



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Let anyone with the ears listen. 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. Please be seated.

I don't know if a lot of you know this, but I have a tattoo. It's on my arm right here. And I didn't get this tattoo because I was drunk, or 18 years old, or traveling the world. It happened as a part of my ministry here at Christ Church Cranbrook. I was giving a sermon, and I got really excited about this message I was trying to deliver, and it's from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 12 and 13.

And what I talked about in the sermon was that in chapter 12, Paul talks about being members of the same body, that we are all connected to each other in one body. And that was good and powerful and it's something to keep in mind, but Paul only sees that as stage one in the Christian life, because right after he talks about that life in the body, he says to his audience, "And still I will show you a more excellent way." And then in chapter 13, he talks about love. And he says that love bears all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love does not end. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. So faith, hope, and love. And these abide, but the greatest of these is love.

And that transition point is sometimes something that we miss. And it's 1st Corinthians 12:31. "Still, I will show you a more excellent way." And oftentimes, God invites communities to be transformed by love, to move beyond the familiar and into the unfamiliar. to move beyond simply that life that we have together and learn about that life for others. And so I got down off the pulpit that day and one of the coolest people in the parish I know, who's bald and bearded and wears skinny jeans, he came up to me and he said, dude, I'm going to get that tattooed on me. And I said, okay, I'll do it too.

And so we went down to Ferndale, a nine-mile road, to Signature Tattoo, and we met with Zach, and we looked at this. And then he sent me a script that he was working with, and he wanted it to be in Latin, and so I wanted to make sure it was the right Latin, because there's nothing more embarrassing than having the wrong Latin on your body. So I went to the Vulgate and decided, with all of its little grammatical flaws, the Vulgate was, that's the text we had and so I carefully brought it out. So it says *adhuc excellentiorem viam*, "Still a more excellent way."

And when Claire heard about this whole caper, she said, well, I want to do that too. And I don't know if any of you know this, but there's nothing better than going on a bro thing with your date. And so I said, sure, let's go together. We'll do it together. And so we all went down to Signature Tattoo and Mike got it tattooed around his wrist. And knowing a little bit about anatomy, I knew I didn't want to do that because that's very painful. So I did it right here. I could hardly feel it. And then Claire had it on her arm right there. And so we were kind of like a matched set. It was really exciting.

But what I didn't expect is that Claire would actually like getting tattooed. And so now Claire has three tattoos. And this is good for me because I think tattoos on a woman are very attractive. And so, it's nice for Claire to play along a little bit in this little game. And so, she has three tattoos and one of them goes with this theme. And it's on your bulletin. And if you look at it, you can see it. And it's another line in Latin. And it's what I want to talk about today because I think it is so profound.

And that is *simul iustus et peccator*. And this line comes from a letter that Martin Luther wrote to Philip Melanchthon when they were trying to debate the role of righteousness in the Christian life. Some people believe that there was this moment of repentance and then the Christian life with this was this steady progression into holiness. You got better and better every day. Smarter and prettier every day.

And Luther said to Melanchthon, no, that is not the gospel. The gospel is not about becoming better. The gospel is about learning that you are always a sinner and a saint at once. And so he wrote *simul*, which is the root of our word simultaneously, *simul iustus*, righteousness, *et peccator*, which is Latin for sinner. We are always, at the same time, both saint and sinner.

And this is an incredibly important thing for you to know because the promise of Christianity is not a promise of improvement, but it's a promise of being beloved in Christ. And God loves all of you. God loves the parts of you that you want to present as your best self. And that you hope will somehow be a blessing to others. But God also loves the parts of you that you tend to hide from others. God loves the sinner that you are. And some of us know that part of the way of healing from all of the shame that we are often raised in when we are members of a church or any community, some of the healing that we have to do is to accept that God sees the whole person and God loves that whole person in Jesus Christ. This is the good news. This is the gospel.

Now, I begin with this story because I want to use it as a lens through which to read our reading from Matthew. Matthew has Jesus speaking in parables and parables often have a kind of paradoxical message that they're trying to transmit to many people. And parables often hold up a mirror to reality that's a bit

distorted so that we can actually see what is the point of the whole gospel differently and from a new perspective and with new eyes.

And this is why at the end of the passage, when Jesus says, let anyone with ears listen, there's an acknowledgement in every parable that things are always a little more complex than even the explanation might give. And so, we have this parable that is set in such a way in which we are often tempted to see weeds and wheat and to see in that equation, that binary, people who are bad and people who are good. And it's tempting for us to draw those conclusions every day. This is a normal thing that we tend to do. We tend to separate people into weeds and wheat.

And the whole point of the parable is that it's usually outside of our knowledge. The New Testament scholars who have written on this have argued, I think convincingly, that the weed that is being described here is the darnel. And that weed looks almost identical to the wheat that is grown in that time and place. And so as they are growing up, there's no way to differentiate them, even though the darnel is poison. It's only after they grow that you can actually make a distinction. So, when Jesus uses this concept of weeds and wheat, He's talking about something that they all knew instinctively. And yet, the point of the gospel passage is not so much that any of us could have any hope that we could separate the weeds from wheat, but rather that there was a larger space of time in which God would somehow figure out who was what. And this is Jesus's way of putting in the category of time, the mercy of God.

