



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Thank you.

Good morning. I am so incredibly grateful to be back here sharing the Word with you today. The last time I preached from this pulpit, it was the weekend right after Thanksgiving, the very first week of Advent. It was a heavy morning for me because I stood right here and shared with you the news of my new cancer diagnosis and that I was about to step into a rigorous road of treatment. That was a hard sermon to give.

But there's something else I remember vividly about that weekend. I remember just how brutally cold it was. It felt like the very second Thanksgiving dinner was over, winter arrived with a vengeance and simply refused to let go. I can't remember the last time we endured a winter that felt so long, so gray, and so completely unforgiving. Even this spring, if you can even call it a spring, never quite seemed to sprung. Every single time we would get a tiny, beautiful taste of sunshine and warmth, that winter weather would barge back into Michigan like an uninvited guest, bringing the frost and the frigid cold right back with it. But now I think we can finally and safely say that summer is here and winter is gone. Praise God for that

And with the arrival of that warm summer sun comes that annual universal ritual of breaking out those summer clothes. It's time to pack away those heavy coats and sweaters and blankets, clear out the closets, and bring out those T-shirts, shorts, and yes, those dreaded bathing suits. Now, if you're anything like me, this particular transition brings a whole new level of personal anxiety and stress. After eating all that comfort food, you pull out your clothes from the back of the closet, the ones that seemed to fit so beautifully last September, back when everything fell perfectly into place.

But now? Now, you find yourself holding your breath, jumping up and down in front of the mirror, trying to force your body into a shape just so the zipper will go up. Instead of a perfect fit, if you're like me, you might have looked at your reflection and said, "Ugh, muffin tops." Where did that come from? I actually looked at my husband, Alan, and asked him in a moment of pure desperation, "How do I get rid of this?" And Alan, in his wonderfully dry, unfiltered way, just looked at me and said, "Quit eating muffins." True story. The spiritual truth is that the more I try to force things to work, the more everything feels so completely out

of place, and I realize that no matter how hard I try, no matter how much willpower I summon, I'm just not going to be able to force myself into something that doesn't quite go together.

Now, we can laugh about the clothes and the winter weight, but the tragedy is that for so many people, especially within the LGBTQ+ community, and for so many who have been deeply hurt, rejected, and systematically shunned, that feeling of out-of-placeness isn't a funny, temporary, seasonal ritual. It is a lifetime commitment to a shape that just isn't theirs. It's an everyday reality of being told that who they are does not fit. Even now, there is a movement to silence and even exclude those of us who are deemed different and not worthy based on who and how we love, not based on the fact that we do love. Even those from other cultures, those other nations which are vastly different, should not be forced to just fit in, but we should create space necessary to invite them in by getting to know them, by listening and finding out what God reveals, what is already beautiful.

So when we approach the other with a rigid thinking or a self-righteousness, we are telling them that their authentic, God-given identity is shameful. There is no love in that. That shame becomes an uninvited guest that clouds up God's love. Forcing makes everything feel so out of place. There is no room for a God like that when we approach others. Think about how exhausting and heartbreaking that must be for those who are on the margins of our society. There is no warmth of welcome in that kind of sharing. When you are forced to hide your true self, bury your God-given gifts, and walk through life wearing a mask, it leaves you feeling cut off from community and entirely out of place in the family of God. It tells you that the church doors are open, but only if you leave your authenticity on the steps outside.

So how do we as Christians, as modern disciples of Christ, break this damaging cycle? How do we invite the stranger who feels so deeply out of place into a space where they can finally drop their guard, open up, and feel comfortable? We can look directly to our gospel. And in this final parting moment of Jesus's earthly ministry, He gathers His disciples on a mountaintop and tells us something incredibly honest, something remarkably human about that holy gathering. They worshiped Him, but some doubted.

Think about the depth of that honesty. Even in the immediate physical presence of the resurrected Christ, humanity was still trapped in the divisive ugliness of doubt, fear, and uncertainty. The disciples didn't know how they were going to move forward. They were fractured, they were afraid, and they certainly didn't feel they had the strength within themselves to go out and love a world full of hostility and strangers. But notice what Jesus does. He doesn't disqualify them for their doubts. He doesn't cast them out because they don't have it all figured out.

Instead, He draws near to them, communes with them, and gives them an entirely new way of moving through this world.

For generations, this final text in Matthew has been used almost exclusively to talk about rigid conversion, a demand to go out and force everyone to look, act, and think exactly like us. But when we look at this text through the lens of PRIDE celebration, the entire landscape shifts. Jesus isn't building a uniform institution. He is drawing the blueprints for ultimate diversity. And the secret is found in one single beautiful word that echoes through His parting words: all. First, consider the authority of conclusion. Jesus stands on that mountain and claims, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. And in the very next breath, He uses that supreme authority not to restrict, but to expand. He sends His followers to all nations.

