



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of loving, liberating, and life giving God. Amen.

Well, all I know is thank God I'm nothing like that pharisee. Phew! End of sermon. Two weeks ago, Father Bill kicked off this sermon series we're doing on Space for Grace. And the theme really resonated with me because despite all the things we've been talking about lately regarding our newly renovated building, you know, the incredible Sunday school classrooms, that gorgeous atrium, the amazing space we now have for ministries that will be generated out of this place.

At the end of the day, what's always made this church special to me was never the physical place, as beautiful as it is, but the space for grace that we make together. As Bill said, a place is physical, but a space - a space is transcendent. Space pierces the veil between Heaven and Earth. You can leave a place with great memories, some amazing pictures that you can post on Facebook. But a space, space can leave you a changed person.

Last week, Pastor Manisha talked about the space we create beyond these walls. Today I want to touch on the space for grace we create between us, which immediately brought me back to when we first moved to Michigan several years ago. The house we found was amazing, much larger than anything we could afford in San Diego. Big backyard, trees all around. It was the house of our dreams in every way, and yet it still felt kind of sterile. Our pictures weren't up. There was furniture, but it didn't feel lived in. There were no stains on the carpet to remind me of where the girls spilled grape juice that one time. It didn't have any memories yet. It was a beautiful house, but it wasn't yet a home.

For me, that didn't happen until our house blessing party. We invited everyone we could think of, the whole church, the whole neighborhood. Joe's enormous family, his coworkers at the salon. We had a band. We had a food truck. Some plates got broken, wine got spilled. The cops got called, twice, by the way, which has to be a record for house blessings. But somehow amidst all that craziness, I remember looking across the room and seeing the most unlikely of interactions taking place. I remember seeing a neighbor who I had never met carrying on with the parishioner who I really just only barely knew.

I remember looking over and seeing the bishop's wife laughing out loud at a joke that one of Joe's cousins must have told that may have been a little off color. Who knows? The woman who built our house was there carrying on with

members of the choir, I saw. It's like the scenes that you would see at a wedding, right? When two families kind of come together and all these little relationships start being born. It was somewhere in the midst of all of that, that that house started to feel like a home, that that place became a space.

I wonder if that's our mission as Christians. I know it's one of the missions of this church to make all the world a space. A space where hospitality and healing, welcome and inclusion, compassion and mercy reign, where total strangers mixed with friends, where family mingles with neighbors, outsiders hang out with insiders until each group blends with the other, until the lines get blurred so that they no longer matter. Because in that gorgeous, glorious moment, the space between us becomes filled with nothing but grace.

And if that sounds a little, you know, philosophical to you, think about someone that you have become close with enough over the years that maybe when you go out to eat now, for example, you no longer worry about splitting the bill down to that last decimal point. You don't pull out that app to figure out your share, and if they pay, you don't feel guilty, and you don't even necessarily feel obligated to reciprocate because the place between you is no longer accounted for, the ledger is gone. It's moved beyond the transactional to a space where our lives sufficiently overlap, that we're no longer counting.

That's when you know - that's when you know you've left the old economy and begun to enter into God's, God's economy of giving and grace. That's the kind of space between us that Jesus would have us create with the whole world. It's what loving others as ourselves looks like, and it's never been easy. And I think it's no question that these last couple of years of pandemic have made it even harder. But the good news is the church has always been something of a personal trainer in this regard, teaching us to create space for grace between total strangers, like a coach who challenges us when we need it, who nudges us when we'd rather not.

Here at Christ Church, for example. Did you know we actually train people to be professional visitors for folks who are homebound? Visitors who come with no agenda, no to-do list. They don't shop for them. They don't clean their house. Some of them bring communion, but not all. Some just come to be with, to sit, to listen, to share stories, and to be present with someone who would otherwise be alone. And you can imagine we work the other side as well, encouraging those who could use a visitor to overcome whatever pride or feelings of unworthiness that hold them back. Right? We hear things like, oh, you know, Chris, I don't think so. I'm getting along okay on my own. Certainly there's other people that need this more than me. So we nudge them, we encourage them to give it a try, and they're always happy they did.

