



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

What more does God want from me__ - The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost- 10_10_2021

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.

When I was in college, I heard a turn of phrase that has been with me ever since. And it was that it's important to read the Bible, but it's more important to let the Bible read you. And this meant for me then, and it means for me now, that as much as we need to learn as much as we can about the scriptures, to study it and to explore the setting in which it was written, the authorship, and whether it was written by a person named Paul or not. As much as we can dig deeply into the scriptures and study and understand the original languages, at the end of the day the purpose of reading the scriptures is to allow that living Word of God to read us. Lay open all that is in us, identify and isolate and pull out the call of God in us, the presence of the spirit in us. In all of these things, when we do those things, the Bible begins to read us.

And this is a critical distinction for us to make, because so many times we can spend our time letting the scripture sit in our heads, but not let it sink down to our hearts. And of course, in order for the scriptures to help us do anything in life, it tends to have to begin with our affections, with our will to help us enact in our practice and in our lives, the Word of God for us.

And I begin this sermon in this way, because there is a powerful way in which today's Gospel from Mark is a presentation to us - an invitation for us to see ourselves inside the scriptures, to let these scriptures read us. And as much as I can tell you a bit about the context of it, or go into the setting in which it was given, the more important thing for us to do today is to let that scripture sink in and to meet the merciful gaze of Christ that emerges in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark. We need to place ourselves, in other words, in the place of the ruler who comes and kneels before Jesus and asks for Him to reveal the path to salvation and eternal life. We have to dare that vulnerability, otherwise we will not see the Christ who loves him and bids him to change.

Every time we read this passage, we come against many other ways in which people have thought about it through the years. And I find this whole interpretive tradition to be so powerful because I've seen other attempts of people to find what is sinful and broken in themselves so that they might find the grace that is God's. And one picture that I have before you that's an incredible

interpretation of it, is on your bulletin cover and it's by a painter named Watts. He did it in 1894, George Frederic Watts. And it's of this passage. Watts captures this right at that moment in which the ruler begins to grieve and turn away from Jesus.

Watts had a kind of technique of painting in which he wanted to continue and retrieve the paintings of the Renaissance. And so you can see the kind of theatricality of this piece. You have all of these incredible folds and the garments, the rich garments that the ruler is wearing, and you see his face hidden from God, which is another hint that we're dealing, not just with an event that he's remembering, but a kind of message to us. And all of this is meant to convey a person who is stuck in himself. In the Renaissance Canon, when you have folds in a garment, it's meant to convey intimacy with God. Folds that you cannot see, but you know are there. So when Mary is in the midst of her adoration of God and a painter paints her with all these folds and our garment, that's meant to say to you, the viewer, that Mary has this interior life of prayer that is brought her even closer to God, that has allowed God to somehow meet her and speak to her face to face and heart to heart.

But here in Watts' painting, those folds are meant to speak about a kind of interiority that hides from God, that does not want to let go of certain things, the stuff that we use to turn away and reject the invitation of Jesus. And so Watts entitles the painting *For He Had Great Possessions*. And this is meant to invite us to think about those things we have, those possessions we have that keep us from seeing and meeting Jesus. And it comes down at the end to a kind of either/or for the viewer. Are we going to follow the ruler into that kind of solace of shame and grieving? Or are we going to turn to God and enter into the daring act of discipleship and relationship with God?

How do you interpret this scripture? Yesterday, I was with the youth and other leaders in the church, as we were doing a cleanup day in Pontiac at our community partner, Micah 6, and we were hauling boards and we were hauling plastic and we were hauling pipes. The youth got just exhausted and they were sitting on these little logs and they're eating gummy bears. I came up to them and I said, "Guys, I need your help." And I read to them the gospel for today. I said, "What's going on here?" And they said, "Well, it's simple, really. It's not a hard gospel. You just have to not let money get in the way of your relationship with Jesus."

And it was so obvious to them. I was so proud of them. And I said, "And what is wealth to you?" And someone said, "Wealth is my family. I love my sister and she means everything to me. Wealth is my family." And another said, "Wealth are my friends." Still another says, "My wealth is the need to be good, to follow the rules, just like the ruler." And one said, "My wealth is money." And I said, "What keeps

you from following Jesus?" And one said, "It's really hard to put all your eggs in one basket." I love that response.

