

CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

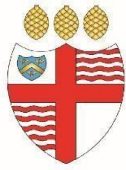
In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

For those of you who don't know my story, I wasn't raised going to church. It just wasn't something my family did. In fact, I'm not sure I knew anybody who did, or at least they never talked about it. And so growing up, what I knew about Christianity came from what I saw on TV. And as a kid in the '80s, it was wall-to-wall televangelists. Remember those guys, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson talking about how hurricanes were God's retribution on sinners? Jimmy Swaggart getting caught with prostitutes. Jim and Tammy Bakker defrauding people out of millions, buying private jets and building these huge amusement parks. Not your ideal spokesmen, right?

And I remember thinking to myself, you know, who would ever fall for that religion? My gosh, you know? Come on. But as I got older, I became a little more mellow, a little more open-minded, obviously. When I was in college, I remember a bumper sticker quoting Bono, the lead singer from U2. He was saying something like, I really like Jesus. It's His followers that scare the you-know-what out of me. And I later found out he was paraphrasing Gandhi who actually said basically the same thing. And I took it a little bit to heart, you know? I knew enough about life to know that the message and the messengers don't always align.

So I didn't completely write off the idea of religion. And that's actually in line with young people today where survey after survey shows that non-Christians in their teens and in their twenties overwhelmingly see Christians as intolerant, judgmental, and hypocritical. Sorry. More than 80%. Yet – and here's the thing, yet more than half of those same young people, more than half are open to learning more about Jesus. And that was basically me in college. You know, despite all the negative stuff I had seen, I was open to learning more. So when those campus crusaders came around to try to convert me, I was actually willing to listen, you know? I was genuinely interested in what they have to say. Maybe Bono was onto something, eh?

The problem was they were never interested in me. They never asked about my story. They were not concerned about my heart or what was going on in my life. It seemed like all they wanted to do was to win me over, like salesmen on some kind of a bonus system. All they really wanted me to do was to say yes to their big pitch, which was this: Jesus died for my sins, and if I would just believe that, God



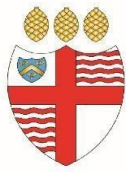
CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

won't punish me for all eternity. Because that's what's coming if you don't. And somehow, that just never came off as good news. It always felt like a threat. And I was no theologian, but I knew enough to know you can't threaten people into love, can you?

And here's the thing. I would've been open. I would've been open to hearing some actual good news because there were times, especially in that first year in college, when I really could have used some. I was a little lonely that first year. I hadn't met many new friends. I had just gone through my big first breakup. I wasn't feeling good about myself. I was under a lot of pressure, confused about who I was, whether I was making the right decisions in life. There were times when I would have loved to hear something affirming, something encouraging. Life was plenty threatening on its own. I didn't need to hear a bunch of new threats about God. I would've loved to have heard about a God who loves me, despite all of that, who believes in me, who will always be there for me, always waiting for me to come home no matter how lost I might get. And always waiting to rejoice, rejoice when I do.

I would've loved to have heard a gospel like that. And to be honest, I might not have believed it. I might have thought it somehow sounded too good to be true, but as a kid on his own for the first time in his life, I would've loved to have heard it. But all they could do was talk about a God whose love came with so many conditions, so many strings attached that God ended up sounding like pretty much everyone else. And so we'd get into these arguments instead. I'd say, what about the Eskimos? Or what about people who've never heard of Jesus? Are they going to hell too? Or, what about my dad? I made a lot of mistakes as a kid. I made some pretty big ones, but my dad, he never threw me out and certainly wouldn't ever do so for all eternity. Are you telling me my dad is more forgiving than God? And Manisha, if you're watching at home, yeah, even back then, I loved a good argument.

And I could even get them to concede something a little bit, right? They'd say stuff like, Chris, look, I can't explain it all. I'm not God. Maybe it doesn't make complete sense, but I do know this. It's what the Bible says, right? And they would point to some passage or a quote that seemed to back them up, and I wouldn't be surprised if one of them came straight out of today's gospel, because on the surface, at least, that metaphor John uses, it kind of sounds like that judgmental, threatening God they were always talking about, right? John describes Jesus as coming at us with what is basically a pitchfork, to separate us, to gather the wheat into the granary, but to toss the rest into an unquenchable fire.



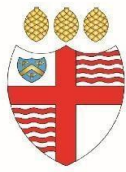
CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

What does that sound like? Who says you have to go to the Old Testament for fire and brimstone, right? And by the way, is there a part of us that worries that might be true? At least entertains the idea? Does God, does Jesus punish those who don't love Him? And if that weighs on you in any way, remember the story from the Gospel of John about the sinful woman caught red-handed, dead to rights, who according to the law should have been stoned to death. They bring her to Jesus and what does He say? And in one of those rare occasions where He doesn't answer a question with another question or a parable or a metaphor, He tells her flat out, they have no business condemning you and neither will I. I didn't come to condemn, I came to save.

