



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

You're No Better Than Him_ - The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost - 9_18_2022

Grace and peace to you from God, our Father, and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So you heard right, there isn't wax in your ears. This is really a parable about a man who has stolen, who has swindled and squandered his employer's property, is caught, and before he gets canned, continues to play fast and loose with what is not his own, reducing the debts of people who don't owe him, but owe his boss. So he gives away huge amounts of profits so that when he is fired, this dastardly devious manager doesn't have to beg, doesn't have to dig, but just can go knocking on the door of his new friends and say, hey, can I crash on your couch? And not only does his boss commend him, Jesus insists we follow his lead.

Now I could stand up here and preach to you ad infinitum about how you cannot serve God and your wallet. And I could tell you over and over again, how any wealth that you have is supposed to go and take care of those who are in need. And I was sitting there getting this sermon ready, and I need to tell you something, I couldn't muster up any passion to talk about you and your money. I really don't care today. Because I was captured by that despicable, dishonest, diabolical, sleazy manager, because you know what, he reminded me of someone. He reminded me of you and me.

Now, okay, this might be a little offensive to you all because you don't cheat, you don't swindle, you don't steal, betray, or lie. So saying that you're the same as this spineless dude might be a little harsh. So let me convince you that you are no better than this common thief. During my summer vacation, I picked up a book entitled "The Truth About Us: The Very Good News About How Very Bad We Are," written by Brant Hansen. And I need you to know, full disclosure, this whole entire sermon is shaped by Hansen's argument. And a summary of his argument appears on the first pages of his book. He begins with a letter:

"Dear everybody. We have a serious problem. All of us think we are good people, but Jesus says we're not.

Sincerely,

Brant Hansen."

And before he goes on to quote Jesus, he spends chapter after chapter citing social science researchers and study after study and book after book that show that you and I all have a tendency not just to think highly of ourselves and our own decision making capabilities, but to actually think that we are better than others at most everything. And that we justify our actions all the time, even if there's evidence that we are wrong or we've done something wrong. We humans, we have this self-preservation instinct to think the decisions that we make and actions that we undertake are right. And that leads to self rightness, self righteousness, and self delusion.

For instance, 93% of us think we are better than the average driver. Statistically impossible. We also think we are way friendlier than most people. We are smarter than the average person. And here's my favorite. Almost every single one of us believes we are more humble than the other person. And to prove this, let me state this: I am a good driver. I am definitely way more friendlier than anyone I know. I am smarter than the average American and yes, I pride myself in being humble and having that "aw-shucks" attitude. In summary, I am better than you. I am Manisha and I am self delusional.

Here's an experiment that Hansen offers. I want you to imagine yourself in this really crowded grocery store parking lot, and you're looking around to park your car. You're driving around the parking lot and you spy a Lexus that pulls into, what, the handicapped spot. And you look, and there's no handicapped sticker on the dash and there's no handicapped symbol on the license plate and the guy steps out of the Lexus and he ain't handicapped. And you're fuming because he's just broken the law and you're like, something should be done about this. People shouldn't be doing this. Meanwhile, he manages to go in the grocery store, get his six pack of beer, come back, get in the Lexus and take off. Now, are you better than he is? Of course you are. Because you're not going to so blatantly do something so illegal and so wrong, just so you can get your evening libations.

Now I want you to imagine that you're done at the grocery store and now you're ready to go home in your car. And so off you go, you drive home. How fast are you going? Are you under the speed limit? Of course you're not, but your crime is not as bad as that beer guzzling handicapped parker guy, right? Even though speeding leads to more accidents than taking a handicapped spot in a parking lot, but no, you're convinced you are a good person. And so you're going to make all kinds of rational explanations to justify your irrational judgments.

And it's even worse than that. It's worse than thinking that we are better than others. We're actually hardwired to be biased to ourselves. It's a survival mechanism. We need to think we're right about making very complex decisions. And there's hundreds of biases that you and I have that have been discovered by social scientists and we do it without thinking about it. So here's a couple of

my favorite. There's the Ikea bias. Ikea. This is where you think that something you've made or put together is more valuable because you did it. I actually have an Ikea dresser, one of those that you get from Ikea all the time and I did put it together and we are never getting rid of it. Why? Because it's worth a lot. And you might have the same Ikea dresser, but mine's worth more than yours.

Now, here's another fun bias. Confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is that once you have made a decision, you will tend to look for and remember information that confirms what you already think and ignores anything that leads to cognitive dissonance. Now I have an important confession to make to you. I do have a long standing conflict with many on the staff at Christchurch Cranbrook, including the rector. So let me go on the record. I am a Windows PC, Android cell phone user. Thank you. And the rector and most of the staff use monolithic Macs and made-for-dummies iPhones. And I love to point out how I can customize my platforms, but their machines utilize the "keep it simple, stupid" theme.

