



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.

In Requiem for a Nun, an essay that William Faulkner wrote many years ago, he wrote that the past is not dead. It's not even the past. The same, I think, can be said about grief. Grief never dies totally when it is carried in us. It's not even part of the past, but grief is the pain of the past in our present. And one of the challenges that we have to face when we face grief is to befriend that pain so that that past that is present can be something that leads us to God.

And this is holy work. This is transformative work. It doesn't matter whether you are religious with a capital R or a small r. Whether you're religious or spiritual, grief is a time of transformation. It's not that you experience something difficult. It's that you, yourself, goes missing when you're grieving. You lose a sense of your identity. You come undone. You fall to pieces and you have to build yourself back up again, often from revisiting that very past, which is the source of your pain.

And this transformative part of grief is why it is so crucial for us to do it, and is why it is such a holy work to do. And in the West, we've had a tendency to reduce the practice of grief to a psychological journey. But the reason why we have a liturgy like today is to remind us that grief is something that we will revisit again and again and again, and it'll be something that we have to live through again and again and again until our own time here is done and we are with God.

I was reminded of all of this earlier this fall when in part of my course at Ross Business School, I was taking a class on negotiations. And the professor there, Sue Ashford, assigned us a test, a kind of first draft of our work. And she told us to learn about negotiations, we have to talk about the first time in our lives we experienced conflict and how was it dealt with. And then to talk a little bit about the first time we saw someone negotiate.

And I dreaded this assignment because it meant opening up parts of my life that I had carefully put to bed time and time again. It meant going back and remembering the incredible difficulty and trauma of my childhood. My father and mother were good together, but they were not always good for each other. My father was a recovering alcoholic, who struggled with anger and infidelity, and my mother was abused by her first husband and struggled mightily to somehow hold her family together.

She dropped out of Columbia Law School, where she was enrolled at the same time as Ruth Bader Ginsburg, to go and take over the family finances in a family business owned by her parents. She gave up that opportunity and went back to a small broken-down town that was experiencing its own post-industrial depression, to a man that was not faithful to her and not kind to her, to a family that was not all that happy in a small split level in the small suburbs of that small, depressing town.

And that was my life. My life was living through an incredible amount of anger and sadness, and it's something that I grieve deeply. And the first conflict that I remembered was a moment in which my brother discovered a woman's hairbrush in the backseat of my father's car, and tried to confront him. I had gone down into the basement and I was teaching myself to tie my shoes. I realize in retrospect that I wasn't just teaching myself to tie my shoes, I was hiding. And my father beat my brother and my brother retreated to his room. I went later on and watched him muttering to himself and rocking on his bed. We all were just waiting to leave.

That is something I've grieved for my entire life. There are moments in which I transcend it. There are moments in which it doesn't bother me. There are times in which I'm not so triggered. But when I think about that time, it becomes difficult. I think about my brother, who was both my mentor and my tormentor. He was pressed into being a parent because no one else was able to do so. My mother would work long hours and come home and collapse into bed. I learned how to cook because she would bark out instructions before she could get up and do what she needed to do.

Now all of that grief is something that still is part of me. It's a pain from the past that is part of my present. And the good news of that difficulty is every time I go back into that grief, every time I go back into that pain, I remember it differently. It doesn't have the same claim on me that it used to. It doesn't actually have the same power over me that it used to, that it seems that every time I actually tell that story becomes a moment of survival and transformation and change. Of course, I had to admit that it happened and that early on in my life seemed like disloyalty, but now I see it as key to my transformation as a human being.

And this fall, when I was thinking about that first conflict, I suddenly found myself thinking about the first negotiations that I ever saw. It was from my mother, who I have spent decades being angry at because she didn't leave my father. I realized that my mother was betting on the future and negotiating a space where my brother and I could have a roof over our heads and continue in our lives. It was my mother who taught me how to negotiate. The first few moments of my life when I would see my mother at work was when I would see her on the phone with auditors and with bankers and with subcontractors. It was a construction

company and she was masterful. She balanced and multitasked and played one against the other.

