



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Earlier this week, I had the moment to reconnect with a friend and former mentor of mine that helped me a great deal when I was a graduate student getting my PhD. Her name was Sister Susanna Bede Caroselli, and she was an Episcopal nun and a professor of art and theology. So whenever I use art in my sermons or in my teachings, you can thank Sister Susanna Bede Caroselli for her influence on me.

And I called her because I remembered this story that she told me years ago and it had a huge impact on me years ago. And it was this: that when she was in college, she was having one of those crises that you go through when you're a young woman. She didn't think she was beautiful enough. She didn't think she was desirable enough. She didn't think she was valuable enough. She didn't think her voice was loud enough or authoritative enough, and she just had a very mopey summer. She sat in her room and she read, and she sat by herself and kind of was a little bit depressed with all of the things that were going on in her life.

And she got back to college and she received a gift from her father. It was a puzzle that had been made out of a photograph, and in the 1960s, this was high tech. You would take a photograph and then you'd make a puzzle out of it, and then you'd send it to somebody. And they'd put it together and they would have a great memory. And she began to put the puzzle together because her family loved puzzles. She started on the edge and she worked her way around. And then she did a couple of things that were there that were obvious. And it wasn't until she got to the upper right corner that she recognized the figure, which she immediately saw as a beautiful woman sitting and reading on a lawn chair. It wasn't until she put the last puzzle piece in that she realized it was a photograph of her. Her father had taken a picture of her, and in his wonderful, gentle way, sent this message to her to say to her, you are beautiful. You are desirable. You are valuable. Your voice matters.

And this was a profound thing. And so when I called her, we reconnected this week. She said, well, let me go see if I can find the puzzle. And she found it. I have a copy of it for you in your bulletins. You can pull them out and see. She is truly adorable. This is Susanna Caroselli in the 1960s when she was in college. And she has since gone on to have a remarkable career, in part because she realized who she was. She was beloved.

And we were talking and I told her about this sermon. And she understood a little bit of what I was trying to get at with this puzzle because her vocation to be a nun was motivated in the end because she saw her vocation as a gift to herself, that she wanted for herself. She didn't care whether or not the church valued it. She didn't care necessarily that even God valued it. She knew she was already valued by God. She chose her vocation as a gift to herself, and so has lived your life faithfully.

Now, I begin with this picture and this puzzle and that final puzzle piece to talk a bit about something critical in us and in today's gospel. Puzzles are wonderful. They are not as popular perhaps as they were once upon a time. But there is this kind of group activity that goes into it, and each person has a role to play when they find a piece and they put it in there. And there's something amazing about the person who holds that last piece in the puzzle. They have a kind of special authority, a kind of revelatory authority. They speak something into existence by the action they do.

One of our choir members, Allison Womzer, who's flying back from a fabulous vacation in Amsterdam that I'm trying not to be jealous of, she has on her forearm a tattoo of a puzzle piece. And it's because her grandmother loved to do puzzles with her grandchildren and would always hide a puzzle piece up her sleeve so she could be the one who put the last puzzle piece in the puzzle. And all of her grandchildren got the exact tattoo of that puzzle piece because they realized that in holding onto that peace, she was present to them. And that they were, in a sense, a missing puzzle piece that brings it all together.

So this puzzle that Susanna Caroselli received, that last piece of the puzzle, it's something about our identity, it's something about the way we figure ourselves out. There's often that last moment where everything holds together and we see ourselves as we are. And Christianity believes that the greatest truth about us, the thing that holds the pieces together, the thing that is the final piece of revelation is that we are beloved of God in Christ.

And in today's gospel there is a kind of puzzle as well. There is no one way to read the Gospel of Mark today. There is no one story that will explain what is going on. There are stories that are evident and unavoidable and may hit us hard because we are seeing an innocent man being murdered in front of His mother, and that's a story we all know too well.

But there is another story in today's gospel. And that is that in the midst of that ordinary violence and injustice, God inhabits that space and transforms it by the presence of God's own self through God's own son. And that ordinary violence is transformed and changed into a demonstration and revelation of God's love.

