



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"My sheep, hear my voice." 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.

More than any politics, more than any philosophy, more than any rule of life, Christianity is about relationship. It's about a relationship with Jesus. The miracle of Christianity is not that Jesus has come to give us a new way of life. It's not that Jesus has come to set in place a new law. It's not that Jesus has come to establish some kind of ideal politics, but at the core of the promise of Jesus is that we have an intimate, personal relationship with Him.

Jesus is interested in us. Jesus wants to know us. Jesus wants to walk with us in all of our complexity, in all of our good parts and bad parts. Jesus loves the whole of us because Jesus is the same God who made us. He is the God who loves us. And wonder of wonders, He is the good shepherd who calls us by name. "My sheep, hear my voice."

And this relationship with Jesus is critical. And over the years, it has come in the Christian tradition to be understood as a kind of invitation to discern what that voice of Jesus sounds like to us. And there are two ways in which we have been called to listen for the voice of God and Christ to us. The first is through our conscience. Our conscience is often described as not some kind of inner counsel with yourself, but the voice of God within you. And that conscience was seen as paramount in the Christian life. Christians were tasked to listen to their conscience.

In the 13th century, Saint Thomas Aquinas, who almost always defended the church to the end, said in his *Summa Theologiae* that the conscience in an individual Christian was something that outweighed even the church. If you felt called by God to exercise your conscience in some way, it was something Thomas believed that you were obligated to follow. It didn't matter if your conscience erred. In fact, he believed it was a grave sin to go against your conscience. And this is because the conscience helps us discern what God is calling us to do in the midst of incredibly complex situations. In the midst of existential decisions we have to make in our life in which we decide the course of our life, whether it be one way or the other, the conscience is key.

The second way in which that voice of God is spoken in the fabric of our lives, in which the dialogue that God craves for us with Jesus, is in terms of vocation. Our

vocation is not merely our occupation. It's not merely the way we make our money. It's not merely the relationships we find ourselves in. Our vocation is that one thing that God is calling you to be. The purpose you have in this life is your vocation.

And there are different ways to define vocation in the Christian tradition. One of my favorite ways, which is a little bit like doing some kind of calculus, is that your vocation is your greatest passion meeting the world's greatest need. And of course, standing behind that view of vocation is the awareness that all of the gifts you have are meant to make the world a better place to echo God's love and justice in this world. Another definition of vocation is it's whatever makes more of you. Which of course means that there are certain things that make less of you that have to be let go, but there are things that make more of you and they transform you by living into that vocation.

And of course, one thing I want to say third about vocations is vocations are always expressed in community. We need to protect the vocations we feel called by God to express in our lives. We need to support people who have been called on a certain path. These two things, conscience and vocation, these are the ways in which the Christian tradition believes we have all been called to find and discern and to live into the relationship we have with Jesus.

And these two things, conscience and vocation are incredibly important for us to keep in mind on this day in which we celebrate mothers, because the decision to be a mother is one that resides in every woman's conscience. No authority can stand in that place where a mother is called. And when a woman decides to keep a pregnancy or end a pregnancy, we have to respect that that has been a decision made in her conscience, in the place that is holy, in the place where no church can go, in the place where no government can go.

And I am not saying, and please understand me, that that conscience will always go one way rather than the other. No, I'm saying it's in the midst of that complexity, in the midst of the context in which a woman finds herself as she takes the measure of her life and she seeks to hear the voice of God for her. That is where the decision is. And that is where that decision belongs.

And that decision to be a mother, to keep a child rather than end a pregnancy is one that I have been incredibly blessed to walk with someone as she made that decision. And I know in my bones having walked that way, how deep the discernment was, how important the conscience is in these moments. And that when given that authority, I have never met a woman who has been cavalier about that decision. And I have never met a woman who has not lived up to that obligation to prayerfully and carefully make the decision of her conscience.

And this is important for us to lift up today because I believe that conscience needs to be respected and I believe Christians are called to respect it. And I believe that that conscience is enough that no church, no government can stand in the place of that decision, which is where only God can be. And today also is a moment in which we have to lift up that vocation of motherhood, because as much as the decision to be a mother is a biological decision, it's also a spiritual decision.

And one of the things that is powerful about motherhood is that there is an unavoidable, spiritual dimension to being a mother, so much so that the spiritual expression of the vocation to be a mother is actually shared by more people than those who are biologically called to be a mother. And this is actually something that the Christian tradition is incredibly clear about, though it is not often spoken of.

