



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

God so loved the world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

About a year ago this week, my father died. He died on Ash Wednesday, which fell on March 5th last year. Ash Wednesday is quite a day to experience a profound loss. It is the beginning of Lent, our 40 day season of preparation for Easter. We prepare with joy for the Paschal Feast we hear. This year we are calling Lent "Five Weeks of Freedom." Maybe some of you are involved in a small group, right? Five Weeks of Freedom.

On Ash Wednesday, we pause to consider how we all will die. We go on to reflect about our sin and weakness in more detail than usual. We confess our need to turn back to God and back to each other. We come to Jesus empty handed without one plea. We come to Him in humility, eager to ask for His forgiveness, and we recommit ourselves to following in His steps.

Like the rest of us, Fathers can cast long shadows. For good or ill, my dad was a powerful figure in my life. We even share a name. He got it from his father before him, who cast an even longer, sometimes brutal shadow. Even in the best of circumstances though, our family relationships are complicated. My dad was not the worst father. As a priest, I've heard about quite a few. But he wasn't a perfect person either. None of us are. In some ways, his flaws harmed the people around him. And yet in other ways, he was a blessing.

It was only when I became a father myself that I began to understand my dad with greater compassion. To some extent, I have been able to decide which aspects of his legacy I will pass on and which need to die with him. That being said, I was so blessed to be able to fly out to San Diego to be with my dad as he lay dying. As our family gathered in his hospital room, we had a whole day together where my dad was conscious and able to carry on a conversation. It was a blessing that he knew we were there, and we were able to hold his hand and to tell him that we loved him. Sometimes that's the best thing we can do.

My dad was a Vietnam-era veteran. He served in the United States Navy. We laid him to rest at Miramar, one of our newest national cemeteries, and his marker is one of those little white tombstones that you may have seen at Arlington and elsewhere. My dad would have loved his burial place. When we moved to San

Diego in 1980, we chose the home where my mother still lives, in part because it's down the hill from Fort Rosecrans, an older national cemetery, which overlooks both the Pacific Ocean and San Diego Bay. My dad loved to watch the ships go in and out of the harbor. He also loved that he could hear the Star-Spangled Banner every morning, and taps every night. And so we made sure that the Navy supplied a bugler and a color guard for his funeral.

Speaking of powerful people in my life, my godfather, also named Bill, is also buried at Miramar. Bill was a priest and he was an important mentor to both me and my wife. Every summer, Tracy visits his grave. And now we joke that we can go about one-stop shopping.

Father Bill was a Vietnam vet too. At the time, he was a Roman Catholic priest and an army chaplain. He served with the first cavalry, the big red one, and often found himself in the jungle with soldiers.

Now, I'm told that the first cav had more friendly-fire incidents than any other division in Vietnam. And that is a testimony to the violent conflict among Americans at the time, a conflict that still casts a shadow over our national life. As William Faulkner once wrote in the wake of another war that still haunts our country, “The past is never dead. It's not even past. All of us labor in webs spun long before we were born, webs of heredity and environment, of desire and consequence, of history and eternity.”

After the war, Bill became an Episcopal priest. He got married to a former nun. He served as a VA chaplain for years, and in order to minister to those who came home wounded, he helped set up the first storefront vet centers. He also worked with homeless veterans in a large public park near the San Diego Zoo and our cathedral in an operation they called “Stand Down.” Together, with a variety of healthcare professionals, chaplains would go into the park and minister to those who were living there.

Bill was among several people that lobbied to get post-traumatic stress disorder included as a mental health condition. I think it was the DSM-III or III-R. He became an early expert in the field. In several publications, he argued that healing from trauma only occurs when we deal with the spiritual and moral dimensions of our wounds. Until the day he died, Bill was a fierce advocate for those who still bear the scars of war. Then he got involved in campus ministry and helped minister to their children, including me.

Later on, after Kosovo, he was called back in by the VA. They flew him to the Balkans to minister to women, men, and children who'd been tortured in modern-day concentration camps. And in 2011, he died of a service-related health condition. He was in a VA hospital surrounded by the veterans that he had served throughout his ministry. He had a form of cancer that you just don't get

without being exposed to Agent Orange. Had he lived, he would've turned 90 this year.

Now, I mentioned these two men, not only because we're at the one-year anniversary of my father's death, but also because I find myself entering Lent carrying heavy burdens. In the 22 years that I've been a priest, many, many people have shared their stories of trauma with me. I have also had to come to terms with my own trauma. Even here at Christ Church Cranbrook, where I've only served God with you for three short months, several of you have shared very personal stories about things that happened to you. Thank you for trusting me with these stories.

That leads me to ask the following questions: how do we pray with these stories during our Lenten pilgrimage into the wilderness? What might they teach us during our five weeks of freedom? And how do we hope, how do we hope that Jesus Christ will touch our wounds and set us free from the power of sin and death? Trauma-informed care is all the rage these days, and it's for good reason. Trauma is everywhere. It's in our families, in our neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. It's in our national life. We experience violence, fear, and loss of control.

As Father Chris and the others who went out to give Ashes to Go this year reported back to us, again and again people had the same prayer request. They were asking us to pray for hope. Many of us can't bear to watch the news anymore. It's all too painful. Yesterday, at least 85 people, most of them young girls, were killed in a school in Southern Iran. Afghanistan and Pakistan are at war. Closer to home, there are countless acts of violence in our own country. Like when I was a child, sometimes we see it on TV.

