



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the summertime, back in the summer when the staff and clergy were still displaced because we were doing a campus renovation here and they were tearing up all of our offices. And so we had to move all of our stuff to Temple Beth El. And so for two years I was living like a nomad. I had half of my stuff at Temple Beth El, and then I had the other half in this one little drawer in the vesting room that I kept everything in there.

And while all this was happening in the summertime, during the summer, we had a staff meeting, a weekly staff meeting. Father Chris said, we should start talking about stewardship season, which is slated to begin today. And Father Chris happens to be amazing at stewardship. He actually goes and teaches other churches about how to do this. So he said, can we come up with a theme?

Now, I am the worst at coming up with catchy themes and titles of things. I chair this committee of Lutherans and Episcopalians that are working together to figure out how to do shared ministry in their congregation. So I titled this group, The Lutheran Episcopal Shared Governance Implementation Team. Righteous. But at this staff meeting, I was in an interesting mood because I had realized that morning that I had left my laptop at the church and I was at the temple. I had forgotten to take a bunch of worship implements from the temple to the church, and I had been searching for these prayer cards, which I had not laid eyes on for two years, and I didn't know which building they were in.

And so Father Bill said something during the stewardship season, we should lift up our new space. And I blurted out, "A space for grace!" and it stuck. And for me, of course, in the beginning when I said that, I was thinking about myself and how excited I was going to be when finally we were all together in one building and how filled with grace it would be. And indeed it is.

But as I began to ponder it more, I realized that a space for grace is something everyone longs for. We want a mystical space here on Earth and where beautiful things happen regularly that take your breath away. Where enemies can practice love for one another. Where the impoverished are being unchained from the tyranny of scarcity. Where the downhearted can hear good news so that they can believe and hope again. And where we have the work of the people gathered

together who offer themselves freely making their community shine with the light of God.

We all want to be somewhere where grace is the norm, where unmerited and surprising acts of kindness and generosity overflow from a people who are so loving, who are so generous, who are so full of light that nothing stops them from giving everything they had for anything that needs to happen. In other words, we all want a space that is so different from this world.

On Friday, I was really disturbed by another mass shooting. This one happened in Raleigh, North Carolina. A 15-year-old went on a rampage in his own neighborhood, killing five people, including his 16-year-old brother. The Raleigh News and Observer featured stories on all the victims, and they included a 29-year-old man who was on his way to work. He was a cop. And he was shot in the heart and died, and he left behind a wife and a child. There was a 49-year-old mom of three boys. Her husband wrote this poem on Facebook.

We had big plans together
And we had little plans together
We had plans together for big adventures
And plans together for the mundane days in between
We had plans together with the boys
And we had plans together as empty nesters
We had plans together for growing old
Always together
Now those plans are laid to waste

And I began to wonder about what exactly is a space for grace in this world. The pictures that they released on Friday of the crime scenes showed a regular suburban subdivision that we would all recognize with clean cut homes and mowed yards, and it was an area - people lived there because it promised safety and happy children playing in the streets, and people walking on the trails behind, and the promise of solitude and refreshment. These were supposed to be places where we could trust our neighbors and we could experience the goodness of God and humankind, not fear for our lives while driving to work or jogging on the trails, and remain locked in our homes because of threatening carnage and bloodshed.

Where in this world are the spaces for grace? How do we reconcile the continual and ever present forms of horror and sorrow in a world that God has promised is filled with grace, with Christ's reign over the earth? I searched for some solace in the scriptures. Psalm 121 is one of my favorite psalms to center oneself on the presence of God, who will neither slumber nor sleep. "I lift up my eyes to the hills from where is my help to come. My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

But the true consolation for me actually came from the Book of Genesis where we meet a man named Jacob. Now I want to give you a little backstory about Jacob because when we meet him in this text, we are smack dab in the middle of his life and he is at a crossroads, most literally and figuratively. So Jacob has a twin brother, Esau, and when they were young men, Jacob stole Esau's inheritance and then fled for his life because Esau would've killed him. And now years have passed and Jacob has come to a conclusion: you cannot have life today when all you are doing is running from your past. He wanted to be done being afraid of his brother, and he wanted to come to terms with himself, with that heinous act he did from his youth. And he wanted to come to some sort of understanding with God.

And I am so struck by this because when we meet Jacob, the damage has already been done. It's already messed up in his life. He's committed a crime against his brother. He severed ties with his brothers, and ultimately because he gave into his demons, he ruined his relationship with God. And to me, this echoes so much of what happens in this world. We create the hell in which we live, and then we wonder if we will ever again have the gift to experience some peace.