We work to create small groups of all kinds as well, dinner gatherings, bible studies, book groups, because it's in small groups that we can create safe space, space to be ourselves, to share more openly and more honestly, our hopes, our dreams, our struggles with our faith, and to find in that vulnerability a strength that we all need. That too can be something that some people are reluctant about at first, but it's not uncommon that once they try it, they don't want to stop.

I just found out the other day, one of the dinner groups that we formed way before the pandemic, it was only supposed to meet for a handful of months, they're still going strong more than three years later. And there's dozens of stories like that. I'm looking at some of the Bible group members right now. Also, something we thought we'd just do during the pandemic, it's still going strong.

God is relational and so are we. Whether we always want to admit it or not, we all yearn for a space where we can be seen and heard and known for more than just our name but for what's going on in our life. Where people know about those chest results we've been waiting on, where they pray for us before we even need to ask. Where they know our favorite ice cream to deliver when we're recovering. Those are the muscles that we seek to build here at Christ Church Cranbrook. Those are the relationships we want to help you form. That's what we practice at the altar rail every week, because it's the world that God would have us create.

And our gospel today gives us the key, I think. The key to unlocking that space and that key is humility. In the parable today, Jesus contrasts those who think they can do life under their own power, with those who know their need for a higher one. And it can get tricky because like the Pharisees, we too - we too can get a little self satisfied following the rules, going to church, serving on committees, paying our pledge. We can fool ourselves with all of our success, thinking that our careers and our status must be some kind of a sign that we're doing something right. But living the American Dream has never been a substitute for bringing into reality God's dream. Following religious rules is never a substitute for salvation.

I think this parable is reminding us that humility is the key because it allows us to see what Jesus has been trying to show us, that my humanity is bound up in yours, that I can't be me until you are free to be you. That the person in front of me is not an obstacle, not an outsider to be feared, not an adversary to overcome, but a fellow child of God whose hopes and dreams spring from the same God-shaped hole in their heart, as do my very own.

Humility and being human, they're interrelated. They share the same Latin root, humus, which means earth or soil. Being humble means keeping ourselves grounded, grounded in the truth that no matter what we think we've

accomplished, no matter what heights we've achieved, no matter how much better we might think we are, at the end of the day, we are all dust. And to dust we shall all return. Remembering that before we die changes the space between us while we yet live.

Humility in our relationships with God and others, it upends our perspectives and opens our life and the world in ways we could never dream. And that humility applies not just to our relationships, but to everything, including our relationship with what we think we own, with what we have. And yes, even our money. Jesus preached about money more than praying because he knew letting go of that money would be perhaps the highest of hurdles we would ever face. We can accept a lot of things on faith, can't we? But money, money's often the last thing that we hold onto tightest. Where we insist we know best, where we insist that our plans are better than God's.

That's why pledging at the end of the day is a spiritual practice. It's a spiritual practice more than anything. And yes, yes, our pledge funds our mission. Yes, it helps us to plan our programs. It helps us to dream big dreams. Yes, it will have a real impact on real people's lives and may even save a few. Yes, but its real impact is ultimately a spiritual one. Because giving calls the question of our faith, it calls us to that space between us and it asks, what will we fill it with? Will we fill it with fear? Will we feel fill it with scarcity and the need for control? Or will we decide - we decide to fill it with trust, to fill it with faith, not in ourselves, but in God. Not in our own power, but in God's power.

And let me tell you, having nudged more than a few people over the years to make a pledge for the very first time, to increase their existing pledge, to shock themselves with their generosity, to tithe perhaps, whatever it happened to be, I can tell you, I have never had a single person ever tell me that they regret it. In fact, over the years, they have said two things consistently. The first, you know, Chris, I didn't miss it. And the second is something like this in their own words, you know, Chris, somehow I feel more connected to God. I feel more connected to this church. I feel like I belong more deeply to this community. I have less anxiety in my life. I have more peace in my life. I feel like I'm in the flow of life once more.

Our decisions are the difference. It's what makes the rich man walk away and make the disciples drop their nets. God gives us the power and the freedom to decide what will we do with the distance between us? Will we allow it to just remain a place, or will we allow it to become a space for grace?

Amen.