



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, amen.

As someone who didn't grow up going to church, living in San Francisco Bay Area, my image of Christians was formed sadly by what I saw on TV, which back in the '80s when I was a kid meant those televangelists. Remember them? Jerry Falwell, the Pat Robertsons, the Jim and Tammy Faye Bakkers, and all of those shenanigans, not to mention the judgmentalism and the hypocrisy that came along with it, right? And if it was before your time at all, trust me on this, it was not a good look.

And so growing up, you know, I just didn't give Christianity much thought. And when I did, one of the things that always bothered me was the exclusivity that those folks were always professing, that when it came to God, that there somehow wasn't room for everyone, that God's love was limited or conditioned. And it was always on things like being in the right religion, which of course was always their religion, or having the right beliefs, which was always their beliefs, or going to the right church, which you get the idea. And everyone else was, you know, going to you know where.

And I remember, you know, even as a kid thinking, this can't be right. Come on. You mean to tell me that God would just write off billions of people, ancient indigenous peoples, whole civilizations and beautiful cultures with languages, all because they never heard of Jesus? Could God's house really be so small? Or what about members of our own families, people like my brother, a guy who deep down has a heart of gold? I know that because I have seen it. I've seen the image of Christ come out in him, in his compassion, in his selflessness, his almost innocent nature at times.

He certainly heard of Jesus, but again, it was a version that he could just never relate to. And so when this world became too much for him to bear on his own, with no faith to reach for, he reached for all the wrong things and now lives in the grip of a terrible addiction. He's never been baptized and may never be. What about him? What about the countless like him? For all kinds of reasons, some of them really good reasons, who could never get traction in a church.

So these misgivings I had about Christianity, they continued until I was an adult, when quite by accident, I discovered the Episcopal Church. And I heard for the

very first time, actually heard good news about God. And that was this: that the creator of the universe, the creator of creation itself, knew my name before I was born, knew my face before it was stitched together in my mother's womb, and knows yours as well. That God, that God has loved us since the beginning for who we are, as we are, and there is nothing that we have ever done, and nothing we could ever do that could change that love.

And hearing that good news for the very first time, it just blew away all that stuff, all that stuff that I grew up with, hearing all the doubts and the misgivings, all of them, but perhaps that one question: what about everyone else? What if they were right about that one? Should I worry about my brother? Should I worry about the rest of my family, most of them, who don't go to church, who still think I'm going through some kind of phase myself, even to this day? Should I be doing more to convert them? Should I feel guilty that I haven't?

And then one day, I came across a lecture by the biblical scholar, Marcus Borg, he gave at Stanford, where he told a story about a Hindu professor who was invited to preach at the chapel of Boston University School of Theology. And that Hindu professor was, of course, I'm sure, brilliant, but he was no Christian. And the gospel reading that morning just so happened to be the one we just heard. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." And as Borg tells the story, that Hindu professor stepped up into the pulpit, and the seminarians out in the pews, they all just kind of leaned forward. You could hear a pin drop as they wondered, what is a Hindu going to say about that?

And this is what he said. He said, my friends, this verse is absolutely true. Jesus is the way. And that way is known at the heart of every enduring religion in the world. And what is that way? It is the way of mercy and compassion, the way of forgiveness, the way of peace and justice, the way of dying to our old life of fear and isolation and ego, and rising to a new one of self-giving and self-sacrifice that in the economy of God actually makes our lives bigger, not smaller. That leads to more life, not less. So much life that those who experience it can't help but want to share it, to give it away with a world who needs it so much, and when we do, we change the world a little bit on Earth as it is in heaven.

That is the way that Jesus embodies. And so please hear me when I say by sharing this story, I'm not trying to suggest that all religions are the same, or that Christianity doesn't matter, or we should be watering it down. No, just the opposite. I think we need to get back to the heart of it because the way of Jesus was never about having the right beliefs about God, or worshiping the right way, or attending the right churches, or clanging the right gongs. It was always about living a life grounded in love. That's why the earliest Christians were called Followers of the Way, because their way of life looked different. They cared for

those who had been discarded. They took in those who had been cast out. They loved the people that the people of their time thought to be disposable.

