



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

About a month or so after my wedding, my husband Joe and I were pulling out of the driveway on the way to the airport for our honeymoon when one of our neighbors came running over to the car. She had been at the wedding and she wanted to say hello and just tell us how beautiful it was, how much she enjoyed it. We told her we had a plane to catch. So she blew us a kiss and as we were pulling away, she yelled, oh, wait, wait, wait. One more thing. Can I just give you a little advice? Okay. She said, if you find yourself on your first big fight during the honeymoon, don't panic. It's perfectly normal, she says.

Well, I'm happy to report that we did not get into that first big fight, which is actually pretty amazing considering pretty much everything went wrong. It started with British Airways losing our luggage for just about the entire two weeks. We had to be evacuated from our hotel in Rome because of bedbugs. So there was that. I had nothing but one pair of contacts because everything was in the luggage. So on that first night, I put them in just a glass of plain water because that's all we had. I left it in the bathroom and the next morning I get up to put them in and the glass is gone. Joe, what happened to the glass of water that was right here on the counter? He's like, I got thirsty in the middle of the night. Why do you ask?

So you can imagine, right, the comedy of errors? And as stressful as all that was, the dramas we had to endure, we never really did have that big fight that Drew warned us about, because I have no doubt that we always had a common enemy. First, it was the airlines who kept promising to deliver our luggage and failing, and then it was that hotel, but it seemed like it was us against the world on that trip. Have you ever had an experience like that where you form a common bond or a deeper bond because of a common enemy? If you really look around and pay attention, I think it happens way more often than we appreciate. Every notice at a football game, you can suddenly find yourself hugging total strangers because Michigan just kicked that winning field goal against you know who?

It happens in our families, doesn't it? All of our dysfunctions and all of our petty squabbles, they seem to be miraculously healed when that one particular in-law comes to visit and stays for a long time. My hometown of Santa Cruz could not

have been more divided politically, but after a massive earthquake, we completely came together to dig out that town. And we had a version of that after 9/11, didn't we? Right here in this country. There was a real sense of unity in the aftermath of that tragedy, at least for a little while.

It turns out common enemies are such a powerful uniting force that we will actually manufacture them in order to recreate that sense of unity and common purpose. And that's when it becomes known as scapegoating. Our theologian in residence a few years ago, James Allison argued that scapegoating is in fact a foundational mechanism in human society. A pattern as old as Cain and Abel, and probably earlier than that. Early human societies discovered that an easy way to maintain peace and to distract us from our problems was to find someone who is innocent to blame. And so rather than face the complex realities of the world, rather than deal with the changing times, rather than own up to our own failures or to deal with our unjust systems, we learned it was so much easier to put a face to our fears. And the best targets proved to be those who were already marginalized or vulnerable.

In the Middle Ages, the Black Plague was blamed on Jews. Immigrants and refugees have always been the go-to scapegoats in the face of unemployment or crime. Japanese Americans were rounded up after Pearl Harbor. Gay men demonized during the AIDS crisis. Muslim Americans after 9/11. African Americans at pretty much every period in American history. The examples are legion, and chances are you've experienced it yourself in some way. The elderly, the disabled, single moms, we've all been hit from time to time, and today it's the transgender community.

And I bring this up because it's essentially my read of today's gospel. And certainly at one level you can read it as a miracle story, testifying to the power of Jesus over the power of evil so that we might believe. And it is certainly that, but I can't also help but notice a subtext suggesting that this isn't merely a story about a man possessed by demons, but a deeper story about the role this demonized man played in that community. And for me, the tipoff is in their response to when he's healed. In all the other healing stories in the gospels, if you think back, the crowds are amazed. They fall to the ground, praising God. They press in trying to touch Jesus in the hopes that they too might be healed.

But did you notice what they did here? When they find the man clothed and sitting calmly at the feet of Jesus, how did they respond? Did they shout, Hosanna? Were they filled with hope? No, they were afraid, says Luke. Is it possible that they were afraid because Jesus had just taken away their boogeyman? Could it be by healing this man, Jesus has upset the social order of this town in some way, threatening the peace, the false peace that it had been built upon? And at some level they know it, because notice as well, when they discover who healed him, what do they do to Jesus? Again, do they approach

Him? Do they invite Him to come to town to heal their sick daughter? No, they want to cast Him out as well.

