



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Meet me in the Middle The Fifth Sunday of Easter 522021

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

Last Sunday night I was super, super tired and it was one of those nights where you flip on the TV because you don't really want to think about anything or do anything. And so then the TV goes and the act of trying to get up and find the remote and turn off the TV and then walk away from the couch is just too much work.

So I sat there and watched the whole of Academy Awards. And I don't watch the Academy Awards. I mean, I've never seen any of the movies that were on for trying to win an Oscar. And so I wasn't really sure why I was watching it, but I watched the whole thing. And towards the end, they gave out an award for humanitarian service. So they have this humanitarian award that they give out periodically to directors and actors, people who do some good in the world. And this year, the Academy recognized Tyler Perry. He is an actor and director, maybe you've heard of him or seen some of his work, but apparently last year during the pandemic, he was pretty extraordinary.

In April, 2020, when we were in the midst of that first lockdown, where he had no idea what was going on, and we were trying to take care of all of our seniors. And you remember in grocery stores, they would have those senior shopping hours that were specifically for the seniors. Well, one day he called like 44 Kroger stores in Atlanta and 29 in New Orleans and he paid the bill for everybody who walked in during seniors shopping time.

Before that he had found 42 restaurant workers who were not working in restaurants because of the shutdown and he paid them \$21,000 in tips. And then when Rayshard Brooks, who was the man who was shot by police and killed in the Wendy's parking lot in Atlanta where Tyler Perry lived, when he died, Tyler Perry funded his funeral, and then he set up a college education for all four of Perry's kids. The youngest is Dream and she's one years old.

And then he has a studio in Atlanta and he converted it to Camp Quarantine. Those of you at home, you get to see what it looks like. It was in the summer of 2020, and he did it because he was worried he could afford not to work, but there were many who needed to pay the bills. So he went ahead and created

some really impressive conditions so that they can all live and work together. And he was able to take care of many, many people. He also gave out tons of food from Camp Quarantine. I mean, he was worthy of the recipient of the Oscar, right?

So he gives his speech and in his acceptance speech, Perry says something that struck me. He told a story of when he was leaving the studio. He ran into a woman and she asked him to help her. She was homeless and she needed some money. And so he was going to help her and then she looked at him and she said, do you have any shoes?

So he took her into the studio to the wardrobe room and she was really hesitant to go in there. And she went in and there along the walls were tons and tons of shoes and clothing. He beckoned her to come over to the wall and she wouldn't move. She stood in the middle of the wardrobe room. So he grabbed the shoes and brought them to her. She found a pair that fit and with tears in her eyes she said, thank you, Jesus. My feet are off the ground.

So Perry, dedicated this Oscar that he won to anyone who was willing to stand in the middle, no matter what is along the wall, stand in the middle, he said, because that's where healing happens. That's where conversation happens. That's where change happens. It happens in the middle.

I thought that this was an interesting paradigm to meet someone in the middle. This middle thing, it's an interesting place to be, because it means that both of you are willing to let go of your sides of the wall. You have to lose something to go into the middle in order to gain something, right? So you have to lose your position, your sense of safety, your pride, in order to gain an encounter, an apology, a hug, a pair of shoes.

And I think this is what makes so intriguing the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, because they both meet in the middle. Yeah, it was literally in the middle of the desert, right. But they had to both get off of their respective walls and engage in the work of being in the middle. Now to understand what made them come into the middle, you need to know a little bit about these guys.

Philip, he was a deacon in Jerusalem. He's one of the first deacons ever. He was with the Apostles, James and Peter and Paul. And they needed help because everybody needed help. And so they ordained a couple of people, deacons and their job was to take care of the poor, the widows, the outcasts, and to serve them. And he was really good at it. But then something happened in Jerusalem, right? The Great Persecution. And Christians were being killed.

And so then he got the word - run! He got the word from the angel and he ran, except he went up north to Samaria and that's no man's lands for Jews. You don't go to Samaria to travel and to meet the people there. They didn't get

along, but he went and it was there that Philip began to share the good news about Jesus - the one who came into the world to suffer for our sake, the one who died and was crucified for our sake, and the one who was raised to new life for our sake. People believed him and he started to have a wild following and people were baptized and his ministry was wildly popular. And those same apostles who ordained him blessed his ministry and celebrated it.

And then all of a sudden he gets told by the Spirit of God, go. I want you to go back to Jerusalem. You know, the place where they tried to kill you, go back there. I want you to go to Jerusalem to the Gaza Strip, dangerous strip of land, desert, and there's a road that's even more dangerous. I want you to think about this. Philip who is finally finding his place in the world on his side of the wall was now being asked to go into the middle.