It was a new way of being in the world. It was the way of love, and love is not exclusive to any religion, any church, any group, and certainly not to any one country. And I think that's worth remembering today because we live in a time when a faith rooted in love is once again being portrayed on the news by a loud and vocal minority who once again are peddling a version of Christianity that I don't think Jesus could even recognize. Some are calling it Christian nationalism. Perhaps. But whatever it is, it's the same old song. People trying to speak for God about who is in and who is out. People who have turned away from the great commandment and instead have embraced some kind of a philosophy of exclusivism and scapegoating. Building walls rather than tearing them down, trying to divide rather than bring us together, blaming our problems on our differences rather than looking for the image of Christ within them.

Which brings us to today, because you might be now wondering, what does this have to do with bagpipers? With bagpipers and that really serious-looking guy who walked down the aisle with that really big sword. As Bill said at the beginning of the service, Kirkin' o' the Tartan did begin in Washington, D.C. during World War II by a Presbyterian, which is why all the Scottish flavor. He was trying to create a liturgy that was trying to remind us all how we can still celebrate our differences and our heritage without falling into the trap of nationalism and tribalism.

And so today we are going to lift up and we are going to bless all of our modern-day tartans, the various symbols that we carry of our histories and our origins and our identities and our families, but also the ones that are less visible. Those that we have weaved into our very lives, the tartans of our political tribes, our professional tribes, our race, our genders, our sexualities, our age, our generation. Are we boomers? Are we Gen Xers, millennials? Today we're going to lift all those various clans and tribes up because for better or for worse, they've helped bring us to where we are today. They've helped to make us who we are today. They've given us a sense of community when we needed it. And some of them, some of them have even saved our lives.

Because if you've ever been an outsider, if you've ever been someone who didn't quite fit in, if you've ever felt the sting of prejudice, then you know how life-giving it can be to find a community of people who share your story, who speak your language. They get what you have gone through and they can see you as you are, accepting you without any need for explanation. Our tribes, they can give us a dignity when we need it most. They can offer us belonging when we feel most rejected. So yes, we're going to give thanks for all of those tartans that we carry,

for the people who held us, for the families that raised us, for the communities that took us in and taught us how to stand up. We are going to bless them today.

Also, though, we are going to bless them so we can lay them down. Because unexamined, our tribes can also become a gated community of the heart. Places where we become so accustomed to people who look like us and think like us and vote like us that we forget what it looks like to find Christ in those who don't. Our tribes can become so comfortable that we no longer can tolerate being challenged by those who make us uncomfortable. Which is why I think Jesus keeps calling us beyond our clans and our tribes because while they were important along the way, we were never meant to end there.

In the words of one of my great heroes, the Father Greg Boyle, who works in LA trying to reconcile rival gangs, he says it this way: "Our tribes are mere hallways. Beautiful as they may be, mere hallways that lead to the grand ballroom of kinship." They teach us how to love and how to be loved, but only so that we can then love more widely and more wildly. So later today, when we come up to this altar, as we do every Sunday, when we come with all of our differences, all of our varieties, all our diversities, all of it, we give it back to God so that we might come together over a common meal at a common table to be sent in common mission to love and serve the world as one body in Christ. Jesus says it in this final prayer to the disciples in the gospel we just heard when He prays that we may be one. As the Father and I are one, that we may be one. That is the dream of God, and it is what we model every week here at the altar so that we might have a shot of building it out there when we go.

But what about those missing from the table? What about those who are not here and may never be? Some who are doing their best, some who are struggling, those who are still very lost. "In my Father's house, there are many rooms," Jesus says. So I take heart that the one who goes to prepare those rooms is the same one who leaves the ninety-nine to look for the one. The same one who doesn't quit until every last coin is found, every last sheep is brought home. The same one who in the fullness of time promises to gather all things, all people in Christ so that God's dream would come true.

And so with all due respect to the Pat Robertsons and the Franklin Grahams, I'm with