



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our gospel this week brought to my mind a rather remarkable encounter that I had shortly after I was ordained. It was the middle of the week. I was working in my office trying to figure out how to be a priest when one of the volunteers at the front desk came rushing in, Father Chris, Father Chris, you need to come out here! There's a woman and she's really mad. She's upset and she's demanding to talk to a priest. And I said, okay. Is she a member? She said, no, no. She just came right in off the street. I think she saw our sign. So we had just put up this big red banner that said, "All welcome, no exceptions," just like the one we have out here on our sidewalk. But this one was really huge and it was facing a really busy highway, so it was definitely getting noticed.

So I came out and there's this woman standing there, and she was maybe in her early sixties, dressed pretty conservatively. And as soon as she saw me, she's like, are you one of the ministers here? And I said, one of them. She said, well, I need to talk to you because I saw your sign. I saw that sign, and you know, you need to take it down because I don't believe a word of it. That sign is false advertising. And I immediately thought, well, mission accomplished on the sign. It's getting the attention we wanted, isn't it?

And then I thought, okay, this is probably not a conversation for the lobby, so I invited her back to my office. And she sat down and took a deep breath and she said, look, I'm sorry for being so hot, but you have no idea what I've been through. My husband and I were members, and she named some large Baptist church in the area. We were really involved. My husband was on the board. We were part of a Bible study. We tithed, we delivered meals to people that were sick. We gave our life to that church, but it was like none of that mattered because when my son came out as gay and we decided to support him, it was like we became outsiders in our own church. They didn't want us hosting the Bible study. We stopped being invited to things. We stopped being asked to do things simply because we loved our son and we weren't going to be ashamed of him.

And then she went on to say, you know, no matter what they said, and they tried to convince us, they tried to read us all this stuff, it wasn't going to change my mind because I had seen what living in the closet had done to him. He was depressed. He was lonely. He started drinking. He didn't need to hear he was a

sinner. He didn't need to know how he was going to go to hell. He needed to know that he was loved. So when he finally told us, his father and I, we told ourselves we would be his biggest supporter. We would stand behind him. We would stand up for him. We would always be there for him because we would be proud of him and we were proud of him. It was like that church wanted me to choose between God and my son, and that's a choice I will never make, she said. I don't care what they say, I know what my heart tells me.

And with that, she stopped to catch her breath. It was like she just had unloaded this weight on me and I said, well, believe it or not, I've had my own firsthand experience with this. I know something about what you're going through. And she looked up and she's like, wait a minute, wait a minute. Do you have a gay son too? And I said, no, I don't have a gay son. I am that gay son. And I want to tell you, there were many times growing up when I could have used a mom like you. Well, we all could have.

So by this point we're both kind of a mess. She reached out to hug me and I hugged her, and suddenly there we were, two complete strangers sharing our deepest wounds. And in that moment, something happened. Sue, which was her name, she would later say in that moment, she knew she had found a home. And that all her doubts, all her doubts about our sign, about the church, all her doubts that she might have had about God's love, they all just fell away. It was as if those doubts that she had up here, they just didn't stand a chance against the connection we had made in our hearts through the wounds that we shared.

In his book, *The Wounded Healer*, Henry Nouwen suggests that if we are going to really be there for each other, if we're going to be there in a deep and meaningful way, then we're going to need to learn to lean into our wounds. If we're going to have any shot of offering the love and the mercy of Jesus, we need to be in touch with the pain and the hurt of our life. Because it's in those experiences, those painful moments that will give us the empathy we need to make a real connection, a real connection from our hearts. Oh, we can show people sympathy. We can feel sorry for others, but it's not the same as empathy. Sympathy is feeling sorry for someone. Empathy is feeling with.

As Brene Brown puts it, sympathy is like seeing somebody stuck in a hole and feeling bad for them, maybe even offering to lower down a sandwich. Empathy is when we climb down into the hole ourselves to be with them in their suffering and in their doubt. And the ladder, the ladder that lets us get down to them is our wounds. And it's not easy, particularly in a culture that values power and perfection. We try to deny and we try to hide our pain. We tell ourselves it's not that bad. We just need to grin and bear it. We just need to suck it up, or we try to minimize the abuse that we've suffered. We try to minimize the injustice we endure. We dismiss the microaggressions that demean us on a daily basis. We pretend like they don't matter or that our skin is thicker than it is. Or we tell

ourselves, you know, other people have much bigger problems. Who am I to complain?

But all of that, all of that shrouds are wounds in shame and denial, and it just adds more barriers between us. Contrast that with what Jesus does today. When He appears after the resurrection, He doesn't come in a blaze of glory, restored to some kind of glowing perfection. He isn't surrounded by angels and trumpets sounding His victory as we sometimes want to paint it. He comes humbly, quietly, and He comes still bearing his wounds. He doesn't try to hide them. He doesn't try to deny them. He doesn't try to cover up where the nails were driven into His hands or try to hide the place where He was stabbed in His side. He bears them. He bears His wounds for all to see, so that His suffering might somehow help us to bear ours.

They remind us that Jesus has been there too. He knows what it's like to be betrayed. He knows what it's like to be wrongly accused or to be scapegoated. He knows what it's like to be abandoned by His friends, to be mocked and humiliated. And in the death of His only Son, God knows what is perhaps the greatest loss that we could ever be asked to endure. Seeing the risen Christ still bearing His wounds, it reminds us that no matter what the world might try to throw at us, no matter what crosses we are forced to bear, we never ever have to bear them alone. God hasn't just thrown us a sandwich. He's come down into the hole with us. He comes to be with us and to show us, to show us that our wounds, they're not a sign of failure. They're not something to be ashamed of. They have nothing to do with whether we deserved it or whether we've sinned. They are instead an invitation to how, how, how can we with God's help take the pain and the suffering of my life and turn it into something that's life-giving and life-renewing for others and for myself.

I saw an example of this just the other day. Someone was having a hard time articulating why she felt drawn to work in family ministry at the church she was raised in. And after she danced around it a while and we kept asking, because you could just sense there was more to her story, she finally got to it. I'm passionate about children's ministry, she said, because this church was there for me when I was a single mom. They didn't judge me. They didn't turn me away. They weren't ashamed of me. They supported me. They lifted me up when I needed it. And they didn't just talk. They showed me. They showed me and my baby God's love. And I want every single mom who is struggling to know that love as well because it saved my life and it can save theirs.

There it was. God took something that could have been a badge of shame for some, and used it. Used it to build the exact bridge that God needed so that she could be there and reach out to people that no one else could. Our wounds, they do leave scars, but it's not about hiding them. It's not about trying to get over them. It's not try about trying to forget them or to move on from them. It's about

allowing God to redeem them, to transform them, so that through them we might become healers ourselves.

That's the rhythm of death and resurrection that we just walked through last week, and it's the rhythm that we are now called to practice as we begin this season of Easter. And as I've preached before, doubt is no enemy of faith. We need our doubts. God works through our doubts. Our doubts cause us to challenge the status quo. They can help us to knock down the barriers we put up and break open those tiny little boxes that we keep trying to put God into. And all the endless conditions and exceptions that we keep trying to add, our doubts can remind us that if it's not about love, if it's not about love, then it is not about God.

So by all means, bring your doubts. They're just as much a part of you as your wounds. Bring your doubts about the church. Bring your doubts about the Bible. Bring your doubts about our creeds and our theologies. But one thing, one thing you need never doubt is God's love for you and your capacity to share it, to share that same love through your wounds.

Amen.