



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak 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.

Is it too late for me to talk a bit today about the Super Bowl commercials? Are we too close to March, too far away from January? I don't know about you, but I found all of the Super Bowl commercials kind of interesting this year. I loved the one with Christopher Walken and his ad for BMW because I think that it taps something that we all believe in our hearts and minds that we can all do excellent Christopher Walken imitations.

And I also liked the one from Dunkin' Donuts, the moment where Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck have this kind of couple spat over work, and Ben thinks that he can dance and do something with a group called the Boston Massacre that's going to somehow charm her and others. I found that hysterical because there's nothing funnier than a middle-aged man dancing. And it only gets worse if the middle aged man can dance well. It just gets funnier and funnier. And there's nothing funnier and more intimate than being part of a beautiful couple's spat.

What makes an ad powerful? What makes it effective? While I was watching these ads, I was texting with my social group, which are all my classmates in business school, and I found that it was an equal part conversation between football and the ads. And my own answer to this question is that the best ads are ads that create a sense of identity, a sense of community, and a sense of agency, and make the customer a co-creator.

This is a formula that's been played out for the past 10 years, particularly with social media, because the best way to actually advertise these days is to find an influencer and to create a kind of bond between that influencer and the product, and the influencer creates this sense of identity, community agency and co-creation. All good advertising does that, and it was doing it since before social media became a thing.

In 1984, Apple Computer Company introduced the Macintosh computer and they did it with an incredible ad that borrowed from George Orwell's 1984, where this beautiful athlete swings around this sledgehammer and destroys the screen that had been controlling the minds and thoughts and hearts of a nation of automatons. And suddenly when people saw that ad, they knew that there was

something coming on the market. That computers were not just a way to make a buck, but to somehow remake yourself. It gave people an immediate sense of identity, community, agency and co-creation.

Dove soap in 2004 set forth a new campaign in which they stopped using models and instead used real women. And they saw real women taking care of themselves, talking about the Dove products, and how it helped them understand that everybody was beautiful, and that was incredibly powerful. It gave a sense of identity, community, agency, and co-creation. Those ads were revolutionary and powerful.

This year, the ads that really caught my eye were the ones from an advertising campaign known as "He Gets Us." These are ads about Jesus, and it's done by an organization called The Servant Foundation. It's a foundation that typically funds really conservative causes, anti-abortion causes, and anti LGBTQ causes. And for some reason they've decided over the next three years to spend \$3 billion with ads for Jesus, saying, "He gets us," and showing these examples of Jesus' love that bridges so many of the divides that they are so firmly aligned in.

And I have two for you today. One is from the cover of your bulletin. It's of a priest who's washing the feet of someone who codes as a member of the queer community, and the priest is being so tender and beautiful towards this person. And they both have their shoes off, which is a sign of not only humility, but mutuality. We're catching this in the middle of a moment in *media res*, as they say, in rhetoric, in the midst of things. And we are catching that moment where the queer person is allowing their feet to be washed by the priest. And of course, the time will come eventually when the priest's feet will be washed as well.

And it's impossible to see this without keeping in mind that there are many religious traditions that exclude people who fall within that community, the LGBTQ community, and oppress that community. So the reconciliation that is happening through this foot washing is profound.

On the last page of the bulletin, I also have another one that I found incredibly powerful and moving, given the fact that the Servant Foundation is an advocate against choice. You have a woman who seems to be coming from a group of protestors, washing the feet of a young woman who seems like she is entering an abortion clinic. And the woman who is representing the protestors is sitting down and kneeling down so beautifully. It's like watching a mother care for a child. And they both have their shoes off again. And this is a sign for us that this will be a moment of mutuality. They will wash each other's feet.

Now, when this ad came up on the social media that I was following with my business school friends, I wrote down a comment. I said, is it just me or are these people trying to steal my business? And I got five likes, which mean everything in social media things. You know what that's like. You're just like, is this going to be

funny? Is it not going to be funny? Am I going to get the tear with the smile? You know, what am I going to get? And then one of my friends, Becca Anderson, who's an Episcopalian and just finished a stint on the vestry at Christchurch Grosse Pointe, she wrote back and said, "Maybe this is just an indicator of how large your addressable market is."