Julian of Norwich, who was the great Christian mystic from the late 14th century wrote in a beautiful classic of spirituality that Jesus made a good mother. That the mother that she found was not just her earthly mother, but Jesus, because Jesus was the mother of life. And this is what she writes. "This fair lovely word Mother is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of Him; and to Him who is the true mother of life and of all things. To the property of Motherhood belong nature, love, wisdom, and knowledge; and this is God."

So Julian sees in motherhood a kind of embodiment of the infinite love of God. And this is good news for us for two reasons. The first is that our own mothers and no mother can live up to all the expectations of motherhood because it is a vocation. It makes more of you. The mother you've become is the mother you have to grow into being, and there will always be more growth and there'll always be a need for mothering. And the second is this: that we are often called in community to support not only the vocation of motherhood, but we are called to be mothers to one another.

In our reading from the book of Acts, there is that beautiful line in the scriptures which I hold onto so dearly, which is that when Tabitha died, all the widows brought to Peter and showed him the tunics that she had made for them, the clothing that she had cared for them. These were widows, people who had lost their husband, and yet they needed their mother. And their mother was Tabitha. And so the miracle we run into in the book of Acts is of a mother being raised from the dead.

And this is important for us to keep in mind as well, because one of the things that make us special as a Christian community is we mother one another. We love one another. We nurture one another. We support one another. And all of

our lives, it doesn't matter whether our own mothers are alive or with God, all of our lives, we never stop needing a mother.

I have two poems I wanted to share with you today that go with the grain of this thought of the vocation of motherhood that I want to lift up for you. Ironically, these poems have been written by two men, which is ironic, but maybe there is something in the eyes of an outsider that they see. And I find these powerful poems. The first is by Rudyard Kipling. And it's a beautiful little poem and I want to say a little bit to introduce it to you.

Kipling was born in India, in a city then known as Bombay. And when he was six years old and his sister was three years old in 1871, his family sent him to England to live with a foster family where he was to be educated. And the foster family adored and loved his little sister. They didn't like Rudyard very much and he suffered and he said nothing. And finally, maybe listening to her intuition, his mother came and removed him from the home. And Kipling later in his life said that the reason why he never said anything for the six years he lived with that abuse is that when you're a child, he wrote, everything comes as an eternity and you just patiently wait your way through it.

So Kipling had to travel on a voyage at six years old and he had to live without his mother for several years, and yet he never doubted his mother's love. And this comes out in his poem, *Mother o' Mine*. It's a shanty. It's something that you would almost hear on the deck of a ship.

If I were hanged on the highest hill,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
I know whose love would follow me still,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
I know whose tears would come down to me,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!
If I were damned of body and soul,
I know whose prayers would make me whole,
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

What's key in this shanty that's powerful for us to see is the refrain "Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!" has a kind of ellipsis, a kind of missing point at that line where he says, "If I were damned of body and soul, I know whose prayers would make me whole." And that is a kind of gesture that Kipling makes to draw the contours of motherhood along the lines of the love of God. And in this sense, he goes with the grain of the Christian tradition.

The second poem I want to lift up for you today is Rabindranath Tagore, who was the first winner of the Nobel prize for literature from India, or from anybody outside of Europe, which he won in 1931. And this is his poem:

I cannot remember my mother
only sometimes in the midst of my play
a tune seems to hover over my playthings,
the tune of some song that she used to
hum while rocking my cradle.

I cannot remember my mother
but when in the early autumn morning
the smell of the shiuli flowers floats in the air
the scent of the morning service in the temple
comes to me as the scent of my mother.

I cannot remember my mother
only when from my bedroom window I send
my eyes into the blue of the distant sky,
I feel that the stillness of
my mother's gaze on my face
has spread all over the sky.

What I find powerful about this poem is Tagore is speaking to that anxiety of loss and grief that so many of us experience when we lose a mother or when we lose the opportunity to have the mother we wished we had. And yet in the midst of that loss is that conviction that the love of his mother provides a kind of window into a world of love. He sees the face of his mother's smile and the blue sky and knows that he is home.

"My sheep, hear my voice." May we give thanks for all the mothers in our midst. May we support the vocation of every mother. May we respect the conscience of each woman and every person as they seek to listen to the voice of God speaking to them. And may we all know the immense love of God that Jesus speaks of when He says, "My sheep, hear my voice."

Amen.