Now, in our modern ears, we hear nations, and we think of lines on a map or political borders. But in the original Greek text, the word used is *ethne*. It goes infinitely deeper than geography. It means groups of people, every culture, every identity, every unique tribe, and every beautifully distinct way of being human. Jesus is looking out at the vast tapestry of human expression and saying, go to all of them and include them. When we reframe this text, we realize that this exact same word, *ethne*, carries a profound weight. This tells us the ultimate goal of going to the nations is to ensure that the hungry are fed, the sick are cared for, and the stranger is welcomed. When Jesus stands on that mountain and says, "Go and make disciples of all nations," His disciples would have been remembering three intense years of watching Him wash feet, touch lepers, defend, elevate the marginalized, inviting them even to dinner, welcoming them into spaces that otherwise they were excluded by their fellow man. Spaces they were told that they didn't fit into, that they were not good enough.

But Christ would break down those barriers of prejudice with His radical inclusiveness by commanding his disciples to mirror His life. They would have understood clearly that to make disciples means to go out into the world and do exactly what He did. Loosen the grip of human power, sacrifice our own deep-seated biases, and create a space of unconditional love where the broken and the stranger can finally live, breathe, and find their space to thrive in this world. To co-mission is not about us going on this journey alone, but to be fueled by God's power and strength, not just ours.

And then look at how He secures this journey with the promise of that presence. The very last thing he says before stepping into eternity is, "And remember, I am with you always to the very end of the age." Think about how deeply healing that promise is for a community, for our LGBTQ+ community that has so often been systematically abandoned, isolated, and locked out by religious institutions where they were seeking to be loved, not shunned. When the church doors were

slammed in their face, Jesus was not behind those closed doors. Oh, no. I believe He was standing out on the steps with them. He does not say, I am with you if you conform. He says, "I am with you always."

Look at the word "co-mission." The prefix *co* means "together" or "with." It is never a solo flight. When you break it down, the great co-mission isn't just a heavy, daunting chore handed down to us to figure it out on our own. It's an invitation into a shared mission, co-missioning with Christ himself. The commission is not just to spread a religion, but to invite everyone into the absolute safety of God's unconditional embrace. When you realize that Jesus is not just watching your performance from a distance, but is walking right there beside you as you approach the stranger, your entire posture shifts. You move from being a defensive religious gatekeeper trying to police who's in and who's out, whose only job is to share, to find out who belongs to God.

And in that shared work, we hit on the ultimate truth. You cannot make a disciple of someone you are refusing to welcome. Our only job is to create a space so that an authentic, holy meeting can take place. Looking deeply at the person standing in front of us, looking far beyond our judgments and assumptions, and finding out through listening what unique beauty God has placed within them. Creating that intentional space allows everything beautiful about the person to come forward. When we choose to get to know someone rather than assume we already know them based on our own prejudices, it highlights a profound truth. We are all made in the image of God, which can unify even the most unlikely together.

Now, I saw a beautiful example of this when Alan and I got to travel to the American Southwest. I personally needed some of that unifying strength. I needed a break from the cold, frigid winter we were enduring, and I felt completely exhausted from the grueling 37 rounds of radiation and chemotherapy I had just gone through. But finally, having completed that journey, Alan and I were able to take our much-needed, long-delayed vacation. We went to Arizona, to the desert of Arizona, to find some of that desperately needed warmth, relaxation.

Now, one of Alan's specific requests for the trip was that we go on a tour of Frank Lloyd Wright's winter retreat home called Taliesin West. Now, I have to be completely honest with you. Initially, I wasn't super excited about walking around in the hot desert at 95 degrees on a tour. At first, I just thought, "boring." But I was tired, and a part of me just wanted to lay out, read, and hang out by the pool. But how could I say no to Alan? He took care of me and walked beside me that entire course of treatments. And Alan really wanted to go, so I of course said yes. And let me tell you, I am so incredibly grateful I got up off that lounge chair and went because that tour is exactly where I received the inspiration for this very sermon.

Right there at the entrance of Wright's creative art studio, the very room where he sat and designed the great Guggenheim Museum, I came across a beautiful piece of art that at first seemed completely out of place and initially looked like it didn't fit. It was a beautiful piece of pottery placed right into the rugged rock of this Arizona wall. If you pull out the insert in your bulletin, you will see what I am talking about. Staring back at me was this colorful depiction of a community of people from a nation far away. It seemed completely out of place in the American West.

I found out this art is called Xinjiang pottery. It was brought over from the nation of China, thousands of miles away. Wright believed in harmonizing and creating space to highlight delicate exotic pieces of art. He used many pieces from Asia in his winter home of Taliesin West. He liked taking two things that were complete opposites, the rugged American Southwest desert stone and this Asian clay pottery from a completely different part of the world, and fusing them together beautifully. He wasn't changing the art or forcing it to conform, but allowing its beauty to come forward.

That is how I see bringing together all nations. On the surface, a closed mind would look at the wall of rock and delicate Asian pottery and see an absolute mismatch. It would say the smooth glaze of that Asian pottery has no business being touched by the raw stone of the American desert. It would try to separate them based on their outward reality. But Wright, a master designer, saw a deeper, organic relationship. He didn't try to change the essence of either material. He didn't grind down the desert stone. He didn't smash the Asian pottery to make it fit. Instead, he placed that colorful piece of art representing a community of people and placed it right in the center of that rugged American desert stone, allowing the two completely different textures to harmonize seamlessly.