Again, it fits the mold because Jesus didn't just heal this man. He exposed a system. Because when our rightness is based upon someone else's wrongness, when our superiority is based on their inferiority, when the boundary we draw between us and them is removed, when the big lie is shown for what it is, it is terrifying because where does it leave us? What happens to that story that we've been telling ourselves about ourselves when the one that we've been casting out is shown to be one of us all along? It forces us to reckon with the system that cast him out in the first place. And that can be scary indeed.

But the good news, the good news is Jesus comes to write us a new story, to show us an alternative to the othering and the ostracizing and the cycle of violence that it perpetuates. Jesus comes to show us a new way, the way of love, a way to come together without having to be over and against someone else. And Jesus begins writing this new story when He restores this man. And He will finish it on Good Friday when Jesus takes on the role Himself and undoes the scapegoat mechanism once and for all by becoming the forgiving victim Himself. By showing us all that God loves us, regardless of the terrible things that we keep doing to one another and will never give up on us ever, even in death. He does this so that we might find the courage to begin to seek the unity and the security that we crave in this life. Not through a false peace, but through the truth of reconciliation.

And that is hard work, isn't it? It requires change. It requires listening. It requires us to set aside our pride and to enter into some humility. It requires empathy and compromise. Ask anyone who's married or been in any kind of long-term relationship of any kind. It means hanging in there after that first big fight. And the second one. And the third. It means being open to new perspectives and being willing to have ours changed. It means trying to see the image of God in the other and not giving up when it's hard to find because God doesn't give up on us.

In fact, if I were to suggest what we are called to do in response to this, I would start right there. Let us start to see with new eyes. Open our aperture up a bit wider, as Bill preached last week, because seeing our scapegoats is not always easy. They tend to be hidden because almost by definition, we have been so conditioned to believe they deserve it. And when we are so convinced of our rightness and their wrongness, it's hard to notice when we've joined the mob ourselves. As James Allison reminded us, the sure sign that you have a scapegoat is believing that you don't have a scapegoat.

Maybe that's why Jesus begins by asking his name, and perhaps that's a good place for us to start as well. Who are some of ours? Who do we blame when we see the nightly news? Who do we hope never moves in next door? Who do we hope our children will never marry? Who do we sometimes wish would just go

away so that things would go back to normal? And after we begin to see them, after we start to name them, the next thing we need to do is to speak up. To admit what's going on, to acknowledge the humanity of those that we have ostracized, to imagine that they have a story and to take the time to hear it. And then speak up. To name the big lie when we hear it, to defend those who have no voice, and to find the courage to say that is not who they are, and it's not who we are either.

And finally, after we start to see more clearly, after we start to speak out more loudly, we need to stand with, we need to get up and we need to show up. We need to go to the tombs on the outskirts of town and to stand at the margins until the margins are no more. And I can tell you from my own experience as a member of at least one out-group, nothing means more than to see those who have been on the inside stand with those of us on the outside. It had to mean something profound when thousands of white folks marched in Selma, Alabama, because I know how much it means when straight allies show up at Pride. Because when we do that, we become participants in the very same healing that Jesus begins today.

And notice how the story ends. Filled with gratitude, the man wants nothing more than to go with Jesus, but Jesus sends him back. Not in anger, not in retribution. He sends him back as the forgiving victim, just as Jesus does after the resurrection. Jesus knows that unless we return in forgiveness, the healing He begins is not complete. Because reclaiming our own humanity can only happen when we work to restore theirs. Our dignity, our wholeness is bound up in theirs. It turns out the entire human project, the real foundational mechanism was always intended to be mutual.

And so the story ends on a bit of a cliffhanger because it's also our story as well. How will it end for us? Will we find the courage to name those that we have othered? Will we go to the tombs of our own communities and stand with the demonized until the demonizing stops? Will we become the forgiving victim that helps to break the cycle so that the Kingdom of God might break in? On Earth as it is in Heaven, where there is no Jew or Gentile. No male, no female. No slave, no free. No in, no out. No us versus them. Just us.

Amen.