



## 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. Please be seated.

I have a big idea to share with you today. It's a big idea. And when you're trying to share a big idea, they don't get communicated by a logical argument that goes from point A to point B. They rather tend to dawn on your consciousness and emerge almost like the sun coming up until all you can do is see it.

And I came to this big idea when I was on vacation, which for me meant doing two intense classes in marketing and macroeconomics as part of my degree program at Michigan. And I was sitting in the marketing class and the professor really wanted to get us thinking about marketing at a deeper level. And he said to the class, who are your competitors? And of course, immediately people began to list their competitors. If they worked for Ford, you would say GM or Tesla or Nissan.

And he said, no, no, no, no, no. Who is your competitor is a question that can be answered by asking who can be substituted, what can be substituted for your company and your product? What is a good substitute for your company? And I decided to raise my hand. And I said, my competitor is not another church. My competitor is CrossFit, and SoulCycle, and Travel Hockey, and corporations that claim so much of my people's time. And he did something I didn't expect him to do. He said, YES! And I was so excited.

And I realized in that moment that my colleagues in school, they're all about 40 years old, when they go back to school at the Ann Arbor campus, they want to relive their college years like a bad Will Ferrell movie. But when I go back to school, I want to relive my grammar school years. I want to have like a little gold star that's put on my paper, and a note that says, good job. Because the older you get, if you really are, I think, developing, you start to get more childlike in your needs. It's the kind of trick of life. And if you could just name those needs, it's kind of beautiful. I wanted that gold star.

And I was so excited about the gold star, I had completely forgotten what I had said. But then I listened and we kind of came around again and he asked the question, what does this substitutability teach us? And I raised my hand again. And I said, it teaches me to ask, what is the driving value of my organization? Because this idea of CrossFit being a religion is not particularly new, it emerged

in 2017. But, what I realized in that first discussion, when I posted it on Facebook, one of my parishioners wrote in on my page and said, my problem with CrossFit is every time I participate, I experience shame. I can't compare to the other athletes. I feel excluded because I'm not as fit as everybody else is. I feel judged because I'm not able to commit as much time.

And that tells me that the kind of values that have to drive me as a leader of a Christian community has to be the opposite of that shame. Not necessarily shamelessness, right? I don't need to encourage someone to be shameless. Because when you're acting in a shameless fashion, you're actually confirming the fact that shame has a claim on you, that you're still imprisoned, despite the fact that you're seemingly free. But the opposite of shame is grace and love. And those things have to be the guiding values of my community.

Is CrossFit your religion? When I typed into the search engine "CrossFit and religion," I came up with this picture that's on the bulletin today and that will come up for those of you at home. It's from a person who is training in Chartres, France. And he's not in the cathedral, he's in a CrossFit gym. It's got all the kind of accouterments that you'll find all the world over. And he's in the middle of a jump rope and he's kind of levitated in midair and he's obviously very fit. It's not unlike some Renaissance paintings of the resurrection of Jesus. He is risen, literally, CrossFit is this man's religion, I believe. And the beatific vision on his face is a confirmation that he is in the midst of some kind of transcendent moment.

And when you ask yourself whether CrossFit is your religion, or whatever else is claiming you, you tend to look for these things. You look for that sense of purpose, that sense of meaning, that community, that accountability, those rituals that remind you that you're in a kind of space. You look for the kind of promise of personal transformation.

The problem that we're facing today isn't the fact that religion is declining, even though people are going to church less and less. The problem with today is that the promise of religion is diffusing. Everybody's making a religious claim. They just have to get you to agree to join their community, or to live by their code, or to find the kind of meaning that they're defining, or to engage in measuring your life according to those rituals, or to accept whether explicitly or implicitly the values that drive that organization.

So when I ask you, is CrossFit your religion, I want to invite you to think about the communities that make a strong claim on you. And I want to ask you whether or not those communities are life-giving, whether those communities provide you with grace and love, whether those communities will be as loyal to you as you are loyal to them. Experience has taught me that many of these communities that

are pulling at us, that are making religious claims on us, are not worthy of our attention and our interest and our values.

And all of these other communities that are using shame as an engine to drive their membership, they only learned that from the church. For too long the church has been an engine of shame for so many. But the truth of Christianity and the driving value of this community needs to be love and grace. And that is not merely the opposite of shame, that's actually a kind of claim that pulls you in and values you for who you are, and loves you for who you are and not what you can give.

All of our readings today speak in one way or another about that love and reality of grace within the context of religion. Our reading from Exodus can be seen through the lens of a religious studies lens. We can see in it the normal things that you would find in any religion. There's a ritual, there's a thread of divine reward and punishment. There are strong actions that are being taken, strong memories that are being preserved, traditions that are believed in. And yet, the one thing that is unique about today's reading from Exodus about the claim that God makes on the Israelites is that God is acting with mercy to preserve his people who have been oppressed. And God will provide them with the grace of rescue. And that is a story that the church heard at the time and that is a story that animates us today. Behind all the rituals that we have, may we find mercy.

In our reading from Matthew today, we have this incredible story in which Jesus talks about the way in which you confront someone who's a danger to the community, and how you do it in a way that preserves that relationship. that doesn't try to cast them out in a way that isn't going to be following the sense that that relationship is still primary. When Jesus says Gentile and tax collector, hello, who did he spend His time around? But Jesus understands that sometimes for the care of the whole there needs to be a kind of grace confrontation and an encouragement to change.

And that is something we all need to wield with care whenever we're faced with those decisions. And we always need to keep the care of the whole in mind when we are engaging in these graced confrontations. And no, let me be clear with you, Jesus in today's reading from Matthew is not describing an org chart. He's not describing a grievance procedure so that we could, when someone else doesn't follow it to the letter, say, you should have followed it just like that. Rather, there is grace operating in that whole process. That's why Jesus says at the end, "When two or three are gathered in my name, I am present."

And so, as we engage in our ethical correction, much like as we engage in our sacramental correction that we discuss in Exodus, there is grace at the forefront. Grace is the driving value, and love is the driving value, and Jesus is the driving value of today's gospel. And finally, we have In our reading from Romans, that

incredible promise of the change that Jesus has brought to our Christian community, the gospel that we must hold onto with all our might because that gospel is the promise that God is holding onto us with all God's might, which is infinite, that gospel that love has fulfilled the law. So let love lead you, Paul tells his congregation, and so that scripture tells us.

Is CrossFit your religion? I think we could put so many things in that category, whether or not you do CrossFit or not. Whether it's travel hockey, whether it's your corporation, whether it's your own family, your own hopes for your children, all the things that you hold sacred, ask yourself the question, what is the nature of the claim being given to me and being sent to me by this community? And what am I to do?

Our theme for this year, as a congregation, is to make room for God. And the first step of that is to make room for God within. Engage in some consideration this week and these next few weeks in where God is within you. Who is drawing you out? What is the purpose? of that community you're being asked to join, and does it sit right with what you know to be true?

And the second thing you want to see in this promise of making room for God is what is the nature of the community that you want to engage in? What are the driving values of that community? Is that something you're willing to bank your life on? Because that is what these communities ask of you. In all these things, look for grace, look for love, and let God follow and lead you on your way.

Amen.