



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.

Earlier this week I was on Facebook doing an essential part of my ministry. It seems like about 30% of my ministry is just keeping an eye on Facebook because you get updates there of where people are, what they're going through. You get the birthdays reminder, all of these things. A good 30% of my time doing ministry is on Facebook. I've actually planned a whole funeral over Facebook Messenger.

And I came upon this post from somebody who just said, "A great man has died this week." And I thought, Harry Belafonte? No, it was Jerry Springer. A great man died this week. Now for those of you who are a bit younger, Jerry Springer was a pivotal personality in the history of media. He was TikTok before there was TikTok. He was Instagram before there was Instagram. He was YouTube before there was YouTube.

And anything any of you see that is filthy, that is awful, that you can't unsee once you see it. From the mukbang when they eat so much food and like it's disgusting, to anything that has to do with the words sister, wife, or baby daddy, you can trace it back to Jerry Springer and his show, which was a kind of reality show in which people would get up and say outlandish things that were truly disgusting. And here's the thing, if you talk to any of us who are over 40 years old, I guarantee you, if you get them in an honest moment, they watched an episode of Jerry Springer. You just couldn't pull your eyes away from it. Disgusting.

A great man died this week. Well, I recognized that in that moment the person was engaging in irony, and I thought that was so amazing. Irony. I haven't seen irony in public discourse since 2019. I don't know about you. Irony is so much fun and wonderful, but we don't live in a subtle time. And irony kind of depends on your ability to see something subtle in the message.

And even in 2019, I think I was the only one who was still practicing irony and usually I got just strange looks from you all. So I stopped myself. What is irony? Irony is from the Greek *eirōneía*. That clears it up. It means a kind of feigned ignorance, but as it's come to be used, it means a truth that is spoken and comes from an unexpected place and an unexpected person.

In drama, dramatic irony is the moment in which the character and the play says something that is incredibly true but doesn't know the full import of it, but you, the reader or the audience, knows the full import of it. For example, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Francis Ford Coppola's amazing film, when Mary leans in while George Bailey is getting the ice cream and whispers into his deaf ear, "George Bailey, I'm going to love you until the day I die," and he can't hear it. That is the irony of that movie. He couldn't get the message.

Irony is interesting. And when I combined it with Jerry Springer, I got curious. And so I looked up and I discovered that Jerry Springer gave the commencement address in 2008 at Northwestern University. He was a graduate of Northwestern, and no doubt this was engineered for one reason or another, and he accepted. And so this is what he writes and gives in that speech in 2008. He said this:

"To the students who invited me, thank you. I am honored. To the students who object to my presence, well, you've got a point. I too would've chosen someone else, but once asked, it would've been kind of arrogant or at least unappreciative for me to have said no so here I am. I've been lucky enough to enjoy a comfortable measure of success in my various careers. But let's be honest, I've been virtually everything you can't respect: a lawyer, a mayor, a major market news anchor, and a talk show host. Pray for me. If I get to Heaven, we're all going."

Now, I found this ironic because I think that that was one of the greatest witnesses I have seen in the past few months to the central claim of Christianity, which is that God's infinite grace is sufficient for all of us. That God's grace, God's love, and mercy and forgiveness all wrapped up in one, God's grace alone is sufficient for us. Pray for me. If I get to Heaven, we're all going. There is no greater articulation of the promise of the gospel than that, that through the love and mercy, and forgiveness, and grace of Jesus Christ we are all already accepted and loved and forgiven and reconciled to God.

And the tragedy of life is we tend to forget that. We try to create little hierarchies and places where we can distinguish ourselves. We want to somehow justify ourselves as good people, or we convict ourselves and shame ourselves and believe that we're not worthy, but none of that has anything to do with the gospel. The gospel says that God's grace in Jesus Christ is sufficient, fully sufficient, and that's because God's grace is founded on God's gift of God's self in Jesus, on Jesus's infinite love that He showed us through dying for us that we might live. God's grace is infinite. Just as infinite as God's power, just as infinite as God's justice, just as infinite as anything else that makes God who God is. God is graceful. God is full of grace.

Grace is translated into the Greek as *charis* and it means kindness. But everything is bound up, as I've been trying to say, in that kindness of God. That unexpected moment in the history of the world in which God came to us, not in order to put us right, not in order to make things better, but to somehow heal things by giving God's son, Jesus. Through kindness, God has come to us in Jesus. And that kindness is not weakness, but it's incredibly powerful. It goes with the grain of everything we see so that when we look at Jesus, we see mercy that has become infinite. When we look at Jesus, we see love that has become infinite. When we look at Jesus, we see forgiveness that has become infinite.

And the extent to which you and I place any conditions on that love, that mercy, and that forgiveness. To the extent to which we do that, we become unfaithful. If I get to Heaven, we're all going. The grace of Jesus Christ means that we are all going, we're all going to meet in Heaven, and Heaven begins now when God's grace becomes real in your life.

Today, I want to use that grace as a way to understand what's going on in today's gospel from John and in all the readings, because it's easy for us to get confused by the metaphors in this passage. Jesus, later in the gospel, will say, I am the good shepherd. And Jesus will say, I am the gate. And then you're wondering who is the gatekeeper? But basically what Jesus is trying to do is to say fundamentally that He is the gate or the door that encompasses everyone.

I'm sure you've heard sermons that will talk about this passage and talk about the special relationship that shepherds have with sheep. I don't want to malign anybody who's preached in that way. I might have done that myself. But truthfully, when you look at the social setting of the gospel, there was nothing special about being a shepherd. There's nothing that this can teach us, and I know there are those who will place a lot of emphasis on the fact that Jesus uses the term "shepherd" to talk about the relationship between Jesus and us. I don't want to shatter any illusions, but there is nothing special about that either. The Pharaoh of Egypt, one of the sticks that he holds is a shepherd's crook. And Plato in *The Republic* says that the best kings are those who are like shepherds to their people.

