



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Please be seated. Good morning. To the God who does all things well; to the God who has given us another opportunity to gather together in sacred worship; to your rector and my good friend, Father Bill Danaher; to the entire pastoral and administrative staff here at Christ Church Cranbrook; to each and every one of you, my brothers and sisters, those here in the sanctuary and even those watching online: grace from our Father and peace from the Lord Jesus who is the Christ.

What a privilege it is for me to be with you on this Sunday. Our journey together began in 2023. I was sharing with the Saturday service that sometimes we make the right choice for the wrong reasons. I was sharing that I got a phone call from a friend of mine who was telling me about a cohort he thought I should participate in, and I respectfully told him I didn't have time. I'm not really interested. He said, no, it's really good. I was in it this year and it was a blessing to my life. And I said, good for you. I'm not really interested. And he said, no, it's with Christ Church Cranbrook. It's called the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies. And I said, well, that's good for them. I'm not really interested. And he said, it's only a six-month commitment, one Wednesday a month. I said, well, that sounds reasonable. I'm still not interested. And he said, well, it comes with an all-expenses-paid trip to New York. And I said, funny enough, there's some space in my schedule that just opened up.

And ever since then, the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, Christ Church Cranbrook, Father Bill and Reverend Chris and Reverend Manisha and Roxanne Perry, just the whole crew has just been a blessing to my life. And in a very real sense, I may not serve as the President of Ecumenical Theological Seminary without that journey then, and so allow me to say publicly what I have said privately. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you to those who have shared in what has already been a wonderful worship experience. To this magnificent choir, to all of those who have led us in scripture, thank you.

Allow me to add one more to your hearing. It comes from the Gospel of Luke. Luke chapter 19, beginning at verse one from the new revised standard version reads like this: "He entered (that is Jesus) Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd, he could not because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to

see Him because He was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome Him. All who saw it began to grumble and said he has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

May the Lord add a rich blessing to the reading and our hearing of God's holy Word. My brothers and my sisters, ladies and gentlemen, just a few days ago I was reminded that this season, which goes by a number of different names, is also award season. Award season is the period of time when not just art, but artists are regularly, annually celebrated for their work. Everyone seems these days to have their own award show. The MTV still has the VMAs. The BET network has the BET awards. There are the American Music Awards and the Country Music Television Awards. There are the Emmys, the Grammys, the Tonys, and the ESPYs. There are the NAACP Image Awards, the People's Choice Awards, and even the Golden Globes, which aired just last Sunday.

But more prestigious than all, and most anticipated every year are still the Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars. Just to give you some perspective, at the very first Academy Award ceremony, held in 1929, the entire ceremony lasted just 15 minutes, and tickets were only \$5. Among the 12 awards presented – that's basically one award a minute. Anyway, sorry. Among the 12 awards presented that evening was best actor and best actress in a leading role. However, it was eight years later that a new category was introduced, best supporting actor. This particular award was introduced following a number of complaints. Complaints from other actors and actresses. Complaints from would-be winners who felt like they'd missed out. Their grievance was simple. Unless you were the main character, unless you were the Tom Hanks, Tom Holland, or Denzel Washington, unless you were the Halle Berry, Sydney Sweeney, or Meryl Streep, it was difficult to get recognition from the Academy. These other actors understood that while there is value in those that dominate the stage, the headliner is not the only one who is worthy of our attention.

As I reflected on what word I might share with us on this annual observance of the life and legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., I could not help but see some synergy between those movie awards in 1929 and our modern culture. We love heroes, don't we? We love our big name players. We love our stars of the story, but oftentimes that leaves little to no room for anyone else. I would argue that this approach has a number of problems. One of which is this: I am convinced that sometimes we intentionally make our heroes so big as a way to separate us from them. Sometimes in lifting up the work of others, we excuse ourselves from the same expectations. But my friends, Dr. King's words ring true today just as they did from the pulpit of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in 1968 when he proclaimed that every one of us can be great because every one of us can serve.

