



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the service, today is our first annual Pride service, and really it's the whole weekend. And this service has been long in coming. It's overdue. It's been something that we have had to do for many, many years, and it's at a point where we have to stand and proclaim our allegiance, our allyship, our welcome, our love, our place as a welcoming, inclusive congregation to those who are members of the LGBTQ community.

And I want to, first and foremost, thank people who are too numerous to name. I am so grateful for the members of that community on our staff and in our congregation who have been part of this community for so many decades. We have been blessed by that presence. We are so grateful to have you with us. You have made all the difference in our lives, not merely in opening our eyes to the fact that gays and lesbians and transgender and bisexual people can be part of our community, but also the fact that you are Christians who have been Christ bearers to us. Your witness, your prayers, your love, your service, your presence has been a blessing to us. And for many years we have been a church of safe harbor. Quiet, safe harbor. If you found your way into the doors, we would say, welcome. Let's keep this a secret. But now we are ready. God has prepared us. And we are ready to make sure that the world knows where we stand.

And that brings me to the point that I want to say in today's sermon, the point I want to make, which is that we have a tendency to think of Pride as for only a certain segment of the population, as something only for the LGBTQ community. It's like something that we want, it's almost akin in, I think, popular culture to a birthday. We say happy Pride, the way we would say Happy Birthday, it's your day. But I don't think Pride is just that. And we have a tendency to make Pride a little bit like St. Patrick's Day. A kind of moment of incredible celebration and dancing. And so it is. I keep waiting for the equivalent of the Irish t-shirt that says, "Kiss me, I'm Irish."

But in fact, Pride is for everyone. Pride is for everyone. We all have a hand in celebrating Pride. Because on Pride, we give thanks to God that we have somehow become aware of how important it is to embrace the members of this community and how the members of this community have changed us. Pride is for everyone. Because what we are doing today is not a weird attempt to try to stay relevant or current with the trends of the day. It's not a moment in which we

are trying somehow to get on point or to be woke or to be present, or to somehow be relevant. What we are asked to do today is to see that being welcoming, being inclusive, being a church where gays and lesbians and transgender and bisexuals and queer people can find a place. Being that place is actually, from the beginning, the right understanding of Christianity. To celebrate Pride is to celebrate the fact that we are getting the gospel right.

From the beginning, at the earliest strata of Christianity, we believe that the fundamental relationship we have with Jesus Christ is on the basis of grace. It has everything to do with the way that we read our scripture today from Genesis. We believe that before the covenant with Moses, there was also a covenant with Abraham, and that covenant was based on faith. And it was given as a kind of grace. What is faith? Faith is more than just the intellectual assent to a set of concepts or teachings. To be faithful is to be active and to trust, to take a leap sometimes, to hope and dream, and put words behind those dreams and actions behind those words, and to take initiative. And to walk boldly and to lean in.

Faith is always alive and active. It is never dead. And that covenant that Abraham had with God was based on God's gift of God's self to Abraham. And it was in the hope and expectation that Abraham would give himself back to God. That lineage we claim as Christians to Abraham, to his faith, that active faith is mentioned today in our reading from Romans. There you have a moment in which Paul is trying to make clear that the way that we find ourselves in God and the way we make ourselves to God, we do that not through the law but through grace which comes to us by faith.

In the second paragraph in the reading that we had, you can see that really clearly, everything depends on faith, he writes, an order that the promise may rest on grace and to be guaranteed to Abraham and his descendants forever. If you have faith, you are a descendant of Abraham. If you have faith, your access to God is through grace, and that grace is powerful enough and can create the kind of relationship with God that you need that is greater than the law.

Everything depends upon grace. And grace can be defined in many different ways because it's a phenomenon and not something that is actually easily parsed. But grace is power, grace is mercy, and grace is welcome. And we know this because we read today's reading from Matthew faithfully, where Jesus has fellowship with people who are called tax collectors and sinners. And where Jesus has a moment in which He claims and calls as a disciple, Matthew, who is a tax collector. Matthew has that welcome. The people who welcome Jesus into their home were welcomed by Him. That radical welcome is grace, you see.

