



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Operation_Cookie Monster_ - The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost - 9_11_2022

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.

The decision that I face in the morning to listen to the news has become increasingly difficult for me these days. There's so much going on. And usually I turn on the news first thing in the morning. I've learned that doing so usually is the buzzkill of the day, and so I tend to not do it. But I always relent and I turn it on because I know I want to keep up. And this week I was listening to the news and I came across something that surprised me because it was so uplifting, even though it was a bittersweet and difficult story to hear. It was on CNN of all places. It was at a segment that they call Beyond the Call.

I turned it on just as I was going to the gym. And it was about this family of four that was returning from a family reunion in Arizona on their way to Texas. And there was a storm. There was rain on the highway. They hadn't had rain in a while, which meant that the roads became slick and the family car hit a slick patch and slid into a tractor trailer. Three members of the four people in that family died tragically.

The first person who responded to this family tragedy was a volunteer firefighter from Kaibab Estates West Volunteer Fire Department in Arizona. His name was Tracy Zinn. He came and he discovered that Brian, Allison and Oliver were dead, but that little Alex who was six years old had somehow miraculously survived the crash. He had been sitting in the back seat, but the car had become so crumpled that he was now in the front seat.

Tracy got him out and Alex went to the hospital in Flagstaff. A little bit later, the towing company contacted the volunteer fire department and asked them if they knew of a Cookie Monster stuffed animal that was somewhere in the car. And so another member of the volunteer fire department, Jessica Puisis, went with a teenager, Violet Gunn, who was the daughter of Jason Gunn, the fire chief. And they drove back out to the accident site and they scoured it and they found this little Cookie Monster stuffed animal under some rubble.

Jessica took the Cookie Monster and washed it off and got it to Alex. They were holding the Cookie Monster outside of the truck as they were driving so that they could get it to him before he was transferred, because they knew he wanted

that beautiful source of comfort. They wanted to give him some source of comfort as he was facing these difficult days.

And in the action of doing that, another member of the volunteer fire department, Laurie Granger, wrote about this on Facebook and put a link to a GoFundMe page. That GoFundMe page when they saw that story of the work that they did to bring back that Cookie Monster to Alex has now raised about \$100,000. And I found myself surrounded as I am by reminders of the things that make us all too human, I found myself just powerfully moved by this story of this volunteer fire department that went above and beyond and reached out to help this little boy and to bring him back his stuffed animal. The incredible sacrifice that they did, the love that they showed, the kind of care they did, the way they lifted it up, the way they created all of this goodness for him, so that he would know that he wasn't alone. That he could somehow be surrounded by love, even in the midst of tragedy.

And I did something unusual. I called the Kaibab Estates West Fire Department, and I said, I'm a pastor of a church. Could we have an interview? And they said, yes. And this is a little excerpt of that interview I'm about to play for you. The first person speaking is Tracy Zinn, and he is the man who came upon the scene. The second person speaking is Jessica Puisis. And she's the one who got the call to go look for Cookie Monster. And the third person who's going to be speaking is Violet Gunn. And she is the young woman, the high schooler who actually found the Cookie Monster. And finally, Laurie Granger is the woman who put it on Facebook and helped elevate the story so that Alex would not only get the Cookie Monster, but this incredible gift. And it is a witness for us. So here it is.

Tracy: "It was kind of stormy day and I ended up running into this wreck right after it happened. And it was a very bad wreck, so I pulled over and stopped and there was other people there. But I threw on my reflector shirt and went down to see if I could help. The car was just pretty much destroyed and everything was just crunched except for little Alex. I ended up pulling him out the front window and he was in the back seat. So that's how bad - he was in the front. And he was just broken up real bad. I told him you got to be tough, I'm going to get you out. And the ambulance came, I got him off to the hospital with the ambulance drivers."

