



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.

On December 31st, Claire and I were sitting at breakfast in Palm Springs on a well-deserved break, I suppose. We were having a moment of quiet and she sent to me this op-ed that she found in the New York Times. It's by a journalist named Jaime Lowe. And Lowe had gone to Michigan as a graduate student and she received two pieces of advice when she started her graduate studies.

The first was to go to Zingerman's Delicatessen in Ann Arbor, and I believe that's solid advice. If any of you go to Ann Arbor, not a bad thing to stop there. It's a very good delicatessen. The second was to get season tickets to Michigan football. And she went and she was uplifted. She had been struggling with depression and was having all sorts of difficulties with her life, vocational and personal, but somehow being in the big house, being surrounded by 110,000 fans, somehow she was lifted up.

And so the title of her op-ed piece was, "I Was Transformed by the Best Cult Ever: Michigan Football." Now, this caused me a little bit of a pause in my thinking because I consider myself a bit of a religious professional myself, and so I kind of know what is religion and what isn't. And I also know that football has not always been likened to a religion.

In 1959, the Russian premier, Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union, the then Soviet Union, traveled to the United States as a guest of President Eisenhower. And he toured the entire United States. He went to farms and he thought that the Russian farms were better. He went to factories. He thought the Russian factories were better. Khrushchev said that in five years, the Soviet Union would bury the United States economically.

But there was one thing that happened during that trip that shook him to the core. He attended a college football game. And later he said to his aides, the country that plays this sport can rule the world. He was terrified, because what Khrushchev saw in football was war. He saw everything that you would see in contemporary warfare. There was an air game, there was a ground game, there was a front line. Everything was incredibly bellicose, including the violence.

So when Lowe says that Michigan football is the best cult ever, I kind of like the idea of thinking about Michigan as a cult, as a religion. It kind of makes sense.

And I did a little bit of a personal inventory. I've been to many different schools that are good. I went to Yale University. I have one jersey from Yale. I went to Brown University. I don't have anything from Brown. I went to some good high schools. I have a couple of pieces of uniform that I wore when I was a starting person on the rowing team. But when I looked at my Michigan material and did a quick inventory, I realized I have one pair of shoes that are from the M Den. I have two sweatshirts. I have four jackets and I have six hats. So I have a little bit of that religion inside of me. I'm a bit of a Wolverine. I've only seen one half of Michigan football, but that's because I work weekends.

Is Michigan the best cult ever for you? Do you find it as an engine of transformation? As I thought about this wonderful op-ed, I realized that she was operating with broad religious categories that made perfect sense. In college football, there are rituals. The coin toss, the kickoff, the celebration, the halftime show, and there's also hymns and songs. Hail to the Victors, or I'm Mr. Brightside, if you really follow Michigan football. There's also uniforms in clothing and attire and a sense of belonging.

All of these things give a sense of belonging, and as such, they answer something really deep inside all of us. We all have a religious need to belong, and rather than religion becoming less important in our world, I want to suggest to you that the cult of Michigan football and other kinds of collectives convey to us a different point that religion is now found anywhere any community makes a large claim on you and confirms upon you an identity and a kind of imagined community that you are part of.

And that is not a bad thing and not a good thing. It's just a neutral thing. We all have that need to belong, and sometimes that need to belong is elevated so that it crowds out everything else. Most times when we define our belonging, it's usually by saying that we are these people, not those people. We do it in oppositional ways. This carries on for every collective, from the smallest sect to the largest nation.

Benedict Anderson, a fantastic anthropologist, wrote a book that was incredibly influential in the nineties called *Imagine Communities*, and he argued that the foundation of all nationalism is three things. You need a census, you need a map, and you need a museum. You need a census because you need to count who matters. And of course, with that is the message of who doesn't matter. You need a map. And that says, who contains our people and who are the people that are not part of our domain or country. And you need a museum, which says which stories matter and which artifacts matter, and which stories and artifacts are to be forgotten.

And we're living through a time of immense conflict because we have multiple countries that define their census, their map, and their museum differently. So this

power of belonging, this sense of being part of something larger, this religious impulse that we all have, it is something that is neutral. It can be used for good, but it can be used for evil.

Now, I say all of this because I think this gets at what is at stake in today's gospel where John says to the people who came to be baptized, I baptize you with water, but there is one coming after me who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. And that is to draw a distinction between merely a religious observance and the gospel of Jesus Christ. You and I have been baptized by Christ in the Spirit. Christ in His baptism creates a whole different vision of belonging, which revolves not on power and the ability to mark out who counts and who doesn't, and who matters in our map and who matters in our museum. Christ has come to create a new presence of bringing God into relationship with humanity.

And that changes everything. That changes everything. That changes the entire way we understand the power of belonging. Because when you read the scriptures, you'll see that Jesus is constantly challenging us to define belonging differently. Instead of using a census, Jesus asks, who counts? And why is this person missing? And wouldn't it be better if they too should share in the faith that God is given to Israel?

And so Jesus praises the faith of the Syrophoenician woman, and He tells the Samaritan woman that there would be a time in which the Son of God and God would be worshiped in spirit and truth everywhere. Jesus disrupted, in other words, the normal way we create maps. Jesus honors our stories. Jesus lifts up lost voices. Jesus observes and watches and loves because the belonging that Jesus gives and the claim of the gospel is that the Holy Spirit is in you. It not only comes and descends upon Christ, but that Holy Spirit descends upon you. And that means that you belong to God and God belongs to you. That you are God's beloved just as Jesus is God's beloved.

That is the promise of the gospel, and that is what we celebrate in Epiphany. So it is fine to root for the Wolverines. It is fine to root for Michigan State and the Spartans. I root for Michigan and anybody who plays Ohio State. But all of these things are neutral and they can sometimes be dangerous. And the calling of being a Christian is actually to live into that deeper identity, that deeper community that we have in Christ, and watch as the Son of God living in us, shows us a new way of being, shows us a way of seeing a larger census than we can ever imagine, and a map that is of a kingdom without end and a museum in which every voice is lifted up and celebrated, and every life is held as precious in God's eyes, in Christ's eyes, in our eyes.

This Epiphany, make time to remember that belonging. That belonging is everything. It's on everything that everything hinges upon. It is the key to our

faith, and it's the key to our destiny, and it is what God has called us to in Jesus Christ.

Amen.