Given the violence that seems to be everywhere right now, and given the past that seems to invade our present reality, how do we accept the things we cannot change and yet work, work really hard to change the things we can? Some of you know those words as part of the Serenity Prayer. It's long been part of the “liturgy” of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step recovery groups. As some of you may know, my wife, who's also a veteran, learned the truth of these words the hard way. Tracy has been a gratefully recovering alcoholic for more than three decades. She said, I could tell you that. And she's had to learn by personal experience that there is a good God, there is a good God who is willing and able to set us free. If we only seek God, God will set us free.

There really is a God like that. Many of you have come to know that God in this church. That is what the gospel is all about. God so loved the world, and I am grateful for the countless people who continue to find freedom and new life in church basements everywhere, and that includes many, many 12-step groups that meet here at Christ Church. Some of you are here in this room this morning. Many

of these folks have known their share of violence. Sometimes it's in their families of origin. Sometimes it's somewhere else. Sometimes we suffer from self-inflicted wounds. Many, many people have had to admit that they are powerless. They have had to surrender to seek the help of a higher power, and one day at a time, one person at a time, God is changing human lives here. God is setting us free.

The Christian faith is all about that kind of freedom, the freedom we find in Jesus. And yes, we do have a story of trauma: Jesus Christ crucified right at the center of our faith. In Lent, we hear the call of Jesus to take up our cross and follow Him. We are to follow Him wherever He leads. In a popular prayer, we confess that the way of the cross is none other than the way of life and peace. We need to unpack that. Not everyone who comes telling you about the cross has your best interests at heart.

In many popular versions of the Christian faith, the death of Jesus is portrayed in ways that only deepen our bondage. In my view, these distortions of the gospel owe a lot to the church's complicity with white supremacy and other ideologies of domination. How easily we forget the glorious liberty of the children of God. For in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free. We are all one in Christ Jesus. But how easily we abuse and neglect the little ones whom Jesus loves, immigrants and strangers, widows and orphans, and poor people, many of them, literally children. And how easily we bend the knee to arrogance, violence, and greed to all the idols the world thinks are strong.

In many standard accounts of our salvation, God is very, very angry at our sins, to the point that God does not seem willing to forgive us. Too often we worship a God who is conflicted and ambivalent at best. From this point of view, which I do not share, God needs to punish someone, and Jesus, the Son of God, is tortured and killed in our place. You've heard that story, right? In order to appease God's need for a victim, that's what many people think. According to this false narrative, God's alleged need to punish and control people never really goes away. But I'm here to tell you something. We worship a God of freedom.

Too often when we've been in charge, Christians have persecuted others, especially those deemed deviant, defective, or unclean. Too often in self-interested ways, we end up lying about God. We falsify our own witness. We misrepresent God, modeling God on earthly kings with pretensions to divinity, like Pharaoh or Caesar. I'm not sure those were lifted up as examples by the early church. How easily we forget that God told us to love our enemies. To bless those who curse us. To forgive. How easily we forget that God took the side of Hebrew slaves.

I was thinking about that last week as we listened to Bishop Rob Wright preaching about a demented and tyrannical king who “lynched Jesus in front of His own

mother." Jesus did not die on the cross, nor did He endure torture at our hands so that we could keep on living the same damned old ways we always had. Jesus died on the cross to justify the ungodly that is you and me. He came to show us a new and better way. He came to show us the way of love. He came to set us free so that we might love one another.

God doesn't need a victim. Perhaps we think we do. We are the violent ones. We are the ones who need to be appeased. Our need to punish each other shows up in various ways as we seek to assert dominance through violence and control. Piling sin upon sin, we project our own violence onto God, and that is nothing short of blasphemy. God is love. God is love without remainder. There is nothing, there is nothing at all except love in God.

As Rowan Williams once said, "This is what the love of God is like. It is free and it is therefore both all powerful and completely vulnerable." God is the one who raises the dead. God is the liberator God of the Exodus who hears our cries and sets us free. God makes us to be a people where there is no people. God calls into existence the things that are not. God is always giving us good gifts. God joins us here in the valley of the shadow of death. God joins us in our flesh. God triumphs in our flesh.

On Easter Day, God triumphs over all that oppresses us. Over all that holds us down or makes us afraid. If we want to know what God is like, we should look at Jesus. We should listen to His teachings. We should follow His example. We should turn to Him and live. We should turn to Him and let Him set us free. Just look in the gospels at how He is with other people. Just look at what His example has meant to the saints in your life. Everything He says, everything He suffers, everything He does, all of it is for our salvation.

"For God so loved the world." God so loved the world. It's all of us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... and indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." God so loved the world.

And so come to Jesus. Come to Him. No matter what anyone has told you about Him, come to Jesus. Come to the real thing. Come to Him, whoever you are. Come to Him however you are hurting. Come to Him no matter what you have suffered or done. Come to Him for grace and forgiveness. His arms are opened wide for you. Come to Him for strength and freedom. Come to Him all ye that travail and are heavy laden. Come to Him and lay your burdens down.

Amen.