



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

*The Spirit Always Comes First as Grace\_ - The Day of Pentecost- 6\_5\_2022)*

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 past few days, my heart has been so heavy. It's been heavy in part because I have been dwelling on this war in Ukraine, and I cannot get over the atrocities and suffering that I see the children, the mothers, the refugees, the sadnesses, the atrocities. And I've been sad because I've been thinking about Buffalo and Texas and the incredible sadness that comes from hearing about the suffering that those children felt in their last moments.

And I've been sad also for the loss of my cat, my family pet, and this sadness has truly disarmed me. I didn't know how sad I could become for losing a family pet. And maybe it's because I feel like we're walking through layers of grief upon grief upon grief these days. And maybe it's because there is something that happens when you pull in, you rely on this little being that comes to be part of your family and comes to be so much part of your family you can imagine your family without her. But this loss has affected me and still affects me. She was euthanized yesterday and she went peacefully and beautifully as she came to us peacefully and beautifully. She was a remarkable cat. I have two cats, so I speak from authority.

When my youngest daughter, Rose, went through a crisis and was struggling with her own life. And when we, as a family had gathered around her bed to somehow hold her stable and not have to take her to the hospital yet again, our cat Artemis climbed up onto the bed and went up to her and curled next to her and began to comfort her. And it was amazing. That was the source of comfort for her and she became her reason for living. Artemis kept my youngest daughter alive. So she wasn't just a pet, she was a remarkable gift to us. And I am going to miss her terribly.

And this was a revelation to me because I had never had a pet like that before, where you come close to that animal and you have this kind of relationship with it. Years ago, a friend of mine published a book on the Gospel of Mark. It was with Oxford University Press. It was astonishing. And he said in his acknowledgements, "To Mickey, a very fine cat." And I thought at the time, who does that? Who dedicates years of research to a cat? Now I understand, she was special.

And as I was thinking about what to say today, I decided, instead of trying to compartmentalize that grief, to look at Pentecost through it, because I think that's the work all of us have to do because we're all grieving in some way or another. One of the things that makes this time so difficult for so many is that we all have grief upon grief upon grief. And somehow we're trying to find our way.

And one of the things that my friend who wrote the brilliant book on the Gospel of Mark, who dedicated to Mickey the cat, one of the things he used to say to me that was incredibly wonderful is, he said to me that animals are always close to God. Animals always have a complete communion with God. Animals are always obeying their nature, which means that they need no redemption and they need no grace. It's we humans who don't obey our nature. It's we humans who get out of sync and out of communion with God. It's we humans who try to operate in a way that goes against what God has created us to be. We're the ones who need a savior. We're the ones who need redemption. And in Heaven, so my friend assures me, in Heaven, we will reach and find the animals. And instead of blessing them, they will be blessing us.

Now, this distinction is really important for us to keep in mind when it comes to Pentecost because the Spirit comes to us as grace, the Spirit comes to us and reminds us that you and I in and of ourselves have no power to save ourselves. You and I will constantly go against our nature. You and I will constantly create communities that fall short. You and I will constantly be making mistakes again and again and again. And the blessing of Pentecost is that God has come to be with us and to fill us and to indwell us and to give us grace so that we can do some good in this world, so that we can go with the grain of God's love and God's wisdom, God's truth, and God's peace.

And this image of Pentecost is important for us to keep in mind today because we're living through so many reminders of what keeps us from being who we were created to be. We have so many reminders of the fallenness of our community, of all the things that keep us from being who we ought to be in God's name. And Pentecost is a reminder that it's not enough to know Jesus, it's not enough to believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit has to come and enter into us and change us and transform us, and most of all, reconcile us to God.

In your bulletin today and in the art I provided for you, I offer a piece of art that captures part of what I want to say, because the title of the portrait is called "Babel." And it's by Scott Hocking, an artist in Detroit. Hocking was invited to France to do an installation there. And he went to an abandoned train station and he built up this incredible pile of stones. He brought with them some of the detritus from the ruins of Detroit. And he took some of the ruins of the stones in that beautiful city in that train station and he built this pile of stones, which is beautiful, and he called it "Babel" because he wanted to somehow evoke that sense of ruin and that sense of need for grace, that sense of the breakdown in communication and the sense of the need for God to be present in our lives.