They look completely different on the surface. One piece left raw, rustic, and weathered by the sun, the other beautifully sculpted and glazed. But at the core, they are both formed from the exact same earthly material. At that core, they are both equal. And isn't that the exact picture of us if we realize that the other, the person who looks different, loves different, thinks different, or comes from a completely different cultural landscape, is formed from the very same divine material as us? We are really all made equal in God's eyes, which always makes a perfect fit. It is a beautiful reflection of His singular, inclusive, creative love.

This is what I believe we are called to do as a church. This is the blueprint of our co-mission. When you are co-missioning with Christ, you aren't forcing anyone to change their fundamental identity to fit your mold. You are carving out a shelter of grace, a space exactly the right shape to hold them, protect them, and let their true selves come forward as a welcome addition to the whole body of Christ. When people feel safe, when they feel respected, and when they are allowed to

breathe freely without the heavy weight of someone else's rigid expectations crushing them, their connection to the divine happens naturally. They don't have to be forced into a mold. They don't have to be coerced or manipulated. They just naturally grow toward the light of unconditional love.

This isn't just a beautiful abstract theory about architecture in the Arizona desert. This is about the messy, vulnerable, lived realities of human life where God provides the strength to shatter our prejudices and bring us together. Life has a beautiful way of making these lessons come full circle. Because before I could get to the warmth of that desert, before I could look at that harmonized wall of stone and clay, I had to walk through those heavy doors of Henry Ford Radiation Oncology for 37 treatments. I felt like a total stranger in my own life. That feeling of out-of-placeness was real for me. I know what it's like to sit in that quiet waiting room, scared and terrified about what's about to happen. But God showed up in that room, and He did so through a ninety-four-year-old woman named Nancy.

I met Nancy on my very first day of radiation treatment. As God would have it, my very first day just so happened to coincide with her final one. Nancy had battled cancer three distinct times, and after that long, exhausting fight, she had made the profound and difficult decision with her doctors that she would not be pursuing any further treatments. Sitting in that chair, there was an undeniable heavy sense of finality to her journey. Yet, in what could have been a moment of total darkness, she chose to give me hope. She sat with me, talked with me, and focused entirely on finding out who I was. And in doing so, we found a beautiful common ground right there in that waiting room. She looked at me and acknowledged how deeply daunting and terrifying this procedure was going to be. But as she got to know me and got to know about my husband, Alan, she began to reflect on her own journey. She told me how the love she received from her husband, her close friends, and her faith community had been the ultimate compass that guided her through the most arduous, painful moments.

In listening to her speak, a wave of clarity washed over me. I was instantly reminded of all the love that was currently surrounding me from those exact same sources, my husband, my friends, and this faith community. You people at this very church who loved and supported me with a profound, unconditional love is something I had never experienced. And it was as if Nancy was holding up a mirror to my own life. She reminded me that it was love and love alone that could permeate those icy walls of fear and make the treatment bearable. And you know what? She was right.

So we sat and talked a little while longer, and then we were both called back. She for her last treatment and mine for my first. But right before we parted ways, she stopped, turned to me, whispered something in my ear, and it was this beautiful final blessing. It says, "Remember to receive and accept a lot of these. They

help." And then she reached out, threw her arms around me, and gave me the warmest embrace, an unexpected hug from someone who was a stranger to me just a half hour ago.

It was in that moment I felt the very presence of God's grounding love. I realized that I am never alone. I am welcomed even when I feel completely out of place. Nancy didn't look at me and Alan as the other. Instead, she completely empathized with us by identifying the common supports of love that helped her through her suffering. Even if she wasn't consciously intending to do that, God used her, I believe, to welcome me into a space where I could feel some comfort.

Christ asks us to love one another, not "other" one another based on our human prejudices. And when we allow that love to be the unshakable foundation of our mission, we co-create a space where those on the margins feel safe and welcomed, not excluded, and where they can thrive and shine in all of their beautiful diversity. Expressed through love, that is the perfect fit for all. So when we are truly living out discipleship and co-missioning with Christ, we shouldn't allow those cold, old prejudices to barge back in like an uninvited guest. We cannot let that harsh winter chill return to cloud up the beautiful light, life-giving message that we are called to carry. We must refuse to let fear separate and exclude.

Instead, I believe our ultimate calling is to actively create the sacred space needed to include all people from absolutely all walks of life. Because when we welcome and open up space for God's love to thrive, the shame is conquered, and no one has to stand alone. We should not be breaking people's spirits because they don't fit what we think is beautiful. Instead, our calling is to lift their spirits to reveal exactly what God has made beautiful.

What God creates is always beautiful because it's not about fitting in. It's not about holding your breath, hiding your true colors, or trying to force your spirit into a shape that just isn't yours. We are all already made to be one with each other and in God's image for all of us. From the striking harmony of a desert wall to the unexpected warmth of a genuine hug in a cold radiation room, I learned that we all belong to one another. All we have to do is follow Christ's command, drop our defenses, and create space for all people to experience God's love. And to me, sharing that love is always the perfect fit. Thank you.

Amen.