And the last piece of the puzzle in today's gospel comes when the centurion says, truly, this was God's son. It was at that moment of revelation where all things fell into place and we can see the whole. We will never be able to explain the whole because the Cross is a mystery. It is a wound and irritant to Christian speech. It renders us mute sometimes, and it's sometimes something that we can only enter through song and praise. But in that moment of revelation, we see that God's love and God's self and God's identity has been revealed through that Cross.

And that is hard for us to sometimes see. And this is why I think there is some meaning to the purpose that a centurion, an outsider, someone who doesn't have the eyes of an insider, an outsider sees it just as a Syrophenician woman, earlier in Mark, knows who Jesus is, even though the disciples don't. And just as the woman who has a hemorrhaging for decades knows that if she touches Jesus, she will be healed. The outsiders see things clearly in Mark and they know that this Savior who has been crucified, who has given Himself,

who has been betrayed, who has had His face spit on and nails driven through His wrists, the Savior is truly God's son.

And this goes with the grain of our parent religion, Judaism. It goes with the grain of the Hebrew Bible because at critical moments when God fully reveals God's self, it is not as a being who is impervious to being wounded. It's not as a being who is always already all-knowing, but a dynamic force of love. In Exodus 34, there is a moment in which Moses has gone back up the mountain after he saw the Israelites misbehaving and broke the first version of the 10 Commandments in a fit.

And he goes up to see God, and God says, I know what you're dealing with, and God gives him a new set of commandments, and God gives the presence of himself to Moses. And he says this: the Lord, the Lord, a God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. This vulnerable God is revealed as being the heart of God, as being God's identity. And when Jesus hangs on a cross, there is a revelation of this vulnerable God, and an invitation to interdependence. A revelation of a vulnerable God who is somehow able to transform that vulnerability into a kind of almost organic strength.

CS Lewis in his wonderful children's book, the Magician's Nephew, describes it this way. There is a witch named Janice, and she has somehow grabbed onto this piece of a light post from London as she's transported back and forth to this magical world called Narnia. And she sees this Christ figure named Aslan, and she's terrified. And so she takes the lamppost and she throws it at the lion. She hits the lion and it bounces off, and the light post takes root and grows. And the light bulb comes on and illuminates with an everlasting life and light.

When God takes on vulnerability, it is transformed. It becomes part of God's creative power to bring life out of death, to bring love out of estrangement, to bring forgiveness out of abhorrent behavior. God illuminates everything on the Cross. How is one thing we will never quite figure out, but that God does. That is the truth on which Christianity depends.

So there are two puzzles before us today. There is the puzzle of who Jesus is. And the disciples never quite figure it out in Mark until a centurion comes up and says, truly, this is God's son. That puzzle suddenly holds together. And there is the puzzle of ourselves. There is the puzzle that needs to come together when we see ourselves almost from the eyes of an outsider.

When Susanna Caroselli told me that story about her puzzle, I couldn't wait to meet her father because I knew I was meeting someone wise and beautiful and loving and a little bit different from most of the men I knew. And he was. And in giving that gift to his daughter, he told her that she was beloved, that she was exactly who she had been created to be. It was a revelation. And the task for you and I in Holy Week is to see our puzzle being held together through love and God's puzzle in Jesus Christ, which is the ultimate revelation of love to see those two as connected deeply.

We do not see or understand the revelation of Jesus on the Cross if it is inert and does not address us, and command us and transform us, and change us, and fill us. And we do not understand ourselves and the value we have, the beauty we have, and the voice we have

without knowing ourselves as held together by the love of God, that that love is an ending. It comes from the source of God's identity. It will never forsake us. Jesus will always be faithful to us, and Jesus will go to any length for us. That is the mystery of these next few days. And you and I have to find our way into it, to open ourselves up, to have the puzzle pieces hold together in a new way so that we can see who we are and who Jesus is.

Over the next week, take time, reflect on this gospel. Come to our Holy Week services, participate in the work of the church, and look for the ways you will be transformed. This is the whole purpose of Holy Week. To give us this beautiful ritual that begins in some sense, right this moment, and does not end until Easter Day until we are completely transformed. Take advantage of this opportunity. Don't walk away from it. Don't minimize it. Don't schedule around it. Make it your walk of faith this week and you'll see yourself again for the first time, and you'll see God again for the first time. This is the promise of the church, always.

Amen.