever they were planted and seek the prosperity of the place that they lived. And it often meant that they were in captivity or they lived as occupied people. And it's in this

narrative where Jesus' life is lived and, of course, where He's crucified. I cannot speak to the Jewish theology of being a favored nation, but I can speak to a Christian tradition. And the one that I want to share with you is from Martin Luther.

Now, ironically, even though I was ordained a Lutheran pastor, this weekend, 21 years ago, I got my master's in divinity from Duke, which is a Methodist seminary. And so the Lutheran church was like, oh you need to spend one year in a Lutheran seminary. And I affectionately call that year the year that I was Lutheranized. And in that year, I read a whole lot of Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who rebelled against the church on October 31st, 1517, and set off a course of events that would eventually rip apart the church, causing schisms that remain today that we affectionately call denominations.

Now, Martin Luther did not mince words. He famously called the Pope the Antichrist. He infamously was a raging anti-Semite and can be rightly blamed for perpetuating horrific prejudices against the Jews by Germans. Now, despite Luther's terrible way of dehumanizing others, he has profoundly shaped my own discipleship and my own understanding of my Christian faith with his treatises and his writings. His explanation of the 10 Commandments in his Large Catechism has informed my very habits of how to live my life with the beauty of the law, guiding me as a beacon throughout this very complex world in life that I have.

His freedom of a Christian continues to remind me that the cost of Jesus's life has secured for me freedom. And now I have the freedom to love with abandon the whole entire world with nothing setting me back. And his work entitled, *Secular Authority*, to what extent it should be obeyed has been crucial to my understanding of what it means to be a citizen of the nation and a member of the church.

In this treatise, Luther posits what's now commonly referred to, a doctrine of two kingdoms. He borrows this from Saint Augustine, and it's this view that there are two kingdoms on this Earth. There's the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of God. And both have been given to the world by God. Both have citizens on Earth, but the kingdoms of the world, they're governed by might and by sword and by law. And the purpose for having all of this firepower and military prowess is to restrain evil and lawlessness. Luther believed that the state had been ordained by God for the sake of providing a barrier for people from harming each other, and to maintain and restore the original peace that has been given to all peoples.

He also believed that the rulers of the states have been given authority by God and therefore, by the way, we're absolutely accountable to God. But the Kingdom of Heaven, that is reserved for the believers of Christ. And the ruler is

Christ himself. And we have no need for sword or authority or any kind of coercion, because what governs us? The Holy Spirit governs our hearts and our minds, and the Holy Spirit gives us everything. So Luther said that the Holy Spirit teaches us and causes us to do injustice to no one, to love everyone, and willingly and joyfully to suffer injustice and even death from everyone.

Luther was so convinced that those of us who were chosen by God through our baptism, we are members of the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth, the church, and that we got nothing to worry about. Our salvation is secure. We have everything we could possibly need. So we don't have to fret over ourselves or our freedom. All we have to do is love the people who are in the church and love the people in the kingdoms of the world. And how are you supposed to love the people in the kingdoms of the world? Do anything you can for their welfare and their well being.

So, when Christ Church Cranbrook engages in finding ways to care for our neighbors, and in this case, when we engage in finding ways to care for our interfaith neighbors, we're doing exactly what the chosen people of God do. And I have heard from so many of you how grateful you are that this church, that we are being proactive in reaching out to the Jews and Muslims among us, both before the war started, and now, during these harrowing weeks. Make no mistake, that work is from God, and it is humbling that we get to do this for God.

To me, this is why this congregation, this vital institution of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth is here on Earth at this time. You and I need a space. We need a place where we're constantly being reminded to make room for God in our personal lives and to love our neighbors in our public lives. And so this stewardship season, I myself am so cognizant of the importance of my church, my congregation, in this world that I'm actually considering my pledge to the church as nothing less than evidence that the Kingdom of Heaven actually does exist on the Earth and plays a vital role for the sake of all the kingdoms of the world.

And it's the reason that Troy and I give sacrificially to this place. We know God's using this congregation to bring love and hope and peace to the warring factions of the world and the community. And God is constantly using this church to remind you that God knows you. God knows your name. God knows your struggle. God knows your sins. God knows your hope. God knows your dreams. And God has chosen you and is showing you mercy and kindness. You have God's favor. That is good news.

Amen.