



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

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.

If you have been an Episcopalian for longer than 10 minutes, you have heard it said that we are "both/and people," that we are a denomination known, not for making sharp contrasts, but for trying to include. We want to say both/and. So if someone asks us, are you Catholic or Protestant? Many Episcopalians will say both/and. We have a kind of high-church liturgy, but we have a kind of Protestant sensibility and somehow it holds together. Or if you ask an Episcopalian, are you liberal or conservative? Many will say both/and. We have some conservative tendencies and we have some liberal tendencies. We have some conservative people and we have some liberal people. We're both/and.

Today, I am here to disrupt that tradition because at the core of Christianity is a decision, and that decision is either/or. Either you decide to follow God and Jesus and choose Him as your life giver, your liberator, and your Lord. Or you choose to turn away from Him and to choose the power of sin, death, and the Devil. That has been the pivot point in Christianity from its beginning. From the earliest strata of the Christian tradition, there is an either/or that is at the heart of the faith. We cannot avoid it. It is the decision each of us has to make. And that decision happens, yes, over the course of a lifetime, but it is built up every day by decisions we take and make each day.

And that decision is of a certain kind in the Christian faith. It is grounded in the fact that our decision for God is an echo of God's decision for us. God has decided for us, yes, you are my child. Yes, you are my beloved. Yes, I am willing to do anything for you. And that evokes the decision for us to reach out to God in a kind of reciprocity, a kind of mutuality that says, yes you are my God. Yes, you have created me on this earth that I can love you, and yes, I give my life to you. That deep reciprocity is at the heart of the Christian faith. We love, we read in 1 John, because Jesus first loved us. And the decision we make that is either/or for Jesus and God, it always leads to connectivity and new community and enlargement.

And that means that when people think we're being too inclusive of including everybody around God's table, that is not because we are being both/and. It's not because we're trying to be comprehensive. It's because we have seen that these

people who we now include among our members, they are God's children too, and we have to see that being in relationship with God means being in relationship with them. Our yes to God includes a yes to everyone. And once things have been seen, they cannot be unseen. That is the decision to lean into connectivity.

And I'm not just making this up, this lies at the earliest strata of the Christian tradition. Over the past week, as I was preparing for this sermon, I was reading and rereading one of the earliest statements of the Christian faith. It was put together at the end of the first century, and it's known as the Didache, and in some circles, The Teaching of the Apostles. Didache is Greek for teaching. And at the first part of it, it says, in every person's life and to us has been given a decision. We get to choose the way of life or the way of death. And the way of life means loving God and loving our neighbor without exception. That is what the Didache said in the first century. And you and I are facing that decision today. We have to decide each day and every day, are we going to ascribe and are we going to turn and are we going to claim Jesus and follow Him?

And this runs like a red thread through all of our readings today. In Deuteronomy, we see a kind of early anticipation and in some ways the kind of source text of the Didache. Moses in chapter 30 towards the end of Deuteronomy, after he has promised and told the Israelites that God is sworn by God's self in the covenant and God will not forsake him, God's *sedek* and steadfast righteousness would be with him always, Moses says to the people of God, choose you this day who you will follow. Choose God this day. Choose to observe this covenant because God has said yes to you.

And in our reading from Luke, that is a moment in which Jesus ups the ante in the rhetoric He is speaking. He is going to His own death on the cross in Luke. And therefore when He invites us to carry the cross with Him, He's inviting us to step into community with Him. When He says to the disciples that if you want to follow me, you have to take up your cross and follow me, He's inviting them to be in moral community with Him, to follow Him as He establishes the Kingdom, to follow Him as He dies, so that we may live. And when you and I read this passage, it is natural for us to take one part and think we have done it all.

When I was in my early twenties, I loved the part about hating your mother and father. I didn't like my parents at that point. That was the easy part of the passage, and they weren't very fond of me at that point in my life either. For good reason. I mean, I really earned that distrust. But the whole of that passage is to give your life to God. And that includes everything. And yes, that takes a lifetime, but it's a lifetime of decisions. And these decisions are built up by learning God's yes in your life and by leaning into that connectivity. You see what I'm saying?

And in our magnificent epistle this week, we have most of the Epistle to Philemon. This is one of the earliest epistles that Paul wrote. It was composed, some say, as early as 57 AD. And Paul writes this letter to Philemon while he himself is in jail. Paul has been imprisoned for preaching the gospel and preaching the resurrection. He's in jail and he meets a slave who has run away from his master. And his name is Onesimus. And whatever Onesimus did was likely connected to finances because there is a debt to be paid. And Onesimus has been caught and he's been placed in prison with Paul. And somehow in the midst of even those confinements, Paul is preaching the good news of Jesus Christ because the walls of that prison cannot keep him from preaching that good news.