Now, I want to suggest to you that what goes with the grain of this passage is the fact that in reality, you and I are never just wheat. And you and I are never just weeds. The purpose of the parable is to convey to us the sense that we don't know from the externals what is going on in someone's heart. And what's more, the point of this parable is that you and I are all mixed together. This is a parable about the world, Jesus says, but it's also a parable about us. And so therefore, it is important for us not to be deceived by the superficial reading of this parable. You are both weed and wheat, and God loves you. You are simultaneously justified and a sinner. You are simultaneously a saint and a sinner and you are beloved by God.

This is what's operative in our reading today from Romans. Paul is speaking about the fact that we have been given not the spirit of slavery so that we would be somehow exercised as these kind of perfect beings who follow God all the time, but we have been given the spirit of adoption so that we can cry out to God who has loved us and fills us with God's Spirit, Abba, Father. That is the good news of the Gospel.

And time figures in our reading today from Romans as well. It's not just the end times that we read about in Matthew, but that world to come is already being

birthed in the world we live in. Paul uses that incredible image of labor because he's trying to get people to see that there is a moment in which all of the turmoil around us is merely the birth pangs of a new beginning.

And just as in labor, the baby is already there but not yet arrived or delivered, so in our time and place God's end, God's fulfillment, God's incredible work of redemption is already present in us now, and already present in our world now. You and I are called then to live into the fullness of that gospel and to say with all of our might, Abba, Father, because we have been claimed by Christ, all of us. Those parts of us that we think measure up to being a saint, and those parts of us that we hide from God because we are afraid of our own sins, God sees it all. God loves us all. God died for us all. God has come as we are. And God has come to transform everything about us and make everything about us new through faith, hope and love.

The last thing I want you to see before I tell you one more story, which I think is cool, is in our reading today from Genesis, there is this incredible vision of Jacob, who's in the midst of running away because he is engaged in deceit. He's stolen a birthright. He's running away because his brother Esau, who is bigger and stronger, is going to kill him. This is not a saint. And yet, on his way at Bethel, he has a vision of an incredible ladder of angels, ascending and descending to the throne of God. And that is an image of God's promise to Jacob. Even in the midst of his flight, that God loves him as he is, a little deceitful, a little problematic, needing to be married to more than one woman, all of these things. None of us can relate to this person, can we? And yet, God has chosen him to have a vision of God's presence, God's ladder, God's promise to be with him always.

And one of the things that the early church believed, with all of their might, was that Jesus was that ladder. And the Gospel of John, in the first chapter, on the 51st verse, you see this. Jesus says to Nathanael, "Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Jesus is saying in that moment that He is the ladder, and because he is the ladder, all of you, every part of you is loved.

A few years ago, in the early nineties, Claire and I were walking in a church in Amsterdam, and I looked down and I noticed this incredible stone. It looked like the only visible part of two circles that had overlapped just a bit, and it made this perfect Venn diagram, this perfect almond. And this was the time before the internet so I couldn't just like Google, what is this? I couldn't like take a picture and throw it up on Google Images. Explain this to me. I couldn't go to chat GPT. I had to kind of store it in my heart and wonder what the message was in that stone that was shaped like an almond.

And years passed and I then went for some spiritual direction. And I was sitting with a monk, and I explained this to him and he said, well, that, that is a mandorla, it's Italian for almond. And the thought is this, that all of existence and all of not only the cosmos above us, but even our own souls, is understood as that intersection between these two concentric circles that overlap. The part of ourselves that we don't like, the shadow side of ourselves, the sinful side of ourselves, the time bound part of ourselves, and then that side of ourselves that is beautiful. That side of ourselves that is our best self. That side of ourselves that is holy and good and right relationship with God.

And the mystery of Christianity is found in that overlap between the two. If you deny that part of yourself which flees from God, you get lost. And if you try to deny that part of yourself that desires relationship with God and loves God with all your heart, soul, and mind, you get lost. The greatest discoveries about yourself, the greatest moments about yourself are found in that paradoxical relationship. Because it was in that moment of paradox and tension and pain that you discovered in yourself that you were wholly loved by God.

And the mandorla was in that floor of that cathedral so that when somebody walked in and felt downcast, and felt oppressed, and felt like they didn't have a friend in the world, when they felt alone and lost, they would look down and they would see that reminder and be able to lift their eyes up and to see the light that came through the cathedral.

We have a mandorla here, you know. It's right in front of us at Christ Church Cranbrook. It's that beautiful almond that's right there at the top of that wooden reredos, and through it is coming Jesus. He is the person who has entered time and space to reconcile us, to love us, and to lead us through that opening so that we find our way to God.

May you know yourself, *simul iustus et peccator*. May you know yourself as beloved of God. And may the mystery of that paradox of grace help you to bear up, help you to reach out, help you to love, help you to be transformed, and help you to begin anew every day through Jesus.

Amen.