



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak 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. Please be seated.

When Christian contacted me earlier this week and invited me to preach today, I immediately said to him that I was not worthy. And in my tradition, it is almost imperative that a person of color preaches on Martin Luther King Sunday. And so when he asked me, I said, "It's not me. It's not my place to preach today." And he said to me, "Don't you understand this is the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream?" And I said to him, "That's not helping me today."

I am not worthy. But I am so blessed to be here. And I also know that I dare not keep silent on this day if invited to say something. And so I am so blessed to be with you. I want to offer a prayer that we will be praying at our church at 10 o'clock when Christian preaches for us. And I want to have that prayer maybe be our prayer as well, because that way we can be at one in prayer as we are oftentimes in service. And then I'll introduce my title and I'll introduce my text, and then hopefully there'll be a sermon.

So in our tradition, I say, the Lord be with you and also with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, by the hand of Moses, your servant, you led your people out of slavery and made them free at last. Grant that your church following the example of your prophet, Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love and may secure for all your children, the blessed liberty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

When I was invited to preach - this is not my first time. Some of you know me from the Good Friday Seven Last Words service. I've been preaching there for the past six years. And I want you to know something, that I finally have a little bit of time today. I usually have about 10 minutes on Good Friday. I want to say a few things to you about Hartford Memorial Baptist Church from my perspective. And that is that when I was teaching as a professor and as a dean in Canada, in London, Ontario, and was somehow nominated to be the pastor of Christchurch Cranbrook, there were two churches that I researched. One was Christchurch Cranbrook, and the other was Hartford Memorial Baptist Church. Because I believed that if God would call me to this place, to this church, that working with a church like Hartford Memorial Baptist Church was going to be imperative for me.

And so I studied, I actually, even before I knew Harper Memorial Baptist Church, I knew the Reverend Charles G. Adams because he was an incredible figure and is an incredible figure. But I've been studying this church for close to 10 years, and I was studying how it worked in the community. I studied the way it was a kind of icon and a kind of beacon and a kind of light to the city of Detroit. I looked at all the work it did, not only in terms of the public witness of prayer and preaching, but also in the development that it does in the area.

And Hartford has also been, for me, a model of what I would hope my own church would be. So it is an incredible honor for me to be here, and it was an amazing gift for me to be invited to preach on Good Fridays here. I have gotten to know most of you because I see most of you on Good Friday, strangely enough. I want to also say that during this pandemic, this congregation has been close to my heart, and I want to say how blessed I am and grateful I am that so many of you are here, and how much those who have been lost have weighed upon me and broken my heart as well. We have been through an ordeal, and this ordeal is a time of testing.

One of the things I know, I know the scriptures where it says that God will refine the gold so that the dross is scraped away. And there are hymns said to that effect. But I also know metallurgists and I know that sometimes when you're trying to refine the gold, you could sometimes turn the heat too far up. And when that happens, the gold vaporizes. And it goes poof, and it's gone and all you have is gas.

I can't argue with God, but I have seen this ordeal not only refine us, but we've lost some gold as well. And so I want to give thanks for those saints, for those saints who carried us and who made this church possible. The people who have served us through generations, I want to give thanks to them, to God for them. And I also want to say to each and every one of you, heart of my hearts, I am sorry for your losses, however they may be.

And when we're faced with an ordeal, it's sometimes hard for us to think about someone like Dr. King, even though Dr. King was someone who came out of an ordeal. But when we are hurting, when we are feeling constrained, when we are feeling oppressed, when we are feeling like we have limited maneuverability in this world, there are times in which the person that we are meant to celebrate today can be seen so high on a pedestal that we cannot reach who he is and we can only somehow survive where we are.

That happens a lot with saints. And in the Catholic tradition, it's come to be the practice to pray to a saint as an intercessor almost because they are too far off for us to ever find our way to. But I don't think that that was the intent of Dr. King. He was trying to start a movement. And so today I want to preach a sermon entitled *The King's Speech: Truth Telling As a Christian Practice*. I'm saying the

King's Speech in a kind of play on that movie that came out in 2010 about King George VI, and finding his voice in 1939 so that he could lead the British Empire. It was in the war with Nazi Germany.

But when I say King's speech, I mean something very different. I'm meaning that what I want to focus on today is not just the biography of King, because that biography is something that there are so many layers to that we're going to go again and again and again through it, and it should be done more times than one day a year. But I want to focus on the way and rhetoric and persona of the truth teller that he was, because I feel like that is key. And Dr. King was a practitioner of what I want to call the Christian practice of *parrhesia*, which is the Greek word for boldness.

You see it in the text that I'm going to use today, which is from Ephesians chapter 6:19-20. It's at this point where Paul having set the Ephesians right, says to them, "Pray also for me so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak." The two words in my translation for boldness is *parrhesia*. And even though we translate it as boldness or frankness or openly, to speak openly, that word *parrhesia* has its own history.