And that power that Matthew had to somehow leave behind his job as a tax collector and to follow faithfully Jesus, and that power that Jesus had to heal that

woman with a hemorrhage who had been suffering for a decade, that power of Jesus to raise the dead, all of that is grace. Grace is the power to change, to be transformed, to be healed. And finally, there is that power of mercy. That power is infinite because it has been born by Christ himself. Our access to Christ is not because we are good rather than other people. It's not because we have a higher standard than other people. Our access to Jesus is through mercy. Christ has been merciful to us.

Now, all of this is part of what we celebrate today when we celebrate pride, because pride is a reminder to us that the church often stands against welcome, that the church often tries to live on the basis of its own power and that the church, rather than extending mercy, tends to measure and judge and shame people whom God has created and loved. And for too many years, the LGBTQ community has been the recipient of that rejection, that extra, that ostracization, and that judgment. So Pride is a moment in which we finally discover, again, for the first time, who God has called us to be from the beginning in Christ, and that is a gift to the whole church. Pride is not just for some people, Pride is for everybody.

Now, if you're like me, when you think of the presence and blessing of so many people who represent this community in our lives, you begin to see an endless list of stories of people who walked alongside you, of people who lifted you up, of people who loved you, of people who had your back, and I want you to go home and think and pray about those people. But today, to help you maybe see something that is key, I want to share three pieces of art. Because it's not just that we are welcoming that makes us different. It's not just that we are inclusive that makes us different. When we celebrate Pride, we say that there is something in the experience, the lived experience of the LGBTQ community that can teach us something about what it means to be human ourselves and to be Christians ourselves. It's not just that people are welcome, it's that they have a word from God to bear and give to us a kind of revelation that is God speaking through their lives.

And the first piece of art I want to do, the first two, actually, are from a poet that I've become a huge fan of, Jay Hulme. Jay is from England. Jay is a trans man and he was converted to Christianity in 2019. From not having any kind of religious background, he suddenly became a full on Christian. And he didn't just become a full on Christian, like, I assent to Christianity. He became a Christian who takes and holds onto his scriptures with everything in his might. The first poem that Jay has written that I think is so amazing is called Jesus at the Gay Bar.

He's here in the midst of it -  
right at the center of the dance floor,

robes hitched up to His knees  
to make it easy to spin.

At some point in the evening  
a boy will touch the hem of His robe  
and beg to be healed, beg to be  
anything other than this;

and He will reach His arms out,  
sweat-damp, and weary from the dance.  
He'll cup this boy's face in His hand  
and say,

*my beautiful child  
there is nothing in this heart of yours  
that ever needs to be healed.*

Now, in a blog that Jay writes, he speaks about the connection between that encounter with Jesus in the gay bar and the moment in which the boy touches the hem of Jesus, with readings like we find in Matthew today. And he says that he's trying to create a play on that idea of healing because from his experience, the healing that he experienced in Christianity wasn't the fact that he could somehow pray away his identity, but he had to see his identity as a gift.

And the minute he realized that his identity was a gift, he suddenly had a healed relationship with Jesus. Healing is not just about the body, but it's also about the relationship we have with God. And that healing is powerful for me to read. And it also is one of those things in which an experience of a trans man writing a poem set in a gay bar, tells us a little bit about what it means to be fully human.

Because all of us have struggled, at least to my ears, with feeling unworthy, with feeling shame, with feeling like we are outsiders, with feeling that we are not fit in, and that is part of the toxic culture that too often has been in church. Too often in church, we've created these little hierarchies and value statements, and we've excluded people through an elaborate technology of shame that Jesus has come to abolish that shame in your life.

Jesus is holding your hands and looking at you deep in the eyes and saying, my beloved child, there is nothing in this heart of yours that ever needs to be changed. And that is the gospel that has delivered us from within the particularity of the gay experience. That is the triumph of every member of this community who has experienced rejection and judgment and shame, and it's an experience that helps us see ourselves and see God differently.

The second poem I want you to look at is another one by Hulme. And as this is his incredible analogy that he draws between living as a trans man and having to

find his way with a body that doesn't fit his identity and the building of a cathedral in Europe. And unlike Christchurch Cranbrook, which was built in three years and everybody decided it was perfect and never needed a change, cathedrals in Europe were built over generations. And so often what would happen is, a new liturgical practice would come into place and would get used, and then people would just build transepts or build different parts of the nave.

They would widen doorways, they would create different spaces so that people could experience God differently. And so any cathedral you go to in Europe is always in the midst of becoming, even though it is ancient, it is always being made new. And so picking up on that, Hulme writes this poem called *This Body*.