So the point of the gospel today isn't that we can find some kind of emblem of God in just the practice of being a shepherd. The point of the gospel today is not that there's anything special about the title "shepherd." What Jesus is trying to get us to see and get His disciples to see, for there is dramatic irony in it, is that the gate that He is setting up is greater enough to encompass the whole flock. And that is why the teaching today is that God's grace in Jesus Christ is sufficient, and the shepherds that we must lift up are those who lift up grace.

There are three things I want you to see, as we move deeper into these scriptures, that are key to understanding the full implications of this. The first is

that grace comes as beauty. This is to pick up on something I mentioned in passing a couple of weeks ago, but in the Gospel of John, when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," the word that is used for "good" is kallos, which means "beauty." I am the beautiful shepherd, and by that, Jesus is not saying that He is physically beautiful. Jesus is also not even saying that I am morally beautiful. The term kallos is to describe a kind of beauty that does not set up a hierarchy, but actually encompasses and holds together and reconciles many different things.

It's a combinative beauty rather than a competitive beauty. It is not the beauty of a beauty pageant, which Jerry Springer presided over several times in his career. That beauty has nothing to do with the beauty of grace that comes through the beautiful shepherd. The beauty that is of Jesus is the ability to reconcile and bring together all who are in Christ.

This is what we see in our reading from Acts. When all shared everything in common and they went home and they had table fellowship together and they lived out their lives in prayer, that is describing an image of community that is beautiful. And as we worked yesterday at Keep Growing Detroit, the person who was kind of telling us what to do, she asked us what did we see? And we all kind of shared. And then for reasons that I think only come when you've been at a job for a while, I decided to turn around. I said, "And Alex, what did you see of our 40 people that came forward and worked?" And she said, "I saw collective effervescence in your community." Effervescence is the bubble in the soda. The thing that pops up. And collective means that we all had it together. That is the grace of beauty, and it's beautiful because it takes part in the beautiful shepherd.

The second thing I want you to see is that grace comes as a sacrifice. That is to say, even though grace is freely given to us, even though we are all in, even though God and Christ has included every one of us, there is a sacrifice involved. We have to give up something to be fully realized in grace, to have grace flow through everything we do. And that, of course, is evident in our reading today from 1 Peter in which Peter says in his incredible pragmatic way, we have all been healed by His wounds and we have all been called to suffer like He has.

And that can be terrifying to us, can't it? Because we don't want to suffer easily and we don't want to suffer meaninglessly, but grace works when we give up something. When we love by letting go of resentment. When we forgive by letting go of the claim we have that someone did us wrong. When we choose to be merciful, even though we have every right to hold on to our way of seeing things.

In all of these things, grace becomes operative through sacrifice, and the key to making that sacrifice is to see it as a kind of special call to abundance that will go with the grain of who we are. There are plenty of people that will ask you to

sacrifice in ways that will diminish who you are in Jesus, but there is no way you could become more of who you are in Jesus without giving up something, without a little bit of sacrifice.

The third thing I want you to see is that grace comes as a voice. My favorite part in today's gospel is that whole discussion where Jesus is saying, "My sheep, hear my voice." There are other voices that we listen to all too often in our lives, and we miss that grace of Jesus. We listen to the voice that tells us that we have to be someone, or do something in order to be worthy of God's love or the love of another person. And there are things that we do that we hope to somehow benefit ourselves and others that keep us chasing after false gods who will only destroy us. But the key in Christianity is to attune our ears, the ears of our heart, to the voice of grace that comes through Jesus.

I have a piece of art for you today that's on your bulletin that captures this difference in hearing, and it's by William Blake, the incredible poet and painter from the 19th century. And Blake took up woodcutting when he was 64 years old, and this is one of his first woodcuts that he did. And it was done for a publication that was trying to somehow work out a kind of representation of Dante's divine comedy in the context of the English countryside. And I won't take you into that too much. But it's an incredibly beautiful woodcut because you have these two figures, Thenot, who is the representative of Virgil, who is going to bring this friend to God, and Colinet, who is a younger person who needs guidance.

And you see in this image, Thenot on the left. And you have Colinet next to Thenot holding the shepherd's crook. And then you see lambs getting born and nursing from their mothers. And then you see a tree that is split and dying. And the title of the image is that Colinet [is] Waving His Arms in Sorrow. And we can only imagine that the reason why Colinet is experiencing that incredible anguish and anxiety and sorrow is because it has something to do with something dying and something being born at a time that he cannot manage. And so the tree is splitting in half, and this is a sign of death. And the lambs are giving birth, and this is a sign of life.

And Colinet is not handling this in a way that is non-reactive. He's worried about the sheep. He's worried about the tree. He is full of sorrow because he cannot control what's happening. And Thenot, the older being, is holding his hands out in a way that's kind of a strange body English, but he's basically trying to say, "Calm down. It's okay." And this I want to suggest to you is the difference between hearing the voice of grace and missing it. Colinet misses the voice of grace and that is why he experiences that sorrow. And Thenot, who represents the older guide, says to the younger person, it's going to be okay, because hopefully he's seen his way through all the changes and chances.

At the end of every funeral, my favorite prayer is said where we give thanks for each person who has died, and we ask God to see in that person a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. These are the truest words that are ever spoken of us, and they will remain always. May you see in that invitation and promise of God, the beauty of living in Christ, the love and sacrifice you are invited to give so that you might know, in those small deaths, life and the voice of the one who loves you.

Amen.