



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.

Over the summer, I made a friend who's in the program that I'm in at the University of Michigan. Her name is Kelly Malloy and she's a physician at the University of Michigan. She's a surgical oncologist. And we make each other laugh. I don't know, that's all I can tell you. We just became friendly.

She said to me the other day, this was actually around sometime in August, she said, "I have a story that needs to be used in a sermon." And I said, "Hit me." She said, "Well, years ago I was driving on the New Jersey Turnpike." And for those of you who have never had that privilege, the New Jersey Turnpike is this hell hole of tarmac and exits. They all come really fast. It's death defying. She's on the New Jersey Turnpike and she comes alongside this enormous tractor trailer on which there is crate after crate after crate of chickens. It's on its way, obviously, to be processed at some kind of chicken facility where they'll all be killed and plucked and gutted and put on our table some way or another.

And what was surprising about all these chickens was that one of them had somehow gotten free. It had gotten free of the cage. It was on the top of the tractor trailer holding for dear life onto the cage as it's going down the New Jersey turnpike. And it's just like the feathers are flying and it's just like, ahhh, like holding on. And she was so taken by this chicken outside of the cage riding and holding on for its dear life, and then, almost predictably the tractor trailer kind of got off an exit to go to the processing place. And that's the story.

And I said, "Challenge accepted." But over the past few weeks, I've been trying to think, where in the gospels or in the readings of the scripture, am I going to find something that really unpacks this image? Because it's a pretty strong image, isn't it? Just me describing it, you can see that chicken, can't you? And if you've been on the New Jersey Turnpike, it's even more vivid. Things happen there. That's all I can tell you.

And as I was reflecting on what I wanted to say today, and the scriptures that we have been assigned, I suddenly found my opportunity. Because I think there is something kind of powerful about the story. It's a story about freedom and community. It's a story about freedom because that chicken is actually perfectly free. It's no longer in a cage and it does not recognize that it is free. And that so describes who we are in God's eyes because you and I are free. Jesus Christ has

died so that we might live. The grace of Christ is supreme in our lives. You and I have nothing that can encase us or entrap us or hold us down or chain us down. As we read today in 2 Timothy, the word of God is not to be changed. You and I are free, and yet we so often live in a way in which we feel trapped and oppressed and limited and unable to move. That freedom is real. It's as real as it was for that chicken.

And what's even more powerful maybe about it is when you think about how long that chicken had been raised in a cage and what its life was like. Part of the reason why that chicken never let go of that cage is because she never knew that she could fly. She just had wings. And you and I have been given wings by God. The grace of God has given you wings. You and I are free. Sin and death and disease and all the sorrows that we sometimes feel that weigh us down, the anxieties that trap us and imprison us, these things have no dominion over us because Christ has come to liberate us. We are now free. And we have always been free by the grace of Christ.

And so the maybe tragic part of this story is that that chicken never knew it could fly. And this is not only a story about freedom, it's also a story about community. Because what I find also touching in a weird way, even though it was funny to think about, but touching is the fact that the chicken could never imagine leaving her flock. Even though the possibility of escape was there, her attachment to her flock was such that she held on to that cage with all of her might.

This actually happens. Even though my friend is a doctor, and you should listen to your doctor, I just didn't know whether this actually happened. So I did a little research over the past week to see like - you know, I typed into Google, chickens, accidents, tractor trailers, let's see what happens. Yeah. And it turns out in 2018, there was a huge accident with a tractor trailer full of chickens in Washington, the state of Washington. The driver took a U-turn where he shouldn't have taken a U-turn, and all of the chicken cages came crashing down and many chickens were killed.

And for some reason, the news decided to report that because for some reason, even though these chickens were going to end up on our plates really soon, the loss of these chickens touched everybody. But the chickens who got free when the cages hit the ground, they didn't run away. They stayed with the flock because that was all they knew.

And this is an important thing for us to keep in mind because we tend to think about freedom as being able to choose what we want, right? But in fact, freedom is not the absence of constraint, but freedom is the presence of a different flock, a different community. We need community to be free. We need a group of people who are empathetic to us to know that we are loved. It doesn't matter if it's our biological family or another family that is formed by

friendship. We need those people in our lives because that's what freedom looks like.

Freedom is not, and this is going back a few thousand years to St. Augustine. Freedom is not merely the ability to choose, which Augustine translated as *liberum arbitrium*, the freedom to choose, to act your will out, as it says. But freedom that really means anything in this world requires what Augustine calls *libertas*, which is that freedom to be who God created us to be. In all of that splendor and all of that beauty and all of that joy, we are free when we become free to be who we were created to be. And that requires community, the grace that we receive from Christ that liberates us, these communities need to provide space for grace to be real in our lives.

