



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

The gospel you just heard is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, which Father Bill suggested last week could be read as a kind of roadmap, a kind of invitation for us all to be more human. And that is a theme that I want to continue this morning because we are indeed at our most human, our most authentic, our most real not when we're prideful, but when we're humble. Not when we're resentful, but when we can show mercy. Not when we seek retribution against those who have wronged us, but when we choose to be peacemakers.

For me, Jesus has always been an icon of human possibility. One who shows us what's possible in a human life, what's possible when we trust God, what's possible when we stop giving in to fear, what's possible when we draw out the image of God that lies within each of us and allows it to shine. I was attracted to the way of Jesus, not because of the miracle stories, not because I was ever worried that God would punish me if I didn't. But because He showed me a new path for my life, one that, for the first time, made me feel truly alive.

Like anyone who's ever found themselves in an outgroup, before stumbling into the Episcopal church, I had spent way too many years feeling less than. Way too many years feeling second class, feeling ashamed for who I was, feeling as if I had to do twice as well, I had to work twice as hard to be accepted. And yet knowing deep down that no matter how hard I tried, no matter how good I was, I would still be seen in the eyes of most as a label. As a label first: the gay attorney, the gay son, whatever it was - a label. Rather than seen for the fullness of who I was.

But Jesus showed me a love that changed that. He showed me a love that I probably had never truly known. An unguarded love. An unconditional love. A no-exceptions-made kind of love. A no-one-left-behind kind of love. And it gave me the strength and the courage that I needed to see within me the image of God that had been there all along, that no one could ever take away. It's been said that God became human so that we might become like God. So that we might realize that God-given capacity within each of us for compassion and empathy, for understanding and healing, for forgiveness and reconciliation.

That's what we mean when we say that we are all made in the image and the likeness of God. We all have that capacity within us. It's a birthright. And I know some of you probably were raised on, you know, original sin. I don't know. This

sounds like an original blessing to me. Blessed to be a blessing, blessed to be salt and light in the world. That is both our purpose and it's our hope. And it's a hope that I have been clinging to this week. As our nation, thanks to police body cameras, has been given, once again, a front row seat to a very different capacity. And it was horrifying and it was made more so by the knowledge that this was just one more in a long history, most of which go unrecorded, unreported, unprosecuted, unremembered.

And as shocking and heartbreaking as it was, as I watched, I found myself just as outraged by those who stood around, seeming to do nothing as Tyre Nichols was slumped on the ground, dying. Officers could be seen milling around, joking with one another, while EMTs, firefighters, sheriff deputies hovered somewhere in the background, failing to give the most basic of aid. If Jesus came to show us our capacity to be more human, that video was a reminder to us all of our other capacity to dehumanize one another.

A former EMT and police officer who is now with Homeland Security said it this way. From what he saw, this wasn't just a problem with that police department only. This wasn't just a problem with that special unit alone. From what he saw, from his expertise, knowing the standard of care, knowing what paramedics are trained to do, knowing what oxygen could have been given, knowing that a lieutenant fire marsh was sitting in her truck and could not even be bothered to be getting out, what struck him is how deep and widespread the disregard for human life somehow must have become in that community. When someone's child could be left on the cold, hard pavement, handcuffed and bleeding, and no sense of urgency by anyone, as if this had all become somehow business as usual.

This kind of widespread disregard for human life would not be a surprise to those who have been tracking the rise of dehumanization in our country, whether it's in our politics, in our social media, in the workplace, in our schools. While Jesus shows us how to be more human, we seem to be getting better and better and more bold at seeing each other as less so. Psychologists describe dehumanization as a process of demonizing the other, particularly those in an outgroup of some kind, by seeing them as less than human and therefore not worthy of being treated humanely.

Contrary to what we see on Twitter, most of us are not psychopaths. We are social creatures. And so we come hardwired to empathize with our fellow human beings, and we get uncomfortable when we see someone suffering. Dehumanization relaxes our instinctive aversion to violence and suffering. It tricks us into accepting behaviors that we would normally never tolerate, which in turn leads to increased violence, abuse, and a tolerance for cruelty.