I love these ads. I think they're powerful. And I actually think that I respect this foundation for reaching out and going to the edge of their comfort zone to imagine a grace of God and Christ through the practices of the church that went beyond their own beliefs. I know that there are people who don't like the fact that it's a conservative organization that funds it. On the left, one of my favorite comments was that these ads present the friendly face of fascism. On the right, they're not as pressed either. One of the comments I found was that these "He Gets Us" ads are the work of a woke trickster. And finally, there are people who are just deeply uncomfortable with the whole idea of making Jesus into a brand. There's something wrong.

But nonetheless, I see something powerful in these ads. I see an invitation to let go of our ideologies, no matter what they might be, and to hold on to the practices of our faith. And to find in those practices an opportunity for a new way of being. One where Jesus sits more powerfully at the center of what we think and do and feel and act. That image of washing each other's feet, yes, that is our addressable market because when you think about what we do at Christ Church Cranbrook, you could almost see these paintings come to life every Sunday. And so in a sense, I'm grateful for these ads because they help us imagine who we are called to be as Christians, particularly here in this time, in this place, and in this church.

All of us have the opportunity in Lent to engage in an opportunity to rethink our identity, our community, our agency, and to become co-creators with God. Lent is not a lonely walk when you give something up and suffer in silence and shame because you cannot believe you are so pulled in one direction. Lent is a time for you to reclaim your identity as a Christian, often by letting go of what is most familiar and stepping into a new way of being, of exploring community in new ways, of exploring what it means to be God's co-creator.

And all of this is in our readings for today. In our reading from Genesis, you have this moment in which Abram has a name change to Abraham to signify his new vocation that God is giving him. And this is nothing other than a change of identity, a change of community, and an invitation to agency and co-creation. God could have saved Israel and could have created Israel any way God wanted. God is infinitely powerful, but God chose Abraham and Sarah and decided to build a community through them.

And from this we learned that God wants partners. God wants to do this work together and God promises us that we'll be changed. Our community will become different in the process. In our reading from Romans, you have another echo of this in which we are told that everything rests upon grace. And this grace of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ, this is from the God whose work of redemption is merely a continuation of the work of creation. And so we read right in the middle of the passage, all of this is in the presence of the God in whom Abraham believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. God calls into existence the things that do not exist.

And this is a kind of promise that when we are engaged in that identity formation, when we are engaged in that community formation, when we are engaged in finding our freedom by following Jesus, that we will be going with the grain of God's creation. We'll be co-creators. And in today's gospel where Jesus says, if anyone wants to be my disciple, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me, that is nothing more than another invitation to find ourselves by losing ourselves. A change in identity to see the larger story of Jesus inside our own smaller stories. And to find in Jesus a story that continues to invite other stories.

The thing about foot washing and the thing about discipleship, they go together. The ritual and the practice, they're always larger than anything we could ever say or do. They always invite us into something more. And when Jesus invites us into the practice of discipleship, of following Him, Jesus is inviting us into a change that we will never be able to settle and communicate with just one story.

We all have a story of coming to Jesus. The question is, how will we tell it? Will it be told in a way that makes room for others? Will it be told in a way that makes room for our own changes as we go through life and find ourselves with a new identity community and an opportunity for co-creation?

This Lent, make space for God to show you that new identity through letting something die. This Lent, make space for that new opportunity to redefine your community, to find a new group of Christians who can help you become more of who God has called you to be. This Lent, take the opportunity to reclaim your life and to reclaim your discipleship. God is not looking for you to hide in the corner full of shame, suppressing things that you don't like about yourself. That has nothing to do with what it means to take up your cross and follow God in Christ. Rather, Jesus is inviting you to co-creation.

Today, I want to end with the final words that will be said in our service today. I wrote a prayer and Pastor Manisha liked it so much she put it at the end. It's on page 16. It's the benediction that we'll have. May it be your prayer this Lent.

Lord God, help us during these 40 days to abide with Jesus in the desert. So that by faithfully following Him and making our own pilgrimage, we might see

ourselves again as full of your grace and generous with your mercy through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever.

Amen.