Let me put it a different way. One of the monikers ascribed to Dr. King was that he was a drum major for justice. If you know anything about the band, drum major stand at the head, and there are very few next to them. Might I suggest by keeping the metaphor that while all of us may not be called to be drum majors, all of us have been called to join the band. All of us may not be leading actors or the stars of the show, but all of us have not just the opportunity, but dare I say, the responsibility to at least fulfill the role of God's best supporting actor.

Friends, the dominant biblical illustration I present today comes from the 19th chapter of the New Testament Gospel of Luke. "Therein Jesus' passing through Jericho, and as Jesus does, he attracts a crowd. There is, however, a short man in the midst who's trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, but he can't because of the crowd. Zacchaeus runs and jumps upon a sycamore tree to get a better view," and the text says, not only does Zacchaeus see Jesus, but Jesus sees Zacchaeus. He sees Zacchaeus and he calls him by name. He tells Zacchaeus, come down from there. And then Jesus invites himself over for dinner. Over their evening meal, Zacchaeus repents of his greedy lifestyle and pledges to sell half of all of his possessions, and Jesus responds that today, salvation has come to this house.

Oftentimes when we share in this passage of scripture, inevitably our eyes turn towards Zacchaeus and Jesus. They are the heroes of the story. They are the stars of the show. And oftentimes the lesson from this story is either that God's salvation is open to everyone or to pursue Jesus at any cost. But may I further suggest today that there might be another interpretation with which we can wrestle. I want to suggest that every now and then God does not call us either to see ourselves in the position of God looking down or looking up at those who need us, nor even we all the time put ourselves in the position of Zacchaeus, focused on reaching Christ by any means.

Every now and then, God does not call us to be the best actor or actress in the story. Sometimes God calls us to be a bit player. Sometimes God calls us just to be a sycamore tree. Sometimes God calls us to simply be willing to be best supporting actors and actresses. Every now and then, regardless of our age or our race, regardless of our station in life or our education, right where we are, God is calling us like sycamore trees to help raise someone else up a little bit higher. Verse four from this text reads, "So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree just to see him because he was going to pass that way."

And as we reflect, not just on the service and sacrifice of Dr. King, but even as we reflect on our own responsibility to service and sacrifice, may I offer you the imagery of a sycamore tree to guide you as you go. The sycamore tree teaches us some things about how to fulfill the role of best supporting actor and actress. First thing I would invite us to remember from the text is that God has a divine

imagination. God can and God will take the little bit that we have and make it do more than we could ever imagine.

The Sycamore of the Middle East is a hybrid tree. It is the marriage of a fig and mulberry tree, and in this particular culture, it was thought to be inferior. Both its fruit and its wood were typically given to the least in the community. Why then does Luke take time to let us know that Zacchaeus, one of privilege, one of means, one who could afford the best, climbs a Sycamore tree in order to meet Jesus? I believe it is simply Luke's way of reminding us that what might seem inferior or less than to us is more than enough for God. In times such as these, we still need to be reminded that God can take what seems like nothing and make something out of it. God has a track record of doing great things through things and people that society would never expect.

And even here at Christ Church Cranbrook, I suspect that there are times in all of our lives when we feel like what we have isn't enough to make a difference. We wonder, what can we do here when the problems are over there? Over there in Detroit, over there in Minnesota, over there at the border, over there in Gaza and Israel, over there in Nigeria and Sudan, over there in Ukraine and Russia. When the challenges of the world seem so big, sometimes we wonder to ourselves if what we have, if what we could say, if anything we could do, would be enough to make a difference. And all God seems to want to remind us of in those moments is that if you would just make yourself available to be used by God, God has enough imagination to do more in and through us than we could ever expect.

God has a divine imagination. That's the first lesson. There's another lesson from the sycamore tree. The second lesson is simply that we must not just remember God's divine imagination, but we must also remember our job description. The reality is God is not asking us to do anything we weren't already created to do in the first place. When I think about the sycamore tree in this story, I am reminded that this tree was just being a tree. All the sycamore tree had to do was to live out its life's job description. It was just a tree being a tree. And the tree that God needs you to be is not necessarily the tree that God needs your pew partner to be. The Zacchaeus that you were meant to lift up is not necessarily the same as the Zacchaeus that I was meant to lift up. The people who need you may be different from the people who need me, but all of us are needed by somebody.

