



## 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've mentioned before, in the midst of doing a graduate degree. And over the course of the first semester, we had a lot of quantitative work. We had microeconomics probabilities and statistics. We had finance, we had accounting and we had marketing. And this semester is known in the group as the right-brain semester. So we have strategy and leadership and supply chain, which is a little bit quantitative. And I breathed a sigh of relief when I went into this semester. I felt like I was in my wheelhouse.

And one lecture that I attended has really stuck in my mind. It was by Professor Jeffrey Sanchez Burke. He is a behavioral scientist and his work is on how organizations and people change, and what that means for our work. And he introduced his lecture by using an analogy from physics. He said that the past two years have created two kinds of deformation in people. There's been plastic deformation where things are pulled out of shape and stay distorted and pulled out of shape, a little bit like Play-Doh. And that plastic deformation is found in all the ways we are continuing to experience anxiety, unrest, incivility, brutality, violence, and all the ways we're experiencing anger and conflict on our streets, in our airports, on our airplanes, all those ways in which we feel out of sorts and somehow isolated and estranged from each other.

And the second deformation he sees is elastic deformation. An elastic deformation in physics is those moments in which something is pulled and then returns back to the shape it had. So elastic deformation is like a spring or like a rubber band. You can pull them and then when you let go, things return more or less to where they were. And this elastic deformation, he argues, can be seen in those moments where people have what he writes are immensely human interactions. When we actually see behind the facade of somebody and recognize the struggle that their life is. Or when we listen to someone's story and ask a follow up question and meet the complex stories that compose each of us. In these immensely human interactions, we experience a kind of elastic deformation. We return, he argued, to a more human shape.

And the task we have in our lives, and he's speaking from the perspective of work, but he also means everywhere. The task we have in our lives is actually to acknowledge the fact that there has been this plastic deformation that we have been pulled out of shape. And to heighten and increase that amount of elastic

deformation in our lives, to listen to one another again, to reach out to one another again, to invite a deeper connection again, to see those complex stories that each of us tell and that are part of each of our lives.

After the lecture, I actually took some time to pray. And as I was praying, this phrase came into my mind and I wrote it down in my notes. I wrote down, we are a rubber band church. And the way my prayer life is, sometimes these words come to me and I'm like, what does that mean? And I began to think about it. And what I realized is that what makes me most grateful about Christ Church Cranbrook, particularly over the past few years, is that we have created the conditions for elastic deformation by listening to one another, by working together, and living together, and loving each other, and forgiving one another. By all the things that we have done together, we have increased our elasticity, our ability to return to a more human shape, and that to me has been the greatest gift of 2022. This church has been an elastic church, a church that's made of many people who, in their own work that they have been doing, have been trying to find a more human shape by engaging in immensely human interactions and somehow finding themselves together. And that's why God is doing something special among us.

And the art I have for you today is on the front cover and it's called Rubber Band Ball by Jerry Cave. It's a beautiful illustration and I invite you to take a moment to look at it. I know that there are more awe inspiring images of Christ Church Cranbrook than a ball made of rubber bands - something that you might have done when you were eight or nine years old. But hang with me for a moment and look at this image because what's special about Christ Church Cranbrook isn't just that we are full of rubber bands that are kind of scattered in a drawer, but that these bands have come together and made something super resilient and elastic.

Have you ever made one of these rubber band balls? I remember doing it, and it takes a little bit of time. You pick them up and you get more rubber bands and the ball gets bigger and bigger, and you think it's never going to actually achieve a spherical shape. And then suddenly it starts to become this beautiful sphere, and then you throw it against the wall and you're lucky if you don't break a window because it comes back so fast. It's so elastic.

And this is a metaphor for you and me today, I believe. That what we bring individually to the church is important. We have to try to cultivate the spiritual practices that are going to allow us to have these immensely human interactions and come together. But as much as everything depends on one, it also depends on the others. Each rubber band in this rubber band ball contributes to that ball's elasticity, and yet the whole is greater than the part, and each rubber band needs the other rubber bands to become what can be said as perfectly elastic.