And Onesimus comes into that decision and chooses Christ. And so Paul says, you are now my brother. In fact, at one point, Paul uses almost maternal language for Onesimus when he says, I have begotten him in the spirit. And so Paul is writing a letter to Philemon, Onesimus's master, who he knows in the church. He knows that Philemon is a Christian and he knows that Christ has come to change the structures of this world. And he appeals to him to meet and receive Onesimus, not as a servant, but as a brother. And to let love close that distance and to see in that connection a new beginning. And Paul pledges to pay anything that Onesimus has taken from Philemon. And it should occur to you, and it occurred to me, what does Paul have to bargain with? He's in prison. What has he to say when he says, I'm going to pay you back everything you've lost, I think he's betting on the people of God. And he's betting on God himself. He knows that somehow that power of saying yes to God, he knows that somehow that love of God, that connectivity with God that we have as Christians, that will be enough to satisfy whatever Philemon needs to be satisfied.

And Paul is not above putting Philemon on a massive guilt trip. The last lines of the reading that we have today says, "I know that you'll do more than even what I ask of you." He's just twisting Philemon's arm. And then if you read the rest of the passage, which is only a couple more verses, he says to Philemon, and I'm going to come see you. Would you make up a room for me so I can stay with you? Wouldn't we all like to have people like that in our lives who just come up to us and say, yeah, you need to repent and forgive this person who's wronged you.

Philemon is key. It's one of the earliest messages of Paul that we have of the good news of Jesus Christ. And it hinges on a decision. The decision is not just Onesimus's decision for Christ, but it's the decision that Philemon has in receiving this letter. And just as you and I read the gospels and the epistles as they're being addressed to us, this, this epistle has been addressed to us today. What does the decision look like for you? What does it mean for you to make that decision for God? In the midst of all the things that you find around yourself, in the midst of all the structures bearing down upon you, in the midst of all the challenges in your family, in the midst of all the challenges in your work, in the midst of all the

challenges in this church, in the midst of all the challenges of this community, in the midst of all the challenges of this nation, in the midst of all the challenges of this world, what does it mean for you to say yes to God and yes to that connectivity?

When I was thinking about today's epistle, I couldn't help but think of a faculty colleague I had when I was a professor at Sewanee in Tennessee. His name was Joe Monti, and there are some professors we have who are colleagues in academia and they're there to be kind of like Paul was to Onesimus. They're like our father figures. They're the ones who love us and encourage us and help us get up when we've had a bad lecture or a bad moment or a bad meeting. And then there are people like Joe Monti for me, Joe was my nemesis. He loved to challenge me. There was not a class that he didn't argue with me about the content of it. There was not a lecture I ever gave that he didn't criticize. There was never a faculty meeting where he was nice to me. I tried my best. I'm a charming person. I failed every time with Joe.

But I respected Joe's integrity. He had been a Roman Catholic priest before leaving the priesthood to join the Episcopal church. And Joe told me a story once about Philemon. When he was in Atlanta, Georgia, and he was going through seminary, the diocese, this was in the late sixties, the diocese forbid the professors of that seminary from preaching about civil rights. They forbid the teachers of that seminary from preaching about the Vietnam War. They forbid them from speaking about any of the challenges that were affecting our society at that time.

And so Joe's professor chose that New Testament class to preach only Philemon. Sixteen weeks on Philemon because he believed that the implications of this epistle is that we all find ourselves in structures, but God has called us in Christ to resist those structures with grace and love and to proclaim the gospel. And as long as he could speak to that, he would be embedding in those students the wherewithal to speak boldly and passionately about Christ. And Christ would call them all into transformation.

For Joe, Philemon was a call to transformation. It was a call to make a decision. It was a call to follow Jesus. It was a call to lean into connectivity and to resist all the things that stood against it. What is this decision for you? Where is God calling you to be today? Where do you stand with Jesus today? Today is the beginning of the program year. It's a moment of decision. You can set an intention for this year. You can say, this is what I want to be. This is who I want to be. This is how I want to be. I invite you to join me in choosing Jesus as our Lord, as our liberator, and as our life-giving Savior. And to walk with me wherever that takes us in terms of the connectivity that God has given to us here now and always.

I invite you today to join with me in going to the earliest strata of our liturgy of baptism, which comes in three renunciations and three affirmations. If you turn to page nine in the bulletin, I invite you to stand and join me as a way of consecrating this moment in this program here.

Do you renounce Satan in all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God? I renounce them. Do you renounce the powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? I renounce them. Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? I do. Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as your Savior? I do. Do you put your whole trust in His grace and love? I do. Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord? I do. May these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.

Amen.