So Jacob shows us what we can do when the fabric of our lives has been torn apart. Jacob creates, intentionally, a space for grace to happen. He takes all of his family, all of his possessions, anything that can protect him, and he puts them aside and he waits patiently for God. And my friends, God always finds us. God always comes to us, and God, despite Jacob's sordid past, restores him, refreshes him, marks him, renews him, and blesses him. The very next day, Jacob goes and meet his estranged brother Esau and Esau comes running toward him, not to harm him, but to embrace him, and they weep together.

And what is astonishing to me about all this is that God actually created that space for grace from the beginning. It was God who changed Jacob's heart. It was God who changed Esau's heart so that they wanted to be reconciled. They wanted to create a future together, and they wanted mercy and grace and forgiveness to rule their lives and their relationship. And that is what a space for grace looks like. It's an opening for something undeserved to happen, but it's orchestrated by God and it is really beautiful.

Intentionally creating spaces of grace in this world, that is what this church loves to do and is called to do. So for instance, our yearly sponsoring of the Homeless Shelter Program is a perfect local example of a space for grace. So in the past, before the pandemic, for 30 years, one week out of the year, we would turn our church around and it would become a home for 35 people who had no homes. And they would come and we'd set up mattresses and we'd make bedrooms,

and then we had a living room and we had a dining room, and we'd come and drive them wherever they needed to go.

We were so committed to this ministry that when we figured out what to do with the renovation, we decided we needed to have two showers here in the church so that when people came and stayed here, they didn't have to go somewhere else to take a shower. They could actually do it in their home. We actually have two showers here in the church. Now, unfortunately because of the pandemic, when everyone went into lockdown, Lighthouse of Oakland County knew that they couldn't do rotating shelters and churches and have people together in the same space and keep them safe. So they rented out motel rooms and, unfortunately, that model is going to continue for the foreseeable future. But it didn't stop us from remembering our friends who have no homes.

So for the third year in a row, during the pandemic, a bunch of you just a couple weeks ago went to the motel, which isn't very nice, I need to tell you, and we provided breakfast, lunch, and dinner the whole week for all the Lighthouse guests. Do you remember how Jacob made that deliberate way of a space for grace? That is exactly what we set out to do. Now all we did was we offered meals, but things happen when you are intentional about seeking out God's space.

So I want to share two stories. The first is about Richard. Now Richard is the shelter manager for Lighthouse. So he works for Lighthouse and he stayed in room 117 of the motel. That was where Lighthouse had their office in the motel. And every evening we would go check in with Richard to see if any more guests had arrived in the program. And after, we went to knock on every motel room where there was a Lighthouse guest and say, dinner time and have them open the door and we'd hand them the meals and the desserts and do a little chatting. And after all that, we'd go back to Richard and give to him any unclaimed meals because the people weren't home. And he would then later on distribute them when the shelter guests arrived back at the motel.

Now, I am proud to say that Christ Church Cranbrook developed the model of providing to the guests sheltering in the motel, all the meals. And we have encouraged Lighthouse to share this model with the 51 other congregations that were doing the old model. But when I asked Richard, how many times are churches providing meals to motel guests? He said it was happening once every three or four months, and when they come, he said, they drop it off to me and do not distribute it like you all do. But the fact that you're going to each room and you are sharing yourself with them, you need to know you are lifting their spirits for they are in their own form of prison.

They are cut off from the community. They are frightened about their future and they feel no hope. You are not just delivering meals. You are freeing them from

their jail cells. The guests keep asking me if the church is coming back again, not just for the food, but because they are at the lowest points of their lives and they feel the unconditional love that you are offering them, you are giving them hope. Now, if that's not grace, I don't know what is.

The other story from Shelter Week I want to share is about the number of meals that we distributed. When we hosted the shelter here at the church, they were able to accommodate up to 35 guests. This year we had 67 people who were part of the Lighthouse program, but by the end of the week, people were coming out of their motel rooms who were not associated with Lighthouse, and they were asking us what were we doing? So we told them and then they began to tell us their stories.

As it turns out, not surprisingly, in Oakland County, there isn't affordable housing. Even if you have Section 8, you can't find a space to live, and when you're given Section 8, it's linked to a county. So these people are waiting for some place to stay with no safety net, and they're staying at this local seedy motel, and so they asked, can we have a meal? At the end of the week, we were providing a hundred dinners. That motel became God's space for grace.

It's one of the major roles our church plays, being intentional and deliberate about going into places like a motel and making it a space for God to show care and compassion for those who long for it. But let us never forget that any intention that we have was God's intention in the first place. It is God who is making space. It is God who is reconciling brothers. It is God who is helping people find comfort in tragedies. And it is God who is helping the insecure receive help from others. And may we always go with the intention to create these mystical spaces with God, where there's deep and undeserving hope and compassion, and indeed grace.

Amen.