Now all of our readings today speak about that elasticity in one way or another, and I'm going to spend some time going quickly through all of our readings to provide that interpretation for you today, because that interpretation is key for us to hold onto so that we know exactly why and what we are doing. We see an image of that immensely human interaction in God's command to the people of God through the prophet Micah, particularly the last bit where we hear "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

And this is an incredible counsel that people have usually used as a way of denouncing when there is hubris, denouncing where there is rigidity, denouncing where there has been injustice. But as much as this passage is an opportunity to vent or maybe even to prophetically speak, it's also an invitation for us to build. And one of the things that we've done over the past year is we have majored in those things that Micah speaks of. We have worked harder to advance the justice of God and to build that justice of God by founding an interfaith dental program with our friends, the Muslim Unity Center that has reached over 50 people so far, and provided these wonderful people with the help they need so they can make a new start as Americans. We have served 1,800 meals to the homeless. We have made 300 pastoral visits. In all of these ways and more, we have done the work of building justice, of loving mercy, and of being humble.

And all of this is a counsel to being human. Note that in the passage it says, "He has told you, O mortal," this is not an impossible possibility. This is Micah telling the people of God what they need to do to be fully human. It's a recipe for humanity. It's a recipe for elasticity, and it's founded in God's own self because standing behind these immensely human interactions is the immense love of God who comes into our midst and empowers and fills us with God's spirit so that we would be God's love in the world, so that the God who became human could help us become human in Christ.

This brings me to our reading today from 1 Corinthians. First Corinthians is one of my favorite letters because Paul is speaking to us. He's speaking to congregations and communities that have divisions over money, sex, and power. And I won't go deeper into that, but I don't need to, do I? And Paul is speaking to people who have created these striations in the people of God and have created some people who are full of the spirit, so they say. And Paul tells them no, that the wisdom and power of Christ is found in the Cross of Christ who died for all that all might be transformed and receive that new creation, that new humanity that we have through Jesus Christ.

Even our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the beatitudes, that is also a counsel in how to be human again. Christian writers and saints and theologians

have, of course, argued over the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount since it was given. There are some who see in it an elaborate discourse that is meant to slowly break our hearts because we know that we have not lived as meekly as we should. We know that when it speaks about poverty, many of us have more than enough. We know that when it says pure in heart, that's someone else in the room, not us. And there are others who see in the Sermon on the Mount, a kind of sketch through a new law that Jesus is giving of Himself, that if we were to look at the Sermon on the Mount, we would actually see the figure of Christ come into view.

Without denying and incorporating both of those things, I want to suggest to you that the proper way to read this text today is as an invitation to be fully human, because I can attest to you that you are never so fully alive as when you grieve. I can attest to you that you are never so fully full of abundance as when you admit your spiritual poverty. You are never so full of the purity of God when like a publican, you beat your breast and say, Lord, I am not worthy to be in your house. In all of these things, the beatitudes are an invitation to find the humanity that Christ gives us through giving us Himself.

This past year, we have been a community that has somehow found that elasticity of the human. God has shown us in the only way that God knows how, which is through the Spirit and through the Son, that we have been given this incredible gift of God's self and the opportunity to find a new humanity for ourselves, to become the people we were created to be.

The challenge for each of us today is to lean into that elasticity. We cannot pretend that we have not been pulled out of shape and deformed in a plastic way by this world in which there is war and rumors of war, in which there is instability and anxiety and challenges all around us, in which we are trying to somehow figure our way, to work our way through things that are difficult and hard to talk about. But we can increase that elasticity.

Where can you lean in to what we do with our studies or what we do with our programming, or what we're doing with our worship, or what we're doing with our service, or what we're doing with our different groups that meet? Where can you lean in so that you can find that elasticity anew? Because cultivating it is the way you retain and find the humanity that this world needs so much, in which Christ has given Himself so that we might find and be.

Amen.