



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you tonight as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them." These are hard words for us to hear when we're about to engage in one of the most public displays of religion that we tend to do in the Christian faith. We're all about to go forward and get ashes on our forehead and publicly repent and go through a big show of showing ourselves to God as sinners. It's hard for me to hear those words and think about what it might mean for us today.

And I guess it has to mean something deeper than exactly what we read on the page. It has to be something deeper because when Jesus says, "Beware of practicing your piety before others," He is aiming for something deeper that is hidden in plain sight. I don't think when Jesus is criticizing those who sound a trumpet when they give alms or those who engage in deep fasting. I don't think He's criticizing any of those things in and of themselves, but I think Jesus is trying to invite us into a relationship of deep intimacy.

And that deep intimacy can be found in many ways. It can be found in the incremental moments in which we try bit by bit to change our habits so that we're in a better frame of mind, or we engage in those things that help us to become who we aspire to be. But that intimacy is deeper than even that because Jesus loves us no matter what we do. And Jesus has come to us so that we would not fall into the trap of thinking that what we do changes who we are in Jesus' eyes.

From the beginning, Jesus' love is greater than anything we could ask or imagine from the beginning. Jesus has come because He is the fulfillment of God's will to be present to us fully, not merely as fire or as sacrifice, but as a person. And from the beginning, Jesus has come to people like you and me who are fragile, fallen, and prone to error, and Jesus looking upon us, loves us.

So this advice, "Beware of practicing your piety before others," I think it's aiming to us and asking us to engage in some deep intimacy with God. The purpose of Lent is not to simply move away from something. It's not to simply be shaped into something that you're not. The purpose of Lent is more like a birth and a renewal than it is some kind of achievement that you have achieved by discipline and strong commitment.

And this is important for us to know because that is what we fall into again and again. We all have a tendency to try our best to be more than we are because who we are disappoints us. We try our best to take on habits to make ourselves better. There is nothing wrong in and of itself with any of those habits, but they don't do anything if it does not convey and become the context of a personal, intimate relationship with God.

That is what Jesus wants in today's gospel. He wants to invite each of us into a kind of practice where we are changed on the inside and in deep intimacy with God. Jesus is not interested in whether or not we have kept our fasts. Jesus is not interested in the fact that we have done all that we could say could be good. Jesus is interested in us because Jesus loves us and wants us to be able to give ourselves back to Him in the same way that He has given himself to us.

Lent is a time for conversion. Lent is a time for *metanoia*. That's the Greek, a change of mind in which we see ourselves in God's grace more powerfully and differently than ever before. Lent is an invitation for us to go a notch deeper in our spiritual life. If it comes through anything we do, that we take on, all the better. But don't let Lent be confused for the discipline you might pick up or whatever you might give up for the intimacy with God that is at the heart and soul of this work we do together as we make our way to Easter.

The image that came to mind to me as I was thinking about this sermon was a painting by Pieter Bruegel, the Elder. He did it in 1555, and it's a centerfold in your bulletins that I have done because there is no way I can do – I hope this works. It's a centerfold in your bulletin. And Bruegel does these panoramas, these incredible displays of humanity. And this is known as the war between Carnival and Lent. And this war is a kind of allegorical and a kind of humors, almost kind of a satire of the ways in which we try to observe things in order to get God's grace.

On the left, the lower left, you see Carnival who is personified as this wonderful, slightly drunk man. He's holding a skewer. On the skewer, there is roasting meat. On his head is a pork pie hat. And he's riding a beer barrel and he's being pushed by people who are either a little bit drunk or a little bit insane. And on the right you have Lent and Lent is a person who is dressed up like a nun who is holding a baker's peel. And on the baker's peel there are two herrings, which are the food of Lent, and they are jousting with each other at the base of the painting. And the Lent is being pushed by a group of children and they're also having pretzels, which believe it or not, pretzels were Lenten fair because they were arms crossed in prayer. So you would only eat pretzels at Lent, not at baseball games.

And they are having this fight. And behind them on the left, you have all of the revelers of Carnival. Some of it is pretty weird in body. There's a tent there where they're acting out a scene from the Dirty Bride, which was a pre-pornographic play that they would put on. And behind it you have this man standing on a beer barrel

and he's drinking and everybody's cheering as he drowns himself. And on the right you have all of the people who are finding their way out of church and into battle with Carnival.

Now, Bruegel wants you to see in this a kind of great display of the ways in which we act or react to God. When we react to God and Carnival, we tend to emphasize everything that is carnal, everything that is material, everything that is fleshly, and that can seem like something that we can overindulge in. And when we act with God, Lent is described as this moment of denial, this moment of withdrawal, this moment of punishment that you do, this moment of fasting when you pull away from God.

And you see the two there and it's clear that Bruegel sees the two as mirror images of each other. And one of the ways that Lent has been misunderstood, says Bruegel in this painting, is, it's only seen as a kind of mirror image of the excesses that we have in our life, that we have so much excess that we have to somehow even the scales. And in the midst of it, you have all of these moments in which the poor and the disabled are making their way through this panoply and trying to find some mercy, which happens to them in church.

Now, this is meant to convey to us that there is something that is a bit wrong about Lent. There is something that can be wrong about denying who we are. There's something that can go too far. There can be something that gets off the wrong track in our lives. When we turn our religion into an addiction, when we turn our religion into something that we believe can make us somehow right before the eyes of others, we go astray. And at the same point, there is something right about Carnival, there's something right about abundance. There's something right about joy. There's something right about mirth. There's something right about dancing. There's something right about celebration. These are things that tend to be denigrated by society, but there's something beautiful about them.

And what Bruegel wants you to see in this painting is that what is most important is the thing that gets missed most often and it's right at the center of the painting, because in the center of the painting, you see a couple holding onto each other, carrying their earthly possessions. They're following a fool who is carrying them away with a torch that is lit in the middle of the day, which is meant to symbolizes being a fool, and they are making their way through the center of town, and they are passing a well. And the well is feeding both the pigs for Carnival and the beautiful people who are washing their fish for Lent. The well is there. It does not matter who drinks from it, the well is always there.

And what Bruegel is trying to say, I believe, is that it doesn't matter where your fate lies in the war between Carnival and Lent. It doesn't matter what you might try to do in this life. If you miss the well, you miss everything. Don't walk past the well because the well, which is water from the depths, is a symbol of God. Bruegel

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offers this, which is a kind of bird's eye view because he wants us to have mercy on ourselves in Lent. He wants us to have mercy on ourselves in Carnival. He wants us to see that in everything we do, God is always there. God is always with you. God loves you. And what we do when we come to Him in Lent is not so much give anything up as become everything God has created us to be in Christ.

This is what I think Jesus is trying to say when He tells His disciples to do their religious work in secret because the Father who sees in secret, rewards. When we come to God in intimacy, when we come to God seeking renewal, when we come to God, hoping against hope, that somehow we will find our way to God in a deep level, this is a moment of rebirth. This is a moment when God becomes real for you.

This Lent, whatever you pick up, whatever you put down, whatever you give up, whatever you take on, whatever you try to do to make yourself a better person, know this from the beginning, Jesus loves you and wants more than anything in all that you do to know that intimacy and to know that love, and to know that you have been called by name by Christ and you are Christ's own forever.

Amen.