And I find this powerful because when you look at other artistic depictions of the Tower of Babel, say in Renaissance art, that tower is always so beautiful. And that's because when people read this part from Genesis, they believe that somehow human beings are doing some really brilliant things on their own. And so they're building this based on their own technology, based on their own power, based on their own abilities, this beautiful tower to God. And God is getting a little bit insecure. Even though God is all powerful, God is somehow insecure, a little bit like Elon Musk, and God just strikes them down because he can't handle having any number twos that encroach upon the number one.

Well, I don't think that, I think there's an incredible wisdom in this passage from Genesis that we miss. And that is that if God hadn't thrown humanity into confusion, and if God hadn't destroyed that union, we would think that we could do it all on our own and we would learn nothing. But God has given us Pentecost so that the Spirit would indwell in us and so that we would be transformed by God. And that is grace, that is good news because we need God's spirit inside of us.

There are three things I want you to see today in our readings that underline and reinforce that idea of Pentecost as grace. And the first is that to have the Spirit in us means that we are always already involved in things larger than us. And that Spirit is often manifested through prayer. In Romans, we read that the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs deeper than words. And this is good news to us who have found our way to Pentecost this year in the midst of layers of grieving. Because we know we cannot pray as we ought, when we know when we cannot contain all of the pain we have seen, when we know that there is more sadness than we could ever imagine or comprehend, the Spirit is in us and intercedes for us. And remains part of God's working through us.

And so today on Pentecost, I invite you to pray, listen to the Spirit inside of you and lean into the Spirit above you and hold onto God and that Spirit will intercede with cries deeper than words. The second thing I want you to see today is that in John, this spirit is called the "Spirit of truth" and sometimes truth can be painful. Sometimes when we're faced with something that hits us hard, we find that the illusions that we've been living our life around, those allusions fall like scales from our eyes. And yet that is grace too. And so when the spirit leads us into truth, it may not be a truth you can take to the bank. It may not be a confirmation of your power. It may not be a way of lifting you up. It may be the truth of your own need for God and your own vulnerability in the face of sadness. But that truth is grace as well.

Years ago, I was visiting with a monk who was my spiritual director. I was about 28 years old and I was pretty fed up with the world and the church, if only. And he said to me, when you go through those moments of disillusionment and you see the truth as it is, that is when the transformation begins. That is when God takes you into the sacred heart of Jesus. And that's when you begin to be marked by the wound that exists within God's self, God's loving wound for the world, which is our salvation.

So today, this Pentecost, I invite you to think about the truth that you're being invited to see. It may not be an easy truth. It may be a difficult truth. It may be a devastating truth, but it will be a grace because when that illusion drops away, you can see face to face. The work of God in your life. And the final thing that we hear mention of today is peace. And one of the things that I will miss the most of Artemis is that she and I were early risers. As soon as my foot hit the landing, she would be there.

And she would protectively escort me to where the breakfast was kept, just in case I got lost. She didn't want me to, you know, deviate, she would bump into me with her body gently just to make sure I got my way there. She would look with incredible fascination at my use of my thumbs to open up the can of cat food. And she was always just impressed by that amazing ability I had. And then she would eat and then I would sit and she would

climb onto my chest. And she would look at me, winking and blinking and squinting and taking delight in me.

The peace of God passes all understanding, we read in the scriptures and that's because that's the peace of God always passes understanding. It's always beyond what we can know, but it's always close to us when we choose to feel. And so today on that Pentecost, I invite you to lean into that peace. And now that she's gone, I have to believe that that peace remains and will be with us forever because it came ultimately from the Spirit or the things around us that we hardly see.

And today I asked the children to come and teach us in a song. Again, the song they performed – so if you all go to page three, and the children are going to come out again and you can all stand this time because they're not performing this time. You're here to help. Right over here. Yep. That's fine.

Maestro, take it away.

Come Holy Spirit  
Fill our hearts today  
Come Holy Spirit  
Bless our work and play

Come Holy Spirit  
Fill our hearts today  
Come Holy Spirit  
Help us on our way

Amen.