This body is a cathedral holier than those made by human hands.

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This body is undergoing a personal reformation.

This body is enduring a modern iconoclasm.

This body is being remade in a new shade of beauty.

This body is altering its archways.

This body is reverting old changes.

This body is fixing the damage.

This body is filled with prayer.

This body holds relics of saints.

This body turns sunlight into statuary.

This body is built out of bondage.

This body is still a cathedral.

This body is still holy.

This body is filled with worship.

We sense these shattered bones.

Powerful words of transformation. And one of the things that this poem invites us to see from his experience as a trans man is that even though the relationship gets healed, there is still an ongoing work of transformation to be everything God has called him to be. And it means fixing the damage. And it means reverting to things that were there in the beginning and now have to be part of the present in order for the future to be possible. And it's also there as a kind of prayer, the relic of saints, the presence of holiness, the way in which God breathes life, even in broken bodies.

And there is, of course, in those last words, "We sense these shattered bones," a challenge to us to think about the cost that the trans community is bearing today when 17 states somehow believe that they are better able to make judgments about someone's body than the parents or doctors in place. And taking the decision to pursue an identity away from the hands of trusted people who are experts and placing it in the hands of incompetent politicians, that violence,

which is now legitimized through legislation, is also carried out with trans people often and everywhere.

And that is something that we have to think about as Christians because what's happening here is that there is an elaborate wedge argument that's being presented. If you can take hold of decisions that are made in a gray area and start to create and divide people, you can create a larger wedge that could divide the entire country. And why? Just for power. There's no concern behind that legislation. And we are called to sense that violence and to welcome those members of our community who are trans because they have just as much a right to be here as anybody else. And that goes with the grain of the faith and grace of Christianity.

And that enables us, again, not just to see one person's experience, not just to see one experience of a community that is constantly facing violence and exclusion, but that is, again, an invitation for us to be human, to understand ourselves as undergoing transformation. How many of us who are over 30 don't relate in some way to another, to the bodies that we have? They undergo changes whether we like them or not. We all fight this fight to try to hold our marbles together and keep our buttons buttoned. And what's interesting about that process of identity is it sees it as someplace where God is, that amidst the changes of our individual bodies these things are places where we can discover God. They are places in which there are the relics of saints, in which there is the presence of prayer. These bodies, which often betray us, are incredible places in which a new shade of beauty emerges, whether we have eyes to see it or not.

This brings me to the last piece of art, which is Doug Blanchard's *The Last Supper*. Blanchard has started to paint this whole kind of canon of scripture around the gay experience and the mission of Jesus Christ. And we might wonder about the choices he made, particularly here. Blanchard is located in New York City and frankly, when I see this, I see a picture of the community that I knew first when I was a priest in New York City. And when I see in the face of the Jesus figure who is standing at that moment with the bread and the wine, I see in those eyes, Bruce Hall, who was one of the first people that I met as a priest who was outwardly gay. And he died of AIDS too soon in the late '90s. He was an incredible author. He wrote one of the first memoir histories of Chinatown in New York. And so when I look into these eyes, I see Bruce's eyes.

But of course this painting is about much more than a pandemic. It's about a struggle for justice and recognition, and this Jesus is being put to death because He is trying to go with the grain of grace. To live according to welcome, to live according to power, to live according to the kind of love and mercy that comes from God. This image is again, a kind of image, not only for the gay experience, but also for the experience of all that it means to be human, because everybody

will know what that last supper looks like. Even when we aren't in church, all of us have experienced those moments of communion, those last words spoken, the prayers you whisper in someone's ear when they're dying, in which you say thank you. All of us know what is at stake when we are living fully for Christ. And so we are on Pride Sunday.

I want to close today with some words that I saw in a movie that a friend of mine is finalizing. It's set in Detroit and it's an incredible piece. In the early parts of the movie, a visitor to Detroit finds his way through all of the brokenness of the city and meets a pastor. And he says to the pastor, I find it difficult here. I find it dark. And the pastor says, you know what? It is dark. Detroit is an illumination training school. They cannot get the light from the buildings. We have to be the light ourselves. The people have to be the light bearers.

Bear the light that God has given you. Be the light to someone who is struggling to know that they are loved by God. And let light shine on this day, on this church in all that we do.

Amen.