And while history tells us that dehumanization can end in mass genocide, researchers like Brene Brown tell us it begins with language. Politicians calling people monsters or animals. Celebrities tweeting that the president is a pig or a child of an ape. Public cries to hunt people down, to drive those vermin out. Using infestation language to refer to people. They are a plague on our communities. They come in like cockroaches. And it's contagious. When one side uses that kind of language, there's a pressure to respond in kind, to even up the ante. And with the rise of social media, it just becomes magnified and multiplied.

A recent study two years ago found that 85% of Democrats and Republicans finally agree on something: that the members of the other party are less evolved, less human than they are. And it should not surprise us now that 25% or so of both parties would now support violence when they lose. And I will be the first to admit that at my most exasperated, in my most frustrated moments, I too have fallen into the trap of using dehumanizing language and thought. It's easy to do because writing off those who are harming you, who are harming others, who you don't agree with is so much easier. If we just convince ourselves that they are less than, that they are monsters, that they're off the grid, they're off the charts, then we don't have to do the hard work of trying to understand, of trying to listen, of trying to see the humanity within their eyes. Not to correct, not to change. Just to maybe hear where they're coming from. To make some kind of human connection.

And that's going to mean putting down my perspective, putting down my arguments long enough to enter into someone else's. Not to gather ammunition from my inevitable rebuttal, but to truly disarm, to truly disarm myself long enough so that I can catch a glimpse of the humanity within them that I had lost sight of.

As Dr. King said, returning hate for hate only multiplies hate. Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate. Violence multiplies violence. And it becomes a descending spiral of destruction. If we are to be salt and light, we cannot contribute to that spiral anymore. We cannot contribute to its escalation. We must be the first to disarm, if we must. That's what Jesus means when He says, love your enemies. It doesn't mean we have to like them. It doesn't mean we have to agree with them. It certainly doesn't mean we have to vote for them, but it does mean that we can no longer deny them their humanity. It means we can't give up on them. We can't give up on who they are because God doesn't give up on them or us.

Being salt and light in the world means doing whatever you need to do to see their humanity. Anything you need to do to reach and to touch the image of God

within, even as they seek to deny ours. And I wonder, I wonder if this is why Tyre Nichols cried out for his mama that night. I wonder if that was his way of trying to reach someone that night, anyone that night, so that they might stop long enough to see him as his mother did. As a frightened, helpless child in need of love, in need of compassion, just like the rest of us.

Jesus sees us for who we are and invites us to become more fully human by seeing the humanity of others, a humanity that is already there. Remember salt doesn't add flavor. It draws out the natural flavor within Light doesn't add anything to what's already there. It casts out the darkness so we can finally see what's been there all along. We must be like salt and light and never give up drawing out that image of God, casting light on that image of God for all to see, including ourselves,

When we lose our saltiness when we stand by and when we stay silent. We lose our saltiness when we allow others to be debased in our midst. Whether it's bullying or dehumanizing speech on the playground, in the workplace, in our neighborhoods, in our politics, when we let it go by, when we avoid making waves, when we go along to get along, we lose our saltiness and we are no longer of any use to the cause of love. And that is a cause that we cannot abandon because with love, all things, all things are possible.

Maybe if someone had stood up for those officers when they needed it growing up. Maybe if someone had shown them the compassion they needed when it mattered most. Maybe if someone had stood between them and their bullies. Maybe if someone had been light and salt in their life, maybe they too could have taken a different path with theirs. Maybe. And maybe God isn't done with them yet. Maybe God isn't done with Tyre Nichols yet. Maybe this won't be just one more tragedy in our newsfeed.

Maybe for some of us, maybe for some of us, this will be the moment that we change forever how we try to think and how we try to talk about others. Maybe for some of us, this will be the start of a new path that will help move this world a little closer to the day we stop hiding from our own kin. A little closer to the day when the cries for help are finally heard. A little closer to the day we finally come together and our light, our light together breaks forth like the dawn and God's glory is seen in all children. All children.

Amen.