



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you tonight 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. Please be seated.

In his magnificent book, *Works of Love*, the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, has a line that has always haunted me. He said that the truest test of love is whether or not we still visit our beloved when they are in the grave. But if you wanted to find the best testimony of love, you would follow someone and look at the way they observed a person who has died.

And this has always haunted me a bit because in one hand I think there is some profound truth hidden in what he says, because when a person has died, they cannot return any of the love to you. That's of course what some people have written about this passage, but I find myself in a different place the more I live my life and think about that visitation. The more I visit my father's tomb, the more I watch the beautiful vigils so many of you keep, for those who have been lost, it occurs to me that what is happening in those moments of visitation is not so much a one-way relationship where someone is pouring out their love on another, as some have suggested Kierkegaard meant, but rather a kind of conversation.

Because when we meet with the dead and we honor the body that is left, and we pray that this person that we loved is with God and knows perfect love and peace and joy fully, what we are engaging in is not a one way communication, but a kind of conversation in which that person is still being part of our own identity and is indeed speaking with us. And time and time again, I have sat with people who have had incredible conversations with a spouse, for example, who has passed away, and in those conversations, it's evident that a relationship still exists.

I lift this up because a requiem is not just a moment of anxious sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and the hope that the soul of the person that we have lost is resting in God's arms. But a requiem, which we are doing tonight, is a kind of conversation with people who have died, a kind of expression of love to them, and a kind of bidding them to speak again to us. No matter where they are, no matter what we know or don't know, no matter what we can believe or not believe in these moments of meeting in this service, we are inviting a kind of

conversation and an acknowledgement of that person and that the relationship is still very much alive.

Now, all of this comes from the deepest strata of the Christian faith, and all of our readings today speak in one way or another about a kind of conversation. The two that I'll lift up for you is Paul is arguing with death, "O, death, where is thy sting?" As if death could respond. But Paul is speaking in a way to invite a kind of conversation, an argument that he knows he can win because he knows the resurrection of Christ and he knows that the final word of Christ has been spoken.

And in our reading today from John, there is that incredible, beautiful passage where Jesus says the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear will live. When you and I visit a grave, when we mark a death, when we remember the impact of someone in our life who has shaped us or loved us or lifted us up, we are in a sense entering into that blessed conversation in which resurrection is being spoken and the dead are hearing the voice of God and living.

My task for you today is to ask yourself what that conversation looks like in your life. There is a kind of redemption in those conversations because in every death there is a lot of unfinished business, and we can spend our time trying to figure out what happened or where things stand. And we still kind of have these lost ones, these loved ones who we have lost. We still have them in our lives. It's impossible for us to truly shed them because we have been so shaped by them, because we are so relational as human beings, because we don't just replace a person we've lost, but we go missing too. It's the nature of grief. Where is that conversation for you?

And because I'm asking you to do something challenging and difficult, I'll say a little bit about where it is for me. As many of you know, in January, 2021, I lost my father and I was ready for him to go. He had forgotten my name. His dementia had extended so far that he was unable to recognize even his own wife. And I was sitting vigil with him as he slowly passed away. I will never forget that last night in which everything I had learned by being a priest, I could tell my mother was happening as he was passing away.

And I was ready for him to go because part of me had so much unfinished business that I was angry. There were so many things I wanted to know, so many things I wanted to learn, so many questions I had, and he just couldn't keep up. He had started to lose it and he couldn't remember. I felt like I had finally gotten to that point in my life where I could handle the truth. My father was often like the Jack Nicholson character from that famous movie that is set on Guantanamo

Bay. He loved to kind of say, you can't handle the truth, basically. But I was ready for the truth.

And so my grieving has been a kind of conversation that I've never been able to have. But I've had in different ways, I've had in a way that defies what normally happens in a conversation. There are moments where I am shaped by him and grateful. Our relationship has improved since he's passed away. He listens better and so do I. A few weeks ago, my brother, who had an equally difficult relationship with our father, found a letter when he was looking for his passport. It had somehow floated up onto the top of all the papers in their safe. And he opened it up and it was a letter that my father wrote to him in 1974 when my father was flying for Delta Airlines, which was the career that he loved most. And he wrote the following. I was a little, little boy, so I didn't get such grown up messages. He wrote my brother:

"It's one o'clock in the morning and I have a two-hour layover here in New York before I go to Boston. I've just arrived from Fort Lauderdale and except for an odd thunderstorm in the Florida area, it is a beautiful night to fly, as the air is smooth and the visibility so clear that I could see cities a hundred miles away. I hope someday you'll wind up in an occupation that you love as well as I like mine."

And that letter has become precious to me because it opened my eyes to something I had missed in our relationship. My father wanted me to do exactly what I wanted to do for a living. He wanted me to experience that joy that he had flying. He might have done something different, but he was probably the happiest person I'd ever met in his vocation. And I realized in that moment that he had given me that freedom to be happy in mine. And no, I don't find myself in the middle of night in New York's terminal waiting to fly to Boston, but I have found myself in a profession where I can see things a hundred miles away. And I have been able to grow because of him.

What is the conversation that you need to have with someone you've lost that's overdue? What do you need to say? What do you need to hear? May those words be more than words. May they be your healing, and may you find your healing in the God who raises and redeems everything through Jesus Christ.

Amen.