



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Sideways_ - The Third Sunday of Lent- 3_20_2022

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I feel like I have to start this sermon with a joke because I read the sermon and it was like way too intense. We live in intense times. I was talking to a friend and she put it this way. She's like we just came out of hiding for two years because of pandemic only to be smacked in the face with the threat of a world war. So I think we need some levity before we get into it. So I heard this joke this week and it made me laugh, so I'm going to tell it to you. We were talking about love. Finding it in all kinds of places, no matter who you are. And this joke surfaced.

A man and a woman are talking to each other in their assisted living facility. And the woman says to the man, I bet I can guess how old you are. And the man said, no, you can't. And she said, yes, I can. And he said, okay, go ahead and try. So she said, stand up. And he did. And she said, take off your shirt. And he did. She said turn around three times. And he did. And she said, put your shirt back on. He did. She said, sit down. And he did. And she said to him, you are 82 years old. And he said, how did you know? And she said, you told me yesterday.

I really appreciate people who can make us laugh in times like these, because we're surrounded by wars, rumors of wars, oil crises, collapsing economies, and Lord knows what other danger and toils and snares face us. And then there are the senseless, mind numbing, never-ending stories of death.

There was an article in the New York times that illustrated this far too effectively. It was written 11 days ago, March 9th. And the cover picture is a picture of a man from Kiev who was holding three photographs. One of his wife, one of his 18 year old son, and one of his nine-year-old daughter. He's a computer programmer. She was an accountant who was working in the company and she was receiving phone calls from all the employees, as they were trying to get emergency funds available for all the employees. And she was helping them so that they could escape and flee.

Now her husband was in another city at the time. And he was taking care of his aging ailing mother. And so they were on the phone and his wife said, I think we need to get out of here. And so she said, don't worry, I'll figure a way out. And the first time that they tried to escape, they walked out and there were tanks coming down their streets. So they went back in and hid in the apartment in the basement. The second time they decided to leave was with their church group.

And so they went with the group, they found out where to go, and they began to cross the bridge. And at that point, the mortar shells hit it and they were killed, all of them, with the shelling and the flying shrapnel.

And the man found out about his family's death through Twitter, because he saw the pictures of the bodies strewn on the bridge and he recognized the luggage. And with them was a 26-year-old man who had already safely evacuated his own family, but returned to go and help the other church members. And when he saw the mom running across the bridge with the kids, he went out to try to go help her. And he too was killed. And his pastor said of this 26-year-old, that this was the kind of person who was ready to help without any words being needed to be said. And he cried out, I do not know how God can forgive such crimes.

How do we make sense of such nonsense? And where is God in all of this? Is God going to find a way for retribution and punish those Russian soldiers who fired those mortar shells? Or the Russian army leaders who told them to do that, or even the leader of the Russians? How will this senseless, ridiculous death be repaid? And what is God going to do? And the disciples of old, they were too trying to understand what God is doing when they were sharing their own horrid news. It strikes me that every single generation has to deal with some sort of atrocity, some sort of terror and that which is horrific. And for them, the disciples share with Jesus that Pontius Pilate slaughtered some Galileans and then desecrated them by mingling their blood with sacrificial blood to offer to the gods.

And I mean, that idea is even horrific today. It's awful. And the question is, of course, why? Why do these fellow countrymen of theirs suffer such a fate? I mean, remember the disciples, they were Galilean. Jesus was Galilean. If it could happen to the Galileans over there, it could happen to them easily. Why was it that they were killed this way? And Jesus says to them, do you think that there's something wrong with them? Do you think that they did something wrong to deserve this? Do you think that they were worse sinners than everyone else? And He responds with that good news that we all need to hear, no, no, no. They didn't deserve this. What good news for us.

And if only He had just stopped there, that would've been really great. But then He goes on with this bone chilling response. Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Unless we repent, unless we change our ways, we're all going to perish too like that. I mean, is this an echo of what we hear in that strange passage from 1 Corinthians where Paul lists this litany of woes in the New Testament of what the Israelites had done as they were getting out into the wilderness, how they had acted poorly. God, wasn't pleased with them and struck them down before they got to the Promised Land. And then they practiced idolatry and sexual immorality. Did you read that number, 23,000 were

felled in one day. That makes headlines today. And those who complained, they were also done in. What is this saying to us? What is Jesus trying to tell us? Is Jesus saying straighten up or else, get your act together, or you're in big trouble?

I have two bits of theology and a parable that I'd like to present to you, that I'm hoping can make some sense out of this. So the first bit came this week when James Alison, who is our visiting theologian, he was giving one of his many wonderful talks. It was on Tuesday night and I was listening here and he just kind of said something that blew my mind. I'm still trying to manage to understand what it means. He said, we have God in the wrong place. We have God in the wrong place. How often do I see when these calamities and horrific events happen, how often do I see in my mind, God, up there on high, looking down at all of us, right? My expectation is God is going to fix it by moving us like we're some sort of a chess board. And so he'll move a pawn or a rook, or a bishop, and put them over here. And you know, I'm down here saying, hey, don't forget that king and queen on the other side, get rid of them. They're on the wrong side. And I just expect God to look down and move everything with His power.

