



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"When Crosses meet Concrete" - The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - 9/27/2020

I speak to you today 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.

As many of you know, I spent about 15 years as a university professor. And during that time I never received an award for teaching. And this kind of upset me because I always wanted to be that person, you know, every time at convocation at the end or at the beginning of a school year, there's always an award for teaching. I always would think to myself, like pick me, pick me, but no. But I did receive one gift that represents everything I ever hoped to be as a teacher. It's in many ways better than an award. And this gift is this stone right here.

I had a student who was a Green Beret and was someone who killed people in close range. And he participated in the first Iraq war. And as his life evolved, he decided to retire from the military and to seek ordination in the Episcopal church. He came into my class and it was a small class, there was a lot of engagement. He enjoyed the class, did all the reading. I really had no idea that I had any kind of impact on him until his wife came to see me in my office, and she handed me this stone. She said, "This is a piece of the Berlin Wall. My husband was stationed in Berlin when it fell and he ran out and he gathered a few pieces, and I want you to have it. Because of your teaching, you've helped walls come down inside him."

And this object, this stone has become incredibly precious to me. It sits on my desk at home as a kind of reminder because there are times when we are faced with opposition. There are times in which we are facing things that unnerve us. There's times in which we experience anxiety and the things that we are facing, the problems we are facing that are facing us, we can sometimes think that we are in the face of an obstacle that is insurmountable, as formidable as the Berlin wall once was. And yet it did come down.

But I also think about this stone and as I've had it on my desk over the years, I began to study it. My family used to be in concrete and so at one point this week, I began to study the concrete and I realized that it was made with a lot of quartz, which means it was a special kind of concrete that is used by the military and by others to harden concrete so much that it can withstand any kind of

attack, because instead of using lime or limestone, the aggregate is comprised of quartz.

And that was a reminder to me of the fact that every building we have bears within it a kind of message. There is a purpose that is revealed and the decisions we make with what we make with our hands. And this stone has been a reminder to me of the ways in which buildings themselves, the material culture of our lives to speak as a sociologist for a moment, the material culture can convey spiritual purpose and property. The stones themselves shout, as Jesus says, at one point in the Gospels and we need to study the things that we hold dear. We need to study the things that we create to make sure that they express the spiritual reality we're trying to bring into being through them.

Now, all of this is a way for me to get into what I hope is my sermon for today, which is to speak a bit about the interaction between crosses and concrete. Because when this church was made - and much of this church is made of concrete, but some of it is of stone, obviously. When this church was made, the Cross of Christ was central. And this church did not begin with the material structure we're standing in now. It did not begin in 1928. In fact, it began in 1904 when the Booth family began to hold services right on the next tail from us under a tent. And when they began that worship, they became a spiritual community of builders. And this church in 1928, 14 years later came into being because of the spiritual energy that they had.

So I wanted, in some ways, to tell a little bit of a story by walking through the material culture of this church. It's not going to be exhaustive. It's just going to look at some patterns that I've seen emerge. And the first image I have for you today is from a celebration of the founding of this church in 1904. And that is the Altar of the Atonement. This is a concrete structure that was put up in 1954 at the sesquicentennial of the first tent meeting. And you'll see in this stone an incredible beautiful cross that occupies the center. The altar is made in a circle, which is incredibly revolutionary for its time, which meant that God was to be found everywhere, not just in the East.

And it was calling back to a time in which this congregation had a kind of spiritual energy. And I want you to also notice that the way the cross is made in this altar, which is, to speak artistically, it's done as a kind of negative space. Everything around the altar is built up so that the cross appears to your eye. And so that cross is both invisible and visible. It's a way of seeing the world. It's a way of seeing ourselves. It's a way of seeing this church and the origins of that negative space actually comes from the next cross I want to show you, which is the cornerstone of this church. And that was laid in 1928 in late September.

And you'll see that this is a creation of negative space. Again, you see that the stonemason carved the space around so that the cross somehow emerged. And that cornerstone again, claims this church for Christ. Also it claims something

that has been with us from the beginning, because the altar of atonement, as it was known, was meant to celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ is our atoning sacrifice. Jesus Christ is the Son who reconciles us to God. Jesus has made the long journey to us when we could not make our journey to God so that we would have a life full of forgiveness and grace and mercy and love.

And so that cross carried forth from the beginnings in 1904 to 1928. And in the third picture I have for you today, you can see one major image of the cross that is carried forth even into today because when they created the altar and when they created many of the tiles in this church, they showed this cross. And I, when we were building the baptismal font that we constructed and put forth in 2017, we picked up on this cross, which can be seen all over again, a kind of testimony to what we are doing.

