



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Good morning. What a joy to be here in this majestic space with all of you.

Now, despite my unearned promotion I got in the program, I wanted to assure you with some diplomatic understatement that this is, for me, not overly normal. The last time I stood in a pulpit like this was 10 years ago at the historic St. Paul's Cathedral in London. There's a long tradition there of allowing the US ambassadors to give a secular sermon of sorts to fellow Americans on the Thursday of Thanksgiving. I had just arrived in London with my wife and three children, and the powers that be at St Paul's thought it wise that I do a run-through briefing a week before. And their equivalent of Father Bill and Pastor Dostert explained who would process when and in what order everything would run, how it would work.

At the end of the briefing the rector walked me up the long spiraling staircase up to the pulpit, and I looked out at the many hundreds and hundreds of tourists in large groups and small, crisscrossing everywhere. "You should say something," he said. "Yes, I plan to," I answered. "I look forward to it," wondering if he thought I'd forgotten that I had a speaking part next week. I turned to walk back down. "No, now," he said. "Say something now. You need to get used to it because in this place it takes a full six seconds for your voice to come back to you, and it can make it strange and it can make you hesitate. Here's the secret though, once you start, don't stop talking."

Yikes, I thought. What do I say? I hadn't written anything yet. There was a leftover sheet of paper in front of me with Bible verses on it. "Just start reading," he said. So I did. I launched in smack in the middle. I don't remember which passage, it was Old Testament brimstone-y kind of thing, basically a long list of things you shouldn't do. As my words traveled around the cathedral, I watched as visitors stopped, looked around for the source of the sound, and listened to see if the words contained any relevant information for them. Sensing none, they returned to their self-guided tours.

It struck me on the drive home, as I thought about what words I did want to say on the big day, that I should start by avoiding everything I had just done: jumping in, in the middle with no context, never stopping to listen, and telling people what not to do. I'm sure we can all think of times when we've been on the receiving end of such a lecture, or certainly for those of us who are parents here today, on the giving end of one.

Back at the embassy I confessed to my mentor, a 30-year veteran of our foreign service, how I thought how often I had repeated those exact mistakes as a new diplomat, droning on and on about transatlantic trade deals, multilateral treaties, and the international rules-based order. She said, "Don't worry, Matthew. Here's the real job of a diplomat. There is a reservoir of trust, respect, and understanding that exists between our two countries, and your job is to leave it just a bit higher than you found it. Sometimes it's one cup at a time, sometimes a whole barrel."

Good advice but how? This inspired me to turn for help to a British writer, Christian apologist, and devout Anglican, whose writings had played a huge part in my own faith journey that had led me to getting baptized a few years before, and someone probably known to many of you, Dorothy Sayers. Writing 80 years ago in London, Sayers expressed frustration, frustration about what she had been hearing from the pulpits on Sundays. She felt that the language and the body language, the pattern and the tone was getting in the way of creating much needed community cohesion.

She wrote of an archetypical young carpenter she imagined sitting in the front pew while the local vicar told him over and over each Sunday with pointed fingers, don't forget to come to church. Don't drink too much. Don't, don't, don't. She said, and I quote, "What the church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables. Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly - but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry?" She wrote that in the middle of the Second World War.

Now, 80 years later, there is war again in Europe, and, I think we can all agree, plenty of division here at home; racial, economic, and social. People are talking at each other, they're talking past each other, or worse, not talking at all. Our civic carpentry, if you will, has gotten pretty shoddy. How full are our reservoirs of trust, respect, and understanding in my home city of Louisville, here in Detroit, all over? And what might each of us do to help refill them?

Now, the strange thing about trust, respect, and understanding is they are byproducts of other activities. You can't make them, they get made. In fact, if you aim for them directly, it backfires. Just like, let's be friends. If I say trust me, respect me, I have dramatically lowered the likelihood that that will happen between us. Dorothy Sayers acknowledges this when she says, quote, "There is, in fact, a paradox about working to serve the community, and it is this: that to

aim directly at serving the community is to falsify the work. The only way to serve the community is to forget the community and serve the work."

Her point I think connects with one of the key messages of today's readings. Paul's letter in Matthew's gospel tells us it is not about sticking to your same stale mindset and saying the right thing, it's about changing your mindset and doing the right thing. This allows us, I think, to think about making good tables in a broader sense. How are we treating each other when sitting around the actual tables we find ourselves at in our civic work? What is our body language? What is our pattern and tone?

Are we like the second son in the parable who talks a big game, maybe about diversity or inclusion or belonging or listening or vulnerability, or whatever it is we think other people want to hear? Or are we like the first one who does the work, the hard work, who includes, who listens. The one who when faced with difference, the inevitable difference, wherever, the inevitable difference that arises wherever and whenever humans are gathered doesn't dodge that difference or discount it or demonize it, but who deals with it constructively, who does the work around that table of integrating difference into something better and bigger. It's difference, after all, where all the potential energy for growth lives.

When that happens, everyone involved in that meeting is just a little bit different than when they entered. And they could bring that difference into the next meeting so it can be integrated and so on and so on. I think Sayers's words ought to encourage you as they encourage me, to go to our next meeting on Monday with a new mindset and hopefully a new heart, a new spirit, with three expectations that when taken together can help make good tables. First, expect to be needed. No one else can substitute for you. Two, expect to need others. That's why you're having a meeting. And finally, third, and most importantly, expect to be changed. Expect to be needed, expect to need others, expect to be changed. And if we all did that more often, all engaged in emptying ourselves in service of that work, that would help refill the reservoir of trust, respect, and understanding too.

Thank you.