



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Since I've moved into my new office here at the church this past September after the construction, I wanted to figure out how to make it a space where grace is experienced. And I had two really interesting things happen in that space. First, I am not a gardener, and I'm pretty negligent when it comes to plants. I forget about them and they regularly die on my watch. So in the 20 years that I have had a church office, I have never had a church office plant.

So one day in mid-September, I walk into my new office and three plants appeared on the windowsill. And I got a phone call from church member, Jennifer Umphress. She's a master gardener and she has a PhD in plant biotechnology. And she let me know that she was keeping three of her plants in my office, and that I had nothing to do except enjoy the fresh air that they were producing for me. And sure enough, those plants are thriving and I have done nothing except marvel and how wonderful it is to have a plant in one's office.

Now, unbeknownst to me and Jennifer, this opened up the agricultural floodgates. Apparently office plants like company. So as of today, I have seven plants in my office all given to me in the past two months by people who could not know that, one, I kill plants. And two, I have a surrogate PhD friend who took pity on a priest who can't do some basic gardening. And can I tell you, it is wonderful. I love my office. Plants are super cool, and so are the people who show their love to you with this.

And I told Jennifer, you know, I think there's a sermon in this. My doing absolutely nothing to deserve or even care for these gifts given to me. This new growth and this gift of life showing up and filling my life with such goodness and fresh air. An office filled with undeserved plants is like a divine savior who covers himself with flesh in humanity and comes and takes away all the sins of the world without anyone ever doing anything. And then he fills our life with such goodness. And he cleans our air.

Now the second conundrum in my now plant-filled office are the walls, they're bare, and I couldn't figure out what to put up on them. I used to have a wall full of crosses when I had my previous office here. But then after the construction and we moved and I had my temporary office over at the Jewish synagogue, I kind of felt uncomfortable putting up a wall full of crosses there. So I decided it was time to share the wealth, and I gave all the crosses away. And all these crosses had been given to me over the two decades of my ministry by people

who were beautiful and they gave them to me. And so now I have shared them with others.

So in September, along with the plants that showed up in my office, I was surprised by another gift. And this one was an office warming present from Rachel Dougle, who's also a member of our congregation, and interestingly, another master gardener. I don't know what it is with you, gardeners. You guys are a generous lot. So she is also a watercolor painter and she gave me a beautiful watercolor of plants! And that is currently the only thing that's hanging on my office walls. So now I have plants and a beautiful watercolor.

And so I began to think, okay, what should I put on the other walls that represents me? Well, I like words. And at a recent funeral that I went to of a friend who suddenly died, she had a massive heart attack, I heard a verse of scripture in her funeral that reminded me of her. And it moved me and it challenged me and it captivated me. So I got it on a big canvas so I won't forget it, ignore it, and hopefully it will remind me over and over again of the good news of the gospel. And it comes from the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians and it is this"

"Love does not brood over injury."

I was so struck by this because the act of brooding, of holding on to wrongdoing, it is what we humans do so well. We keep track, but love is counter to that. It sloughs off injury because it's too captivated by the goodness of the one that it loves. And this is the essence of our beautiful Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah, which starts off with a plant reference!

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

So let me give you a little context. There was a covenant that God made with the people called Israel. And these were the ones that he delivered from Egypt out of slavery and gave them the Promised Land, filled with milk and honey. And the covenant that God made with these people was this. They would have fidelity to the Lord God, and God would grow them as a nation. And they're sign of fidelity to the God who saved them, it was pretty simple. Treat those who were impoverished or destitute with dignity, lifting them up as they were bowed down by the weight of their struggles, just like the Israelites were when they were slaves in Egypt.

And the struggles that the poor and the destitute have are real, are they not? I got a call from a parishioner who shared with me how she had a friend who knew this family. And the father had mental illness and he burned down their trailer. And the mom and the two kids escaped and the father went into the

hospital and then was being charged and was going to go to jail. But the mother and the two kids had nowhere to live because there isn't sustainable housing that's affordable for people here in our counties. So someone set up a GoFundMe page for this family, and this church contributed because that's what the Lord wants us to do.

Just this past week, I got a phone call from another person. She had a car accident. And her car was totaled, so she had to go and lease a different car, and that lease was \$200 a month more than her previous one. And so she had no money as a single mom to provide for her 15-year-old son basic needs like underwear and a blanket. So I called a church family and they are eager to provide for this beautiful little family, a mother and child, and they're going to get everything that he needs and some Christmas presents to boot so that they can have a good Christmas.

Caring for those who are marginalized is what we're called to do. It was what the Nation of Israel was called to do. But we find out in the chapter before our reading, in chapter 10, that they are doing the exact opposite with their policies and their practices. And so the prophet Isaiah reads them the riot act. Here's what he says. "Woe to those who enact unjust statutes; and to those who constantly record harmful decisions, so as to deprive the needy of justice and rob the poor among my people of their rights, so that the widows may be their spoil and that they may plunder the orphans."