And I want to step back for a moment, back behind even the New Testament to its roots in Antiquity in ancient Greece, because *parrhesia* was actually a kind of way to describe an office that people had within Antiquity. In Antiquity you had your leaders of a city-state, or polis, and then you had the people who were charged, who were called, who had the position to be the truth tellers, and they would engage in *parrhesia*, in frank speech. And believe it or not, the great philosopher that we celebrate and call Socrates, he was actually a practitioner of *parrhesia*. And his goal was to protect the democracy of Athens.

And that truth teller, that role was different from being a magistrate or even a leader in any other form. That's why when Socrates was criticized, they criticized him because he chose not to be part of the government. But Socrates knew that his role was to be the truth teller. A historian of Antiquity puts it this way: "One of the goals of the philosophers of the first century was that *parrhesia*, which is audacious, frank, and courageous discourse would occur even before the emperor, whatever the consequences might be, whether it be death or exile for their interminable, moral discourses."

Now, Socrates was killed by the state because he was said to have corrupted the youth because he asked them to explore why something was happening. Why was it the case? What did it mean for a society to be just? What did it mean for a city-state to be good or excellent? What does it mean for this practice of government to be a democracy? Socrates was someone who used *parrhesia*,

speaking frankly, and he combined it with another practice called cross-examination, or the Greek is *elenchus*. He asked people to question and scrutinize and think their way through the assumptions they made so that they could find their way to the truth, and that truth would set them free.

In the Judaic tradition, we of course had prophets, and as you probably have heard in other sermons or in studies, there was a kind of separation of offices. There was the priest, there was the king, and there was the prophet. And the prophet had the role of speaking truth. That is what the prophet did. Sometimes, as in Isaiah, the prophet could be a priest. Oftentimes, maybe more oftentimes, the prophet was someone who had no reason to actually speak. Amos was such a prophet.

In ancient Israel, there even was a practice in which you would have prophets who were almost brought in to kind of foresee the future. They were soothsayers of a sort. But the prophet, according to Amos, was the person who spoke to injustice. And so there is a famous exchange in the book of Amos in which people come to him and tell him, hey, turn down the heat or watch yourself. And Amos said, I am not a *nabi*, which is Hebrew for, I'm not a seer. That's not the kind of sight that I deliver. I'm not going to tell you what's going to happen tomorrow. I'm going to tell you how tomorrow is happening today.

Now, this role of truth teller is something that Christianity begins to lift up. We see in the Gospel of Mark, right after Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah, which was something delivered from God as a revelation, flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, Simon Peter, as you recall. But right after Peter says, you are the Messiah, Jesus says to them that the Messiah must die and be betrayed and crucified. And this is something Jesus said, we read, with *parrhesia*. He said it openly. And that was something that was hard for Peter to hear because his vision of the Messiah was going to be someone who was going to bring them through uninterrupted prosperity and return the honor back to Israel

Parrhesia in the New Testament has something different than how it was practiced in Antiquity by Socrates. It had something different than how it was practiced by Amos. It had two inflection points, some of which you can see as a kind of foreshadowing in the Hebrew Bible, but comes to the full in the New Testament in these two characteristics. These two features are that Christian *parrhesia* believed and trusted that God was listening. By that I mean that for Socrates, all that mattered was the truth you spoke to power. And for Socrates, all that mattered was to somehow hold together what he called *bios*, which we get the word biology, but which means life in the fullest sense. Not just biological life, but life in the fullest sense with the city-state, or polis.

When Christians believe and trust that God is listening, and of course this comes from the very deepest resources in the prophetic tradition in Israel. When

Christians believe that God is listening, they understand that God is calling them to speak and they dare not say anything else. And it also means that God hears them when no one else hears them because the word they are delivering is from God. The second thing that is key to *parrhesia*, and what makes it a distinctly Christian practice is this, that another world is possible.

You see, that again is what Socrates didn't see. It was only the physical world that he knew. The only world, the world of push and pull. Socrates didn't see another world as possible, a world that would fulfill everything that we have been created to be. And even when Moses speaks to power, it is because of the covenant God made. It's still of this worldly condition that they're speaking to. It is only for Christians to say another world is possible.

And that world, as Paul made clear in Ephesians, from which I'm reading, it's the mystery of the gospel. It's not formed by *bios*, but *logos*, by the word that has been made flesh in Jesus Christ. That gospel has been formed and shaped by love. Because it is love for which we have been made. It's love with which we are made out of, through God's love, sharing God's love with us and giving us life. It is the love of Christ that saves us. Love is that bridge and that way of discovering that other world, that world that has the possibility of being that we are called to strive for, that we are called to speak to.

Now, I want to challenge you today. I want you to read anything from Dr. King today, whether it be the letter from the Birmingham Jail or the later writings that were published in 1968 after he passed away. I want to invite you to read anything. And I suggest to you that what you'll see in Dr. King is the perfect practice of Christian truth telling in *parrhesia*. It will always have a sense that God is listening and it is God who is calling us to account. And it will always have in it the promise that another world is possible.

Do you see what I'm trying to say today? I'm hoping that it's breaking forth because that hermeneutic, that kind of interpretation, it wasn't just a way to speak. It was a way to live. It was a way to be. It was who we were called to be. And on this day in which we give thanks for Dr. King, the best way to honor him is to step into his speech. And not merely to lift up the biography to enshrine it, as much as it is worthy of being enshrined, we need to step into his speech.