Years ago – enough time has passed, so I can tell the story. Years ago, I was attending a denominational worship service, and during the service, I got distracted. I got distracted because there were people who were talking during the service. Most of us think we can whisper better than we actually can. These people were talking during the service and it got on my nerves. I tried to ignore it as a sign of my faith, but they kept on talking. And then I believe that the next

sign of my faith was to try to give them a dirty look. Tried to give them a dirty look, and that didn't work either.

You have to understand, I needed them to stop. I needed them to stop doing what they were doing because worship was important. They were distracting, they were interrupting, they were messing up the equilibrium. So I needed them to stop, stop their talking. And it felt like all of a sudden, but all of a sudden, I figured out where these sounds, where this talking was coming from. And then in a moment I realized that the noise that I heard were the Spanish translators translating the service for our Spanish brothers as sisters in worship.

But what I learned from that experience was that to somebody, you may be in the way. To someone, you may be a nuisance. To someone, you may be upsetting the equilibrium, but to God you are right where you need to be. To your Zacchaeus, you are planted where God wants you. To someone on the outside of that story, you might be nothing but a sycamore tree. But to God, you are the stepladder that will raise the lost to salvation. So when times arise, when you feel out of place, remember simply to operate in your God-given job description, and simply be the tree that God has called you to be.

First lesson was about God's divine imagination. We ought to remember what God can do with just a little bit of our stuff. The second thing that we ought to remember is to remember that all we have to do is operate in our job description. Third lesson is simply this: that we are called to seed what we may never see. Observing one last time the sycamore tree, I came to understand that our faith is all about doing things we may never be able to take advantage of. And in order to be a best supporting actor, in order to be a best supporting actress, we've got to learn to get comfortable with sowing seeds that we'll never be able to harvest. Notice that the sycamore tree's involvement in the story ends at verse four. The tree does not know what happens at dinner that evening. It does not get the satisfaction of knowing that it had made a transformational difference in the life of Zacchaeus.

Likewise, you and I get the responsibility to put in the work knowing that no one may ever say thank you. Put in the work believing that a tomorrow you will never see is still worth fighting for today. Ladies and gentlemen, you may never know how things turn out, but serve anyway. Help anyway. Pray anyway. Encourage anyway. Empower anyway. Give anyway. Invest anyway. Challenge anyway. Speak up anyway. Protest anyway. Hold to account anyway. You may find yourself used like a sycamore tree and discarded from the rest of the story, but stand strong anyway.

Ladies and gentlemen, if we would be willing to be God's best supporting actors and actresses, then I believe we will have done a little bit of what God requires.

Our responsibility is to lift up others so that they can see Jesus Christ, because God has a track record that when people can see Him, change can happen. Sir Isaac Newton once said in philosophical debate, if I can see further than you, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants. This morning, I challenge us to see ourselves as sycamore trees, as best supporting actors and actresses helping to raise someone else up in our midst.

The question then, my friends, is if God can use a sycamore tree, how much more can God do when you let God use you? If God can use gopher wood to build an ark to reset a whole world, how much more can God do when you let God use you? If God can use a walking stick to part the Red Sea and create a highway to freedom, how much more can God do when you let God use you? If God can use a slingshot and some rocks to defeat a giant and end a war, how much more can God do when you let God use you? If God can use a fiery furnace to show just how cool our God is under pressure, how much more can God do when you let God use you?

Last but not least, if God can use an unjust court system and a guilty verdict, if God can use the lash of a whip and a crown of thorns, if God can use cheap wine from Trader Joe's and nails from Home Depot, if God can use an old rugged cross to save you and I, how much more can God do when you let God use you? But most importantly, if God can use a borrowed empty tomb with a stone rolled away so that an empty grave is there to prove our Savior lives, how much more can God do when you let God use you?

As we gather today, we not only celebrate Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. because he stood for nonviolence, not just because he stood for justice and equality, not just because he pursued for us the beloved community, but as well because like a sycamore tree, Dr. King stood up so that others could be raised up. Dr. King is a shining example of what best supporting actors and actresses can do. But not only that, let us be reminded that the role of best supporting actor and actress is available to us all.

In Jesus' name, amen.