And James Alison called this the top-down God; a God who makes pronouncements and judgments; a God who declares what is righteous and what is not; a God who says who is righteous and who is not; a God who can choose to intervene on a bridge in Ukraine, or let the mortars fly where they may and seek revenge at some other time against the Russians. But James said that in fact, when Jesus descended the earth, God claimed the rightful space of God's reign on earth. And he called that God not the top-down God, the sideways God. This God is actually not found above us, but between us. We keep looking for God in all the wrong places. We think God is above us when God is alongside us. God is not found now looking down at people, but God is found in between people. James said that God is in between us and the Holy Spirit is the in-between God teaching us about one another.

This means to me that when we look at God and say, God is making a decision of who lives and who dies, we're actually missing what God is doing. God is actually making connections between all of us creating this conduit between disparate groups, segregated groups, people who want to slaughter each other, these connections that God is making between us. They're just amazing. God is working so hard to bridge the gap between each one of us, tirelessly, effortlessly. God is actually in doing this, making us human because a person is only a person through other people, says the African proverb.

So I want you to understand this. Notice the space right now that exists between you and me. Right? There's this difference between you and me? I stop here. You're over there. And that space between us, that's God's residence. That's

where God does God's work. And in bridging the gap, in repairing the breach and creating sibling bonds that are unbreakable, God is working between us all the time. And now I want you to imagine every other human being in your life. And I want you to see God in those spaces as well, God working to make sure that you're both reaching out, that you're both trying again and again, that you're both connecting through the work of God.

And now I want you to increase it to everyone in this world, and God is working there too tirelessly all the time. And then I want you to realize that God is even working with those who are alive and those who are dead. And I think that's why Jesus Christ came down to this earth and lived and died and was resurrected so that nothing could stop us from having those connections with one another, all the creatures of God, because death can't take that away anymore. God is going to overcome even those bonds so that we can all be one.

So, what this means to me is that God cares about how we see each other, how we relate to each other, and how we continue to become part of God's beloved family. God is connecting us to those beloved Galileans who were slaughtered and whose blood was mingled with the sacrifices. God is connecting us to the soldiers who worked for Pilate, who slaughtered those Galileans. God is connecting us with Pilate. God is connecting us to that beautiful family who tried to cross the bridge. God is connecting us to that father who has nothing more left in his life. And God is connecting us to those Russian soldiers who shot at the bridge. And God is connecting us to those who told them to do that.

God is indiscriminate in His connecting creatures with one another. No one escapes God's holy embrace. We're all being connected to one another by a never fatiguing Holy Spirit, no matter what threatens to divide us. How are you treating those spaces that exist between you and the people in your life? Are they holy or are they hostile? This is the space where the spirit works. Can you repent and see it as it is and experience Christ between you? Or where you perish because you do not believe that God exists in the spaces between us?

The second bit of theology, it has something to do with that silly joke that I told you about assisted living. I've spent many, many, many, many, many years going in and out of assisted livings to see parishioners. And I've watched people deteriorate in those circumstance. And when I was younger and really stupid I used to think, well, what is the point of all this? Why are we doing this? Wouldn't it be more humane to remove people from their misery and not let them be just a shell of a human being? I mean, there's nothing that's happening. They're just breathing. There's no cognitive function. Is that a life? Is that worth living? But I learned something very, very important in studying moral medicine and medical ethics and theology.

I learned about something called alien righteousness. Now alien righteousness is this vision from Martin Luther. And he said that a human being is righteous not because of anything she's done, not because of anything she's accomplished. She's righteous because of Christ's righteousness and Christ is the only one who is truly righteous, and Christ has conferred that righteousness to humans. This is what grace means, right? You didn't earn it. You didn't deserve it. You didn't do anything to get it and you got it.

And here's the thing about alien righteousness. It doesn't belong to you, so it can't be taken away from you ever, because it was given to you. And each human being has been made righteous and has infinite worths because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. So alien righteousness protects people - all people. There is not a single one of us who does not possess this, including those who are in memory care, assisted living, on beds in ICUs. They can't do anything more than breathe and yet their worth cannot be questioned because of alien righteousness. All of us are meant to live.

Can you imagine repenting from the notion that some of us must die for certain reason? No one deserves to die. We are all dignified. The dignity belongs to Christ and he covers every human being with it, including the Galileans, the Roman soldiers, Pontius Pilate, the Ukrainians, the Russians, Vladimir Putin. Unless we repent from the understanding that someone deserves to die, we will all indeed perish just as Jesus warns us.

So, let me finish with a parable. That's the parable that Jesus shares, the parable of the fig tree. It is a parable of great hope. The painting that's on the front of your bulletin, drawing, it was done by Vincent van Gogh. And I want to thank Matt Peters, our liturgy coordinator. He was the one who found it. I was just really enamored with it when I saw it on our bulletin. You see that beautiful gardener and he's just working so hard. He's bent over, putting the manure down and caring for this tree. But that tree is so very dead.

Cocoa Seaward, who is an avid gardener, was talking to our women's spirituality group. And she was telling the story of a plant that she had, or a bush or something like that. Some green object, but it wasn't green. It actually hadn't borne any fruit or flowers for years, for years. I'm like, why don't you just throw that thing away? But she said, I garden with hope and this is what we all do with one another.

Even when everything seems lost, we garden with hope, with this sideways God who's working between us all the time. And with this vision of alien righteousness that everyone deserves to live, and no one deserves to be considered less than. We tend to dead trees with the hope that something will grow and maybe we give it a deadline, but all it takes is just a hint of green coming out of that dead brown branch, just a little sprout, just a tiny little shoot,

a leaf. And not one of us would ever give up on a tree that has a little growth because we know it will become beautiful.

Amen.