God is not pleased, and I will admit that God's response to the breaking of the covenant, it's chilling, and I want us to take note of what it looks like when love with a capital L broods over injury. Because God lets the Assyrians, a military powerhouse, come and decimate all of Israel, so it will be no more. And then God lets the Assyrians know that their barbaric and rapacious acts of invasion will not go unanswered either, and God's going to let the Assyrians have it too. There's talk of whips and wasting bodies, and God's anger destining them to destruction. So Chapter 10 ends with these words: "Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop off the branches with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an axe and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall."

When love broods over injury, the only thing that's left is a wasteland. But this is where our Old Testament reading begins. The very next verse, God does not leave us in devastation. From a dead tree trunk will come, a green shoot, a new growth, and from that green shoot that will grow a branch that will be so strong that it'll become the tree of life and it will bring such goodness, such righteousness that it will not only save all of Israel, but it will save all of the nations and all of creations And those who have enmity with one another and those who would injure one another, Jews and Gentiles, lions and lambs,

leopards and goats, bears and cows, even babies and snakes who have been arch enemies since the Garden of Eden, no one will hurt or destroy anymore, but they will live as neighbors with each other.

Because the bearer of New Life, the new shoot from the dead tree trunk comes out of what is empty and barren brings us encouragement and hope. And it's that same new shoot who will bring all of us encouragement and hope will make friends out of our arch enemies and let the lion lie next to the lamb. And his name is Jesus. Hallelujah. And it is no wonder, it is no wonder that John the Baptist, when he comes and announces the coming of Jesus, he starts by saying, repent, the kingdom of heaven has come near. We need new ways of acting and being and thinking now that we're living in a time of the Kingdom of Heaven where new life comes out of nothing and love personified will not brood over injury.

God is not keeping track of your wrongdoings. God is blotting out all of your sins. God comes to you in your barren rooms and fills it with plants and paintings and provides master gardeners without you even asking, and cultivates beauty and goodness and kindness and righteousness in you without you paying a price. We need renewal to be able to live fully in this Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth. So I would like to leave you with a four step process on how actually to live in the Kingdom of Heaven that is being provided for you and for me.

Number one, be injured. Number two, seek Jesus. Number three, change your mind. Number four, love. First, know that it is natural that when people live side by side, we will injure one another. You will injure others, you will be injured by others. And when you are injured, realize that this is part of being human. After all, even God incarnate was not above this. Jesus was harmed. It's the human condition.

So when you are injured, not if, but when you are injured, take the time to acknowledge and be injured. Let yourself experience the pain and the suffering. Don't be unkind to yourself and deny yourself of that. It's like we're on a football field playing a game and a football player gets injured, right? That person needs to be taken out of the game. Needs time to tend his injury. He may need intervention by others to get better. He also needs time to heal. So we non-football players, we need that as well, especially if the injury is not just physical, but it's systemic or emotional.

Second, when you are injured, look to Jesus. Jesus sees your pain. Jesus knows you're suffering. Jesus can witness the injustice, the tragedy, and the terror that you've been through, and it is Jesus's love and affection for you that will heal your every wound. It's Jesus who's going to take care of you, Jesus, who's going to give you strength, and He will remind you of the ways that He took care of others when you injured someone and how God loved you completely through

it, and you were forgiven and you did absolutely nothing to deserve that forgiveness. And then Jesus will invite you to see the world with kingdom eyes, not as a place to get the most out of your injury and get what you can get, but as a place filled with God's love and goodness, so that you cannot help but step into that space and let the goodness overcome your pain.

Third, change your mind. Now, this is actually what John the Baptist says in our reading. It's actually what then Jesus says as He takes on the same tagline. Change your mind because the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. The Greek word is metanoia, and the word stems are meta and noia. Meta you've heard before. When you put it together with a different word, it means to change. So metamorphosis, right? Change your form. Noia is thought, to think. So metanoia, change your thoughts. Change the way you think. Change your mind.

So rethink your injury. Is there another way for you to approach it that gives you life and lets you live in a space where beautiful things can happen all around you, in you, and through you, and can happen for you even though you did nothing to deserve it. This can happen when you change your mind. When you stop seeing an injury as driving the process and you begin to do number four, love.

Now you and I know without a doubt that love changes everything. It is because of God's love shown to us through Jesus Christ, that everything has changed. And that love lives in you and will change how you experience your injury as well. At some point, lingering on your pain and your suffering prevents you from living fully. And this is why love does not brood over injury. It cannot. Love is seeking to forgive. Love is trying to see the person worthy of love and not be an enemy. Love is trying to live in a place where regularly new shoots of life come from the dead tree trunks. And plants and painters, and master gardeners and angels of all kinds appear beside us when we're suffering, without us even seeking them, and provide beauty and goodness and righteousness that heal us.

During Advent, may you embrace this wonderful new world in the Kingdom of Heaven, where wolves live besides lambs, where leopards live in harmony with bears and cows and goats, and the little child shall lead them. And then during Advent, may you tend to your own injury. May you seek Jesus to heal you. May you rethink how you want to be so that you can experience the Kingdom of Heaven. And finally, may you love with abandon. Because it is for this reason God made you and gave you Jesus Christ in the first place.

Amen.