That is the question that we have to struggle with today. I am grateful for people like the Reverend William Barber and his Poor People's campaign because there's no way that I can look at him and not see through to Dr. King. He is keeping alive a kind of tradition of truth telling, and I hope that his health is preserved and that he has a long life. And I am grateful that he is starting to teach at Yale University.

But there's more than one way to be truth tellers. One of the challenges we have today is that the method and levers of changing public opinion have become more complex than Dr. King's time. In those days, you could create through mass demonstration a fundamental change in sensibilities. And what we've seen in the recent past when people have stood up and shouted and said no more, it's not that what they were saying was not true, it's that the communicative sphere has become more complex.

How do we leverage change today? I still think it comes by truth telling. I still think it comes by listening to God. I still think it comes by saying to each other, another world is possible, by saying to the world that another world is possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ. But we live in a time in which we will have to adopt, as a friend of mine likes to say, a differentiated strategy. We have to let that speech act in our lives come out in multiple ways because there are going to be multiple ways in which we can leverage change and we cannot do it simply by protest.

And it's not because I'm not afraid to protest. It's me speaking truth about where I am. When I marched, I noticed that I was the safest human being on earth because of my race, because of my social location, because I had a collar. I was never in danger. The world is different today. I'm not saying worse, but I am saying different. And so how we engage and practice this truth telling has to become more nuanced.

And when I think of the Reverend Charles G. Adams, I see someone who is in many ways a practitioner of that differentiated strategy through this church. Think of the ways in which he created economic opportunities for the area. Think of the ways in which he multiplied clergy to lead the churches around us. Think of the ways in which he advocated for human rights in South Africa. The first time I heard the name Charles G. Adams wasn't in the United States, it was when I led a group of people, a student to South Africa, and they asked me if I had heard of him and I said, not yet because I am weirdly ambitious.

What I'm saying is that the practice of truth telling isn't just the moment in which we point our fingers at the powers that be, because the powers that be have become incredibly subtle, haven't they, in how they handle such people. But the truth telling you and I are called to might be letting our actions speak and in building communities that defy characterization.

One of the things that I am so grateful for - and I have a lot to be grateful for today. I want to make sure that, I want to say thank you to Reverend Jonathan for his incredible liturgy and his incredible leadership today. And to the musicians. I know many of you, I am so grateful for all of you. And I want to say Ms. Barry, I hope that I can preach after you sing any day. It'd be a - right? I mean, that was such a blessing. Oh my God.

But one of the things that I feel like we can do today as a kind of truth telling together is this incredible partnership that has been evolving between Christ Church Cranbrook and Hartford Memorial Baptist Church. Because I think that there are opportunities here with us today that we are only beginning to scratch the surface of, and things that we don't always speak about because it's our work together and the world around us that we're doing. But I want to pick up too and lift up too.

The first is the work we're doing with the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, which is to create an ecumenically diverse and deliberately diverse group of clergy, to develop our skills for leadership so that we can build a beloved community together in Detroit. And that has already attracted the attention of major foundations who are asking us to propose something even larger that will extend our work, not only from Detroit, but to Atlanta too, as our first step. Of course, that road has been paved. Not only because my best friend is the Bishop of Atlanta, but because of the incredible history that this church has had with the churches in Atlanta.

And the second thing that I get excited about is recently we were approached again by a foundation that wants to work with us on literacy. And so Christian and I have been discussing a collaborative project that we can do together where we can work on adult literacy, because we want to call it the Hartford-Cranbrook Gap Project. Does that not sound amazing to you? Because there are no better words in Detroit to say than Cranbrook and Hartford together. It just conveys wow! That's not just your normal GED. The Hartford-Cranbrook Gap project. Because we believe that if we can come together as a church, we can do great things together.

And that's just the beginning. That is just the beginning. Wherever you are today, whoever you are today, you'll be called at one point or another to bear witness. Wherever you are today, no matter who you are called to be today, you're going to be called to speak the truth. That truth might be an obvious thing and you might be the child that says that the emperor has no clothes - and isn't it funny about that old story about the Emperor's New Clothes that it was a child, the person who had the least political power in the room, but was the least involved in the system that saw things clearly. And let that be a lesson to all of us because sometimes the truth comes to us about ourselves, about our work, about who we are.

Wherever you are, I wish that we would have a double portion of the spirit of Dr. King in terms of the truth we have to share with one another. And I wish and pray today that you would have that awareness of God listening, and that confidence that another world is possible.

In one of the last things that Dr. King wrote that was published in 1968, he wrote this: "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of a time. Life often leaves us standing bare naked and dejected with a lost opportunity, but we still have a choice today. Non-violent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. This may be mankind's last chance to choose between chaos and community."

You and I know chaos. We know chaos too well, and we know that today we are called to community. May God give us the words to say. May God give us the heart that listens. May God give us the faith and hope and love to deliver to all the message that another world is possible.

Amen.