



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

My Bodyguard of Faith - The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, amen.

One of my husband's best friends is also a hairstylist. And like Joe, she has her share of celebrity clients, but she takes it to an entirely new level. She texts on a daily basis with one of the world's biggest rap stars. She jets off to LA to hang out with Sharon Stone. She always seems to know the hottest nightclubs and the trendiest restaurants. She's a larger than life kind of person with an even bigger heart, but for whatever reason was never someone I took to be a churchgoer. So you can imagine I was all ears when she told me one day that she just loved this non-denominational big box church that she had discovered.

So I asked her, "What is it that you like so much about it? Tell me more." And she said something very interesting. She said, "Well, for one it's nothing like the churches I grew up in. This church, this church feels like I'm watching an episode of Oprah." And I was like, "Um, okay. Say more about that." And she went on to explain how the traditional churches she grew up in spoke in a language and preached in a way that really never resonated with her. For her. They were always answering questions that she wasn't asking.

"This church," she said, "this church talks about real life - things that I deal with. Things like broken relationships, scarcity, and consumerism, forgiveness, how to live with purpose rather than mere success, and the difference between happiness and a lasting joy, and on and on. This church helps me navigate my life."

And of course my reaction was, "Amen!" Yeah. The church should be relevant to our lives because the gospel is relevant to our life. As Jesus says in the Gospel of John, I came so that they would have life and have it abundantly. So, yeah, the church should be always pointing us in the direction of that life. Not with abstract doctrines, but through the realities of our daily struggles.

And she was right as well. Some churches do that better than others. I know here we work very hard at Christ Church Cranbrook to make the gospel not only relevant to our life, but relevant to the needs and the concerns of the community around us. Like all institutions, any church can get too inwardly focused; we can get caught up in maintaining traditions that have worn out their usefulness.

We can cling to old doctrines that history has left behind. We can hold on too long to language that leaves people out. We can read scripture in a way that draws the circle too small, because we've always been at its center. We can get so caught up in the rules and the requirements of the religion that we can lose sight. We can lose sight of the faith it was meant to point us to.

I think that's a bit of what's going on here in today's gospel. When Jesus goes to the synagogue to preach for the very first time and all who hear Him are astounded. They've never heard anything like this. What is this new teaching they ask? And while Mark doesn't tell us what He said, we know that like the prophets before Him, Jesus has a way of opening the scriptures up, of opening God up in a way that people have never heard before, and sharing God's love with those who have never been allowed in before. He preaches a gospel that is for all. That challenged the religious gatekeepers, that changed the rules that breathe new life into old text in a way that gave life and new hope to the poor and the left out the bullied and the beaten down.

That's the prophetic voice that Jesus is using. That's the authority that he is speaking with. Have you heard the gospel preached with that kind of authority before? It's hard for me to put my finger on it exactly, but when I have, it's never the words that stay with me so much, but the effect they have on me, it gets my heart pumping. It gets me energized. It makes me want to sit up and to be a better person, to be a better husband, a better father. It challenges me to confront the status quo in my life and it ignites me within a desire to try on the unthinkable, to imagine the impossible.

And so yes, when the church preaches the gospel with authority, it is relevant. It is life-changing because the gospel is life changing. So all that means we will tackle the same topics and some of the same life struggles as the secular self improvement industry. Unlike the Oprahs and the Dr. Phils, and the good advice shows and the personal growth gurus, we know that the abundant life that Jesus offers us will never be found with more self-help, but with God's help.

That's what we say after our baptismal promises, isn't it? "I will with God's help." And that's good news to me because I know from my own experience, that more knowledge, more expertise, more techniques, no matter how many books I have read or classes I have taken, nine habits for this, five practices for that, no matter how practical, no matter how well researched, no matter how much it all makes sense up here, I can never seem to find the peace and the joy they promise. The change they promise never seems to take hold on their own.

Trust me, I have a whole library of self-improvement books at home to prove it. And sure, I pick up a pointer here or there, a good technique for better listening, a good tip like keeping a journal. I can even see some changes in my life for a little while, but like a crash dieter, I can't seem to keep it up on my own for long. Somehow the nine habits for this or the five practices for that, which I resolve to

really do this time eventually fall by the wayside as they get overruled by the voices of fear and doubt that always managed to rob them of their promise.

That's why today's gospel is so powerful to me, because notice the very next thing that happens after Jesus teaches about God's love and the abundant life He has come to offer us, we hear the voice of an unclean spirit, a representative of all the forces of this world, which would oppose and lead us astray. And they are worried because unlike the crowd, they know who Jesus is and they know the gospel that Jesus is about to unleash in the world, if heeded, will render them powerless. "Have you come to destroy us?" they ask in fear. And Jesus answers them by doing exactly that, right in front of everyone.

And I know to our modern minds, we can get caught up in questions of what is an unclean spirit and is this about demon possession, but don't let that distract you from the bigger truth here that we are not going to be alone in this fight. Jesus makes it clear, He is not just going to show us the way. He isn't going to just describe the kingdom of God, but He is prepared to stand against and cast out anything and anyone who would try to rob us of the life He has come to offer. And I don't know about you, but knowing that Jesus not only shows us the way, but has our back along the way, that is good news. That is a new teaching.

As I was reflecting on this idea, an old 80s movie I saw as a kid came to mind, My Bodyguard. It's about a young boy who was getting bullied relentlessly at school to the point that he is possessed, if you will, by constant fear and anxiety about what's lurking around every corner. Desperate and miserable, he decides to find the biggest and strongest looking kid in school. And he's going to pay him to be his bodyguard. And it works. His belief in this protector enables him to take the leap of faith he needed so that he could stop looking over his shoulder so he could be himself again. So he could play and laugh and make friends and just be a kid again. To be the person God made him to be again.

I too need to be reminded of that myself because every week. I walk out the doors of this sanctuary and I go into a world that seems to excel at pulling me back down again; a world that always seems to know how to bully me, how to press my buttons, how to play on my insecurities in just the way that feeds my inner demons. I need to be reminded that in Jesus I too have a bodyguard that I don't have to face what's lurking around the corner of this life alone. And when I hear it from this pulpit, when I sing it in our songs, when I say it in our prayers, when I see it in the faces of each of you, I start to believe it once more. So when my unclean spirits return with God's help, I can find the courage to silence them.

In the movie, it turns out that the boy's bodyguard isn't much of a fighter after all, when the bullies get a gang together and come gunning for them, he goes down pretty easily. But driven by compassion for his bodyguard, who has since become his friend, the boy finds the courage to fight back, and in so doing discovers his real power. I won't spoil the ending, but suffice to say he learns that

it wasn't muscle he was missing, but faith - faith in himself, faith in his own worthiness, faith in the power of love.

Now you might be saying to yourself, come on Chris, this isn't Hollywood. Real life doesn't have such happy endings, but doesn't it? Doesn't the resurrection tell us that the unclean spirits of this world, while they do indeed get a word in from time to time, they don't get the last word. And if they don't get the last word, perhaps we can take the leap of faith that we need so that with God's help, we too might find the courage to silence them once more and be freed to follow Jesus more closely and to live more fully when we do.

Amen.

[End of Recording]