Well, that material culture, that moment, in which a spiritual idea, a spiritual reality was somehow encased in stone and concrete, that has actually found a way and to people's souls. Sometimes people like to contrast the mission of a church from the building of a church and thereby to create a kind of conflict and tension between them. And certainly that tension is real. When Jesus drives out the tax collectors from the temple, He is making a point that buildings can lose their energy. People can forget their purpose. People can go wrong and get their priorities mixed and their motivations upset by what they're doing. They can become distracted by simple things like money and commodities and commodification. But again and again, churches have this kind of endurance because the message installed in that concrete, made and created in that concrete, it sends forth a kind of gospel to anybody who inhabits it.

And so one of the crosses that gets formed by this material culture is the cross of this church itself. The fact that you have a cross here and a cross here, and when we're able to have you inside, we will again be what we were. We'll have children streaming in from the sides. We'll have choirs singing from this side, we'll have people full up and down this corridor, this aisle. And we will become a living cross by our very actions with each other, we'll take the shape of the cross ourselves in worship so that we might be the cross to the world around us. So that we might bear the cross in our lives so that people might see the cross of Christ as a message of grace and forgiveness and reconciliation.

The fourth image I want to bring before you today is an example of how this cross gets inscribed in our souls. Kate Bell had a little Sunday school exercise that we did during this time of social distancing, where people could paint - little children could paint messages on stones and they're all over the outside of the church. And one that I saw this week had this incredible beautiful cross; rejoice, always. And imagine that child, as she painted that painting, imagine the way in which that cross has worked your way into her life.

I had a similar experience of this when I was raising my eldest. We were walking home one day from school and she was complaining about some kind of strife and bullying that she was experiencing at school. And I wanted to be much like Oscar Wilde's selfish giant. At that moment, I wanted to take my sword and cut those children in two for touching my child. But she said to me that she was going to be okay because she picked up two sticks and she said, I just make a little sign of the cross and I find my way forward. And I realized in that moment when she said that to me, that she had a resource within her, a spiritual life inside of her, she had the ability to be resilient and she would be fine.

The last image of the cross I want you to see today is by an artist, Rob Aikins, who has found his way to art through a kind of interesting journey. He's a psychology major at Michigan, and he began to do art for a kind of pastime, a kind of therapy, a kind of whatever. And he is magnificent. This painting that he's done today, he's layered layer after layer of paint. The first layer is the kind of reddish orange, the reddish orange that you see, see that's on the canvas. Then on top of that, he's put layer upon layer of his own mixture of paints. He has an incredible eye for color.

And then he does something which is kind of typical for a lot of contemporary artists, he does kind of Jackson Pollock on it. And then he takes a power washer and aims it at the middle of the painting to see what will come out. As he did that on this painting, this cross emerged. That is another moment of negative space, much like the first negative space I brought before today, much like the cornerstone that we have before you, you see this cross emerging. And this is a reminder to us, not only of what is underlying, but how, when we go through any kind of trouble or challenge in our lives, when we face any obstacles, God does not so much build a wall around us so that we cannot be attacked, but God gives us the strength and resources to come from within, because one of the great things about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the deeper Christ is inside of you, the more you can see Christ come out of you. The deeper you go into your own soul in the midst of any kind of trial and tribulation, the more Christ emerges. And so that image that he has been built up by layers and layers of paint that gets stripped away and then the cross emerges. And so it is with you and me.

Now all of what I've brought before you today is in some ways, a gloss, a kind of extended commentary on the wonderful words we read in the first letter of Peter, where we read the encouragement, "Come to Him," come to Christ, "a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a Holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." "Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

Christ is our living stone, not a stone that has crumbled, not a stone that tried to keep people out. But a living stone that is able to continue to be the foundation

of our faith now, and that welcomes us all and invites us to be transformed. And for more than 90 years, more than maybe 104 years, depending how you want to count, this church has been a kind of living stone, a kind of place of incredible spiritual energy built by the people who made it.

And what made their vision possible was that there were people willing to take it on from generation to generation. And from generation to generation, we have had people come into this church, looking for ways to be transformed. They've come here to mourn. They've come here to make promises to change. They've come here to learn the faith. They've come here to live the faith. And in the midst of this pandemic, we have found our way to make that generation not the last, but to say to us, it is found that God is working in us just as powerfully as the generations before.

And over the past year, we have had to contend with many, many challenges, but we have been brave and Christ has made us brave. We have been loving and Christ has made us loving. We have been forgiving and Christ has made us forgiving. We have been reconciling and Christ has made us reconciling. And we have been bold in our proclamation of the word of God revealed in God's son, Jesus Christ.

"Christ is made the sure foundation," says an old hymn that we're going to finish with today.

Christ is made the sure foundation.
Christ the head and cornerstone,
chosen by the Lord and precious,
binding all His church in one;
holy Zion's help forever,
and her confidence alone

As we make our way in the midst of this time, let us not only remember our past, but remember our future. Christ will complete the good work Christ has begun here. Christ will be with us in the bodies that we bring just as He was with us in His own body. Christ will be with us in all that we are called to do. Christ will empower us with God's spirit so that we can do it with all of this around us. Let us continue to begin.

Amen.