Jessica: "The tow company that had towed the vehicles that day there at the accident, the family had contacted them looking for the stuffed animal. They couldn't find it in the vehicle. And I know one of the employees there, so she had reached out to me, said she knew I was there on scene that day. When she first called me and said it was a Cookie Monster, I remembered seeing a blue stuffed animal that day on the hill. And so I told her don't waste your time in the car, I'm pretty sure it's still out at the accident scene. I went and got Violet and Jason and we went out."

Violet: "Jessica said, do you want to go do Operation Cookie Monster? I wasn't sure really what I was looking for other than it was a stuffed animal and it looked like a Cookie Monster. And I was like, okay. So I kind of went in there, blindly looking for this thing and finding out that I found it surprised me."

Jessica: "I called the hospital to make sure Alex was still there because we didn't get any information after he left the scene that day. And they told me he was being transferred out the next day and they didn't know what time. It could be early in the morning. So I didn't want to risk missing him because he's going back to another state. The hospital's about an hour, a little over an hour's drive from where we are. So I just took it home and cleaned it up as best I could, washed it up. And that's when I went and picked up Tracy and we drove up to the hospital and delivered it to him that evening. But he had lost so much that day.

It was a tough call on all of us. We all really felt the effects of that one afterwards. We didn't know much about it after he left, but in my mind he was just this little kid all alone and his whole family was just gone. So if I could bring him just a little bit of joy with his favorite stuffed animal or any kind of comfort in any way, it was worth all of it for me.

Laurie: "I'm recapping what happened. Tracy left three hours early. The accident happened and it was devastating, but then somebody at Murphy's Towing just happened to know Jessica. Jessica just happened to remember the blue thing on the mountainside. And just all these things kept happening. And for me, it was a praise God moment at every step of the way. We heard about the GoFundMe page and we just wanted to blow it up. We wanted this child to be able to go to school and to get all of his hospital bills paid. And we don't know how insurance works when the entire family passes away. We don't know how and where is he going to live? And who's going to take care of him. And how's he going to go to school?"

All of us just have such a big heart that we decided we needed to do this and we needed to get it out there. So it's been one interview after another. It's really blown the Facebook page up so that Alex is going to be okay."

Jessica: "All these news agencies are calling and wanting interviews over a stuffed animal. It's not just a stuffed animal. It's a whole community. It's a whole piece. Had the stuffed animal piece not come into play, had Laurie not wrote the story about us returning the stuffed animal, none of these news networks would've ever picked it up. The story wouldn't have gotten out there. The last I checked I think Alex's GoFundMe was getting close to \$100,000.

None of that would have come about had it not been for a stuffed animal laying on the side of a hill after an accident. There's a lot of stories and a lot of accidents and a lot of things that happen every day. And I just feel like God put

all of the pieces in place to help Alex on his journey and to go through what he is going to go through and to help his family. And none of us know the why or the what. We just do what we can to help and to make it better and to kind of rally an entire community around this child who just lost his family.”

Violet: “It's also the idea that you help one, you help many.”

Laurie: “We're hearing stories about people that have been transformed by this. I mean, we're down at the local gas station and people are saying I'm just so inspired by this story. I feel inspired. I feel uplifted. I feel good. This one little thing of helping Alex has just blown into a nationwide outing, and so many people that we will never realize watching that may inspire them to go join and volunteer something to help someone else.”

And you can see on your bulletin a picture of Alex, and you can see him holding his Cookie Monster lovey. And of course, a teddy bear that had belonged to his brother, Oliver. And you can see Alex wearing a hat that says Kaibab Estates West Fire Department. “Which of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

There are many emblems in this world around us of God's grace. And when Jesus picked these simple images of a shepherd that goes looking for sheep or a woman that scours her home, looking for a lost coin, He was pointing to something that was deep within the way we live as human beings that we often take as a given, rather than as a gift. But these moments when we extend ourselves and sacrifice ourselves and go after someone who is lost or least, these moments are moments of grace and they go with the grain of who Jesus is and what Jesus wants us to do in light of this parable.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, there are three themes that seem to knit themselves together. There is a theme of liberation. And so in chapter four, Jesus says the spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and proclaim a year of liberation to those who are oppressed. And then there is a theme of grace that comes as mercy. And so we read in the tenth chapter of Luke this moment in which a traveler is on a road and falls prey to thieves, and a good Samaritan comes and shows mercy. At the end of that story, Jesus says to the Pharisee asking the question, who was my neighbor, the answer is the one who showed mercy and Jesus says, go and do likewise.