And when Philip gets there, he meets a man. This is a strange man. He's a fellow Jew, but this man is Ethiopian, he's a very powerful Ethiopian. He's in charge of the whole treasury of Queen Candace, which is substantial. So he himself is a very wealthy, powerful, influential man, but that's not what makes him strange. What makes him strange is this man is not fully a man. He is a eunuch; his manly parts have been removed. He was castrated at some point in his life so that he may be loyal and serve royalty. Castrated men held positions of trust back then. Especially, can you imagine if you had a harem, you're a royal guy and you got a bunch of women and who do you want to put in there?

So, the other thing though, about eunuchs is they were considered to be loyal and trustworthy because they were unable to be in a relationship and consummate it and have offspring. And so there was no reason for them to steal in order to care for their families. All temptations had been removed literally. So a eunuch's fate was irreversibly sealed. He would never have love, nor would he have offspring or family. And men were made eunuchs for very painful reasons, right? They were sold into slavery or they were so poor they didn't have much choice or they were offcast to begin with. So they had already been literally cut off in order to survive in this life.

So this Ethiopian eunuch, he did have money. But money doesn't buy you everything. And he goes to Jerusalem from Ethiopia. It's 1500 miles. It's 20 hours in my SUV and he has a little chariot. So he makes that long trek to Jerusalem to go into the temple, to worship God. And guess what he finds out. Deuteronomy 23:1. Now I want you to look that up because I'm not going to say it out loud because this is a rated PG church and Deuteronomy 23:1 is very explicit and graphic. So I'm going to give you the PG version. If a man is a eunuch, he is not allowed into the house of the Lord, nor may he enter the assembly of the Lord.

So this man is reminded, stay on your side of the wall. Don't come here. It's no wonder that when Philip finds him, he's sitting in his chariot after having been

absolutely rejected in Jerusalem and he's sitting in his chariot and he's reading parts of the book of Isaiah. And here's what he reads in Isaiah.

"He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, he did not open his mouth."

By a perversion of justice, he was taken away. He was cut off from the land of the living. And I can imagine this man sitting there thinking, who is this about, if not me? I was afflicted. By a perversion of justice, I'm a eunuch and I've been cut off from the land of the living. And now here comes Philip, a stranger to this Ethiopian, into the middle and says, do you understand what you're reading?

Now that's what people who study the work in the middle call a "bid." It's an attempt to bridge the divide to create space for vulnerability and invite connecting and invite some trust. Bids require works of mutuality. You can accept a bid or you can stop it, right? So the Ethiopian receives a bid from Philip. Do you understand what you're reading? And the Ethiopian had every right to dismiss this bid. It's an affront to his pride. What do you mean, do I understand what I'm reading? Of course, I understand what I'm reading. It's not the best way to come into the middle, right?

But here's where the Ethiopian makes a decision to meet in the middle as well. He could have kept his pride. He could have refused to engage in conversation where he has to admit his vulnerabilities and his pain. He could've stayed entrenched in resentment for being so brutally treated in this world, but he chose to get off the wall and go into the middle.

The Ethiopian eunuch to me is an amazing example to all who have been victimized, even though you have suffered because of no fault of your own, you can do the hard work of meeting someone in the middle, getting off your wall of pain and resentment and anger and injustice so you can move forward. But there's a really important caveat to being ready and able to meet in the middle. Do not attempt to go into the middle alone. Middle work is never done by two people. It's always done by three. The reconciling healing work is always done in the presence of the Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit of God who's going to bring the two of you together in the moment to exchange bids, to be vulnerable with one another, to love each other, because all of God's children deserve to have their feet off the ground, floating in elation and joy because of harmony and reconciliation.

And the Spirit will do that work. And the Spirit always provides a sign that that work is going on. Did you notice the sign? It was there and our story right in the middle. In the midst of a hot, dry dusty desert, what does the eunuch see? Water. And this is what happens. It's like an oasis of grace in the middle that you just stumble upon. It's bigger than you. It doesn't come from either one of you.

And yet it gives you hope to do the work that you need to do in the middle, which is holy ground.

Who do you have to meet in the middle? What work do you need to do to get off your wall and take a chance? I watched, during the vaccine clinic that we had a couple of weeks ago, a volunteer who met someone in the middle, a person came and she really wasn't sure whether she was going to get the vaccine or not. So there in the parking lot, the volunteer came up to the car and spoke to the woman. And I was very impressed. The volunteer didn't bring out pamphlets or show Dr. Fauci or anything like that. The volunteer just met her in the middle and he also wished her well when she drove away and didn't get her vaccine.

As we were closing up the clinic, I'm getting ready to shut everything down, a woman came. She was still hesitant, but she was a little bit more hopeful because, remember, that work in the middle, it wasn't done alone. The spirit was there and the spirit gave her a sign and that sign was this church. A church of stability, hope, always going to be here whenever and if ever she was ready. And she received the last dose in our vaccine clinic.

Amazing things happen when you meet someone in the middle. And when you do, the Oscar goes to you.

Amen.