And what is He saving us from? Well, as the rest of the gospel is made clear, He's trying to save us from all of that: the endless cycle of judgment and retribution from our addiction to othering and scapegoating and dehumanizing those who are different or who might be stepping out of line in some way. He came to save us from all of those man-made hells by showing us a new heaven. One built on humility and forgiveness and patience and compassion and peace. One built on reconciliation, not retribution.

So with that in mind, let's take another look at John's metaphor. And I would say that the first thing to notice is if the metaphor were about good people and bad people, he would've said good wheat and bad wheat, right? But that's not what he says. He says, Jesus comes to separate the wheat from the chaff. So what is chaff? Chaff is the husk of the seed. It's the outer casing that surrounds the wheat. Ever have corn? The husk, it has no nutritional value. It's not even digestible, but it protects the wheat from the elements, from insects, from disease until the wheat has matured enough to be harvested to become bread, the staple of nearly all human life.

So if this isn't about separating good people from bad, but is instead about peeling away the hard outer shell from all of us, what might this metaphor be pointing to do? Do you have a hard outer shell? Do you know someone who does? Think back to Genesis when the first humans saw their nakedness, their vulnerability. When they first became of the world around them and felt fear for the very first time, what did they do? Do you remember? They covered up, yeah? They started to lie. They started to point fingers at one another all of a sudden, and they started to hide. They started to hide from one another and to hide from God.



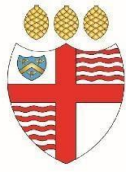
CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

As we all do. It's part of the human condition. It's part of growing up in some ways. I see it happening with my little girls. They're at that age now where they're starting to feel shy around things that they once never even noticed. They're starting to worry about how they look and what others might say about them or judge them. And so our chaff is all the things we do to keep hiding, to keep trying to protect ourselves. It's the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves that make us out to be more than we are. It's the masks we wear in public, our Photoshopped images we cultivate on Facebook. It's our pride, our stubbornness, our insistence on being right. It's our addictions, our distractions, our co-dependencies, our consumerism. It's all those programs for happiness that we cling to that in one way or another, promise to make us happy, to help us to feel safe and secure.

And the hard part is some of them even work, at least for a little while. They seem to, at least, until life comes along, as life always will, and expose them for the empty husks they were all along. And even then, it's hard to let go, isn't it? We can find ourselves going back to them again and again, even when we know better. Old habits are hard to die, and let's face it, those hard outer shells that we built up, they did protect us, at least when we didn't know where else to turn. Our ego, our pride, our false selves, it gave us a sense of identity when we didn't know where else to go, a tribe to belong to, a motivation to compete, a drive to succeed, a sense of control when we needed it.

But as any farmer can tell you, it can't end there because once the wheat has matured and it's time for the harvest, the chaff has to be removed or the wheat will spoil. If no one comes along to separate it, the chaff will choke the life from the very thing that it once protected. Jesus comes with his winnowing fork to crack open our hard outer shells, to help us see that all those things that we once clung to for safety and for identity, all those things that we once thought were so vital to who we were, that they were not only an empty husk but they now keep us from becoming the nourishing, life-giving person we were made to be. The unquenchable fire, it isn't hell, it's the Holy Spirit. And she descends upon each of us to burn away the fear that keeps us hiding and drives us apart. The lies we tell that keep us from being truly seen, the love we avoid, the relationships we starve, the forgiveness we refuse, the needs of others we ignore.

She comes with the fire of baptism to burn away the chaff that once protected us from the uncertainties of the world, but now threatens to suffocate us. That is what Jesus comes to save us from, not eternal punishment. He comes to save us from a life lived on our own, a life lived in fear and in hiding. Always pretending, always trying to measure up, always trying to maintain the facade. But it's no way to live,



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

not to truly live. I have come so that you would have life and to have it in abundance, Jesus says. And that is good news. It's very good news. It's news that your kids, your grandkids need to hear. It's news that their friends need to hear. It's news that we all need to hear.

So as we celebrate our Lord's baptism today, let us recommit ourselves to telling a new story about God, a new story about God's saving grace and unwavering love. Let us tell a new story so that we might start to change the world's story. Who are the young people in your life who need to hear it? And yeah, they may not believe it, maybe not at first, but trust me when I say they'd love to hear it. They'd love to hear it from you.

Amen.