And then in the last part of Luke, there is another fold and that is that liberation and mercy come through sacrifice. And that sacrifice happens when we give something up, when we take something on, when we give of ourselves, and when we die a little bit. And when that sacrifice happens, there is always, Jesus promises, abundance and grace and joy. And all of this is meant to prepare us. For that sacrifice of Jesus himself in which He will die so that we might live. But

the end product of that good news is not just that we are the ones resting on the shoulders of Christ. It's not that we are the lost coin or maybe the pearl of great price, as we read in the Gospel of Matthew. To be a Christian is to step into that incredible economy of grace in which there is liberation and mercy and sacrifice, and always something more comes out of it.

And surrounded as we are by tragedies, when families don't make it home from family reunions, when monarchs who are beloved pass away, when we are surrounded by reminders every day of what happened more than 20 years ago, on 9/11 in New York City, surrounded by all of these things, we need to hold on to these parables of grace in our midst. We need to hold on to the grace that comes to us through Jesus Christ and recognize that we are that pearl of great price. We are that lost coin. We are that lost sheep. And we have to hold on to what God is calling us to do as the people of God. To step into that grace in our own lives and to follow that shepherd as he searches for the lost sheep and to follow and work with that woman as she searches for that lost coin, whatever that looks like for us.

What is the liberation that God is calling you to be the catalyst in bringing about in someone else's life? What is the mercy that God is calling you to show, or to claim, or to somehow share with somebody else? What is the sacrifice that God is calling you to make so that you can discover the abundant life that comes when you go with the grain of Jesus' love? These are the questions that disciples of Jesus have to ask ourselves each day. And one of the things that I find, so moving in this volunteer fire department is that they were people of faith and they simply answered the call. They did everything they could to minister to this little boy who needed help, this little lost lamb. And as long as we have people like this in our midst, I will never despair of what we can do through God working through us here in this church and elsewhere. Where is grace for you? Where is liberation for you? Where is sacrifice for you?

On this day in which we give thanks for Queen Elizabeth, I found myself thinking about all the pictures that I love about her. And my favorite is one that was taken in the midst of World War II when she was still Princess Elizabeth. She was barely 20 years old and she signed up with the army and put on fatigues and drove a transport truck and was so brave. One of the historians of the monarchy that I tend to read said that Elizabeth was pivotal as a monarch because before Elizabeth, sovereigns believed they should be served. And after Elizabeth and during her reign, sovereigns believed that they should serve. And so her whole reign was of a sovereign serving her people and keeping them united by love and goodwill and charity. And that's why we love her. Elizabeth knew that liberation. Elizabeth knew that grace. Elizabeth knew that sacrifice.

Another person that comes to mind whenever I think about 9/11 is the first recorded victim of 9/11, Mychal Judge, who was a Franciscan monk and was the

chaplain to the New York City Fire Department. On 9/11, Mychal followed his men into the tower and he was hit by a large piece of concrete and was killed instantly. And there's a famous picture of his men carrying him out of the tower, and he is bowed and bloody and dead. Mychal did so much more than just serve as a chaplain to the firefighters. He was active in the community. He was active in the recovery community. He was welcoming of everyone, in particular, the LGBTQ community. He was a transcendent person who elevated so many.

And he knew that incredible liberation, that incredible grace and that incredible sacrifice as well as anyone I've ever met. Mychal has a prayer that I pray every season when I enter the beginning of this time. And the prayer is this:

Lord, take me where You want me to go; Let me meet who You want me to meet; Tell me what You want me to say; and. Keep me out of your way.

That is what liberation and grace and sacrifice look like for me, saying that prayer and trying to live it out. What does it mean for you?

Amen.