Now a couple of days ago, since we've all moved back into our offices, we got a brand new church printer. And I'm the IT girl, so I was installing it on my computer and I was having some struggles. So I figured something was wrong with the printer. So I called the tech guy and it took him about a half an hour and several workarounds, but we figured it out and we got it installed. So as I was chatting with him, I said to him, hey, are any of my colleagues having any trouble with this printer? And he said, are you kidding on the Macs, we get this done in a couple minutes.

There's a bias called "attitude polarization." And this is the phenomenon when we say something publicly, we believe we must stick to that position and we will remain entrenched, even if there's evidence presented to us different from our position and as Hansen points out, it takes a shocking amount of humility to change our stance in public. And frankly, I don't have it. So I'm here to tell you in this pulpit that Windows and Android are far superior to any Mac products, and guess what? I really believe that. And so does Father Chris.

In a paper entitled *Telling More Than We Can Know*, social scientists set up another experiment. This one with pantyhose, this was done in the '70s, back when women wore pantyhose. And they asked women who were coming out of a department store to examine four pairs of pantyhose and to indicate which one they liked the most. The women were thorough. They checked out all the different characteristics of pantyhose and what you need and what you don't need. And they were able to say, this one's better. This one's softer. This one's superior quality. And then the researchers told them that they were all the same. And the response from the women, they told the researchers they were wrong.

Even in the face of truth, we still come up with reasons of our own rightness. All of this is to say that we are busy convincing ourselves over and over again, that

we are better than we are, and we're more right than we are. We work really hard at it and it's quite exhausting. But Jesus, Jesus comes down to the earth to remind us that our sense of self rightness, it actually prohibits us from experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom of God. You want to enter into the kingdom of God, you leave your need to be right and to be better than others at the door, and walk into the beautiful space where amazing things can happen, because God is at work and you are not thinking too highly of yourself.

And Jesus says this over and over again in the scriptures with warnings and admonitions and parables. He tells the proud Pharisees that the prostitutes and the tax collectors are going to get into the Kingdom of Heaven before you. He literally says that in the Gospel of Matthew. Truly, I tell you the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. Talk about cognitive dissonance.

Jesus tells another parable directed to those who place their trust in themselves. There's a Pharisee, there's a tax collector, and they both go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prays, "Thank you, Lord, that I'm not like those people. Not like the evil doers and the robbers and this tax collector. I give away a tenth of my income. I fast twice a week. I do good things." And the tax collector, he too prays and his prayer, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." And Jesus asks, now, who do you think goes away made righteous by God? And in case we don't get the big hint, do you know the only person Jesus says will be with Him in paradise? It's not Peter. It's not Paul. It's not Mother Teresa or an ancient equivalent. It's a thief that is hanging on a cross and turns to Jesus and says, please remember me. He was so desperate. And Jesus looks at this despicable man and says you, today, you are going to be with me in paradise.

And what do this thief on the cross and this dishonest manager have in common? They're both desperate. Maybe we need to rename this parable, not call it the parable of the dishonest manager, but the parable of the desperate manager, because that is what we all need to do if we want to enter into the kingdom of God. If you remain convinced of your own goodness, you will make your own way in this world. You can be like the man who thanked God that he was not like other men. And here's the thing, you then have no need for God. You are self-reliant. You can provide for yourself. You can be in charge of your own future. But as one Christian put it tersely, the principle of hell is "I am on my own."

Only the desperate need God. They're the ones who say, I can't do this on my own. They're the ones who experience the in-breaking of Jesus in their lives and miraculous in life-changing ways. They're the ones who let God's way rule their lives because they already tried their own way, and it got them unemployed or nailed to a cross. That manager, he was desperate. He had nothing. And dare I say this, his plan to take the bills of his boss's debtors and slash them so that he

could have a place to go and they could experience some relief, I believe that was inspired by the Holy Spirit. I think it was God who showed him a way out.

How desperate are you? Philip Yancey wrote a book called "Amazing Grace. And he said it this way, you ask most people how they get into heaven and they say, be good. But Jesus' stories contradict that answer. All you have to do is cry, "help." So today I invite you to be like that dishonest manager and be desperate. Stop relying on yourself to get through this life. Stop it. Give up finding solutions in order to figure out your present and your future. Let go of being right, because chances are, you're not. Admit you're as irrational as the next person, probably just as wrong as they are, and none of us is that great. We're all as broken as that manager.

And then let the Kingdom of Heaven break into your life and watch what happens. Your enemies start becoming friends. There are gaps that are bridged between problems and reconciliation can occur. And amazing things happen when you believe there's no way out. And because you're no longer prideful, no longer relying on yourself, instead letting God make a way, you will have a peaceable life. So as Brant Hansen puts it, God is desperately waiting for you to be desperate.

Amen.