What is wealth for you? Of course, this involves possessions and money. And money is one of those things that we can use to good or evil. Money is wonderful. It allows us to experience incredible prosperity and comfort, but money can also be our own kind of way of battering ourselves down from any kind of authentic relationship. Money can insulate us and isolate us and keep us out of community or out of those connections that could help us make productive change in our lives. So many times I've seen people who are wonderful, wealthy people suffer from addiction and never find the help they need because their money protected them and kept them miserable.

What is money doing for you? Is money getting in the way of your relationship with Jesus? Or perhaps wealth for you is the kind of way in which you have managed to control your life. And like the ruler, you have created a religion that is primarily rule-based and focused on rewards. And that kind of religion is wonderful. It's slightly addictive in its own right. You can create for yourself a kind of narrow space in which you function and operate and you can feel always that you're in the room. But at the end of the day, Jesus did not come so that you can follow the rules better. Jesus came because those rules are not enough. Jesus came to begin a new relationship with us, a relationship of face to face, a relationship of heart to heart.

Or perhaps wealth for you is not something positive or not something you're proud of, but actually something that keeps you out of relationship. And it's here that that original image of the ruler from Watts' painting connects with me because that ruler is consumed by shame. He feels unworthy of being a disciple. And perhaps for some of us, the biggest obstacle we put before God and put in between us and a living relationship with Jesus is the belief that we are unworthy and unlovable and small.

What is wealth for you? The gospel has no place for shame. The gospel does not reward rules. The gospel wants you to share your wealth and to find the freedom that comes from the liberation of giving it away. In all of these things, Jesus has come to us. How is Jesus reading you today? My favorite element in this scripture, one that I spend my time thinking about again and again, and it is a bit of a reading of the scripture, but it's also a way that that scripture can read you and me comes in that moment where Jesus, we read, looks upon the ruler and loves him.

And the Greek there is a form of agape, a kind of self sacrificial love, but it's placed in the aorist tense, which is an indefinite point in the past. And so one way to translate that line, "Jesus looking at him, loved him." One way to translate that line is to say, and Jesus felt love for him. Or maybe that Jesus remembered

that He loved him, which is kind of realistic. He was probably irritating Jesus, getting in His way, and, oh, wait, I love this person.

Or maybe it's Jesus having loved this ruler from the beginning, invited him to return the love that Jesus was showing him. Because, of course, the fact that Jesus loved the ruler with agape is a kind of revelation that behind all of that invitation to relationship is one who had given up everything and came into our midst and was willing to suffer all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things to be in relationship with us. You see, Jesus by inviting the ruler to leave everything, to sell everything, to give everything away and to follow Him, Jesus was merely inviting that ruler to enter into the space of His love and the love that He had for him to return it and to make it into something new.

In 2018, I began to experience that love in a new way. I was in a time of dryness. I was in a time of a little bit of depression, and I decided to take things head on. I entered therapy on a weekly basis and I did the Ignatian exercises over a year. And my Ignatian instructor was a 40-year-old yoga instructor, and I just believe that that was God's way of humiliating me a little bit. Like this would be, bring me someone young and callow, Lord, because whatever.

It was the most profound moment of transformation in my life. And what has happened over the past few years has been just a small step in a longer journey. And one of the concepts I want to share with you today is from that Ignatian exercise. And it comes from a kind of belief that Ignatius had, that we were always called to be more of who God created us to be. The concept in Latin is *magis*, which is Latin for "more." That when God created us, God invited us into a relationship in which in order to become more of who God called us to be, we sometimes have to let go of things that we had firmly held onto at one point in our lives. Things that enthralled us; foolishness that we spent too much time with a career that we valued; a relationship, which at the end of the day did us no good.

We had to let go and become indifferent of all those things in order to be more of who God created us to be. What is the *magis* for you? What more is in store for you? How can God call you in Christ to follow Him and be transformed? This is the invitation to let the scriptures read you today. May your heart be open and may you experience Christ face to face and heart to heart, the merciful Savior who came to you and seeks you out and loves you through and through.

Amen.