It was my mother who took me shopping. In those days before Marshalls, before TJ Maxx, when you wanted a deal, we got into the car and we drove to the Bronx. We went to a certain section, and my mother would negotiate with the merchants to get clothing that was nice for a cheaper price. It was my mother who spent a couple of weeks buttering up the Olympic rowing coach when I was going through a pre-Olympic camp. She brought him blueberry pies and he was charmed by her. I realized only in that moment that my mother was really quite good looking, at least the rowing coach thought so. At one point he said, you know, your father must be so patient with all the bees that must be just buzzing around the flower of your mother. And that wasn't creepy at all.

My mother taught me to negotiate. And I remember that differently and I become grateful and I see now what she was trying to do. Not perfect. Maybe could have chosen things differently. Maybe could have processed things differently. But the nature of life and grief is such that we are transformed by remembering things differently. It doesn't mean that they happen differently. It doesn't mean that we tell the story in a different way. But it means it has another chapter, you see. And that pain from the past and the present begins to recede.

Now all of this is to go with the grain of our readings from today, all of which see grief as a kind of beautifying process. Which of course goes with the grain of the incredible music we have today from Fauré. And the line that sticks out to me isn't the incredibly beautiful promise of Jesus that says, "The dead will hear the voice of the son of God and those who hear it will live." It's not the moment in which Paul says that we will all be changed in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. It is actually from our reading from wisdom that those who are visited, which by that, the words mean those who are redeemed, who are judged and redeemed by God, they will run like sparks through the stubble.

The thing about grief, the power of grief is it can be beautifying. It can make your life beautiful. It can help you see things differently, and you can even be seen as incredibly able to reach out to others through compassion and gentleness and concern you never imagined you could muster. It can help you be a better father or partner yourself because that grief has been beautifying.

Elizabeth Kübler Ross, who is famous as a psychologist, for telling us about the five stages of grief: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance. She wrote this in that masterful book that has influenced so many people. She wrote, "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern.

Beautiful people do not just happen. And grief," she says, "is one of the ways in which people can find a deeper beauty, a beauty that lasts and a beauty that brings us closer to God."

What is your grief? What are you grieving today? I don't think this is a leap for me to suspect that you all are grieving, because the one thing that I can guarantee you in life is not that you will be lucky in love, but that you will grieve. You will grieve powerfully in your life, and you will come undone, and you will feel lost. What is your grief and how might God take you on a journey tonight, following the frame of this liturgy, inspired by the spirit that flows through the words and the music? How will God take you on that beautifying journey in which you can remember differently and forgive and transcend and be changed and connect?

That is the task before us today. And I offer you a painting, or a soft sculpture of a sort, as a way to think about that from Thornton Dial. That's on your bulletin and it's also here for those of you following. *History Refused to Die*. It's a painting, a sculpture, and a gift of the soul's deep foundation. I found this to be one of the most powerful pieces about grief because in it, Dial takes all of this detritus, all of these things which have been cast away, all of these objet trouvés, the objects that are found, and he composes something powerful about himself.

History Refused to Die. This is another way of saying that the past is never dead. It's not even the past. And the pain is evident in everything that has been put together, but so is the beauty. Do you have an image in your mind or a memory in your mind that goes with the grain of this painting? And today I offer another poem to help maybe you think about your own relationships with those who are intimate to you and part of you, those who you grieve and those who you must forgive and love. It's by Lucille Clifton and it's called *Oh Antic God*. And it's about the author's mother who has died.

oh antic God
return to me
my mother in her thirties
leaned across the front porch
the huge pillow of her breasts
pressing against the rail
summoning me in for bed.

I am almost the dead woman's age times two.

I can barely recall her song
the scent of her hands
though her wild hair scratches my dreams

at night.
return to me, oh Lord of then
and now, my mother's calling,
her young voice humming my name.

What work is God inviting you in tonight? How can you befriend your grieving? I promise you, with all that is in me, it is a path to transformation. It goes beyond psychology. It prepares us for life eternal. It puts us on the road to Heaven, paved by the mercy of our Savior.

Amen.