Now, all of this can be found in our three readings today from the scripture. And I'll go quickly through them, but I want to invite you to take some time this week to read them at a quiet moment. In 2 Kings, you meet Naaman who is from the Kingdom of Aram, and he is a powerful general. Naaman has been stricken with leprosy. And the king of his country has contacted the king of Israel and told the king of Israel that there was some kind of prophet involved named Elisha, who could somehow cure him of his leprosy.

And so Naaman has to go down to see Elisha, which is horrific because he looks down at anything that happens in Israel. It would be as if you, who are a University of Michigan fan, were told that you had to go to Michigan State University to get some treatment. You would just look down on it. You would just go and you would have to see this prophet. And Naaman is horrified, and he's obstinate. He doesn't want this to happen. And yet somehow, it happens. The king didn't want to do it, and somehow Elisha talks him into making it happen.

And as much as Naaman's illness is external, and as much as that illness is healed by the prophet, through this incredible, beautiful, simple ritual of washing, the story of our reading today from 2 Kings comes when Naaman's staff talk him into going back to Elisha after he has been insulted, and humbling himself enough to actually partake in that communal ritual of washing. And so as much as Naaman has been cured externally, there's been an inward journey that he had to go on. And that inward journey was an inward creation of space for grace, a kind with inward grace had to break out in his life and was all released by people who loved him and who honored him.

And so one thing to ask yourself today is where is that inward space for grace and you? And who activates that in your life? Who pulls out in you that space within yourself that needs to be created for God? In our reading from 2 Timothy, we have this incredible, beautiful, powerful image that Paul gives us of what Christian community looks like. In fact, you see in that moment, early on, where

Paul says that the word of God has not chained. That's a reference to the liberation we have in Christ.

But then for Paul to be fully free, is to be bound to one another as the body of Christ. And that creates a kind of space between us because when we are united in Christ's body, we begin to bear one another's burdens and lift one another up. And we become a kind of body of Christ in this world, reaching out to others, loving them, and being transformed by our own willingness to suffer on behalf of the whole and to lift everyone up and to love everyone, even though they irritate us sometimes. That is what it means to be part of the body of Christ, that space between. And that is the freedom that is exercised in community, which is why Paul engages in this early Christian hymn. If we have died with Him, that is, if we have died with Christ, so we will also live with Him. So we will also live with Christ. If we endure, we will reign with him.

And Paul also is not above using a little stick to go along with his carrot. And that's just typical for Paul, but you can see the point, can't you? And the question I have to ask for you is, where is that space between for grace in your life? There are lots of ways in which we can define the church. We can talk about whether it should be online or in person, whether it should be liturgical or charismatic, whether it should be sacramental or confessional. We can define ourselves in many different ways, but the church is the place where there is space between us, created by grace. That's what makes us who we are. We are the body of Christ. And so what do you need to do to opt into that body of Christ?

And finally, we have this incredible moment of worship in the Gospel of Luke. And there are many ways in which we can talk about the Gospel of Luke. And one of the ways is to see the birth of the church that we read about in the Book of Acts coming to be almost immediately when Christ says early on in chapter four of Luke, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and release to those in captivity." But it culminates as Jesus makes His way to His death, and meets the Samaritan. Because the moment the Samaritan turns back from his moment of healing and goes back to Jesus and praises Him and gives thanks, he creates space beyond himself.

And the church moves and is born again by incorporating those from beyond who are involved in the church. The church as the body of Christ is greater than an ethnicity. It's greater than even one religion. It's greater than any kind of territory. The Church of God exists everywhere that Christ is praised. And that space beyond is created by that Samaritan who goes back to give thanks to Jesus.

And so as you think about where you are and what you are called to be, how you exercise your day, who belongs to that space beyond, sometimes it's something where you're serving outside of the walls of the church that you experience that

transformation, such as we have done recently with those 67 people that we welcomed and cared for, for a week through South Oakland Shelter and Lighthouse. But in other ways, it happens right here. When you come in and give thanks to God, when you opt in to this church, when you support the work we're doing, when you live in such a way that you become the members of this body together worshipping God, we become aware of what is more in this world and what more we can be with God's grace.

You and I this year are called, I believe, to make space for grace. If I were to put a point on what I want to do this year with this church over the next few months is to activate that space for grace more in our lives. I want to see that inward space for grace in myself and you. I want to feel that space for grace that exists between us when we work shoulder to shoulder or even when we meet screen to screen. And I want to touch that incredible transformation that happens when we worship together. Because space is different from place.

A place is something you can touch with your hands, but a space touches your heart. And a place is something you can measure, and you can give as a location, but a space is something you enter with by the grace of God when you are transformed. May we be transformed today and this year. May we remember that we have wings. May we remember that we are free. And may we help one another live into that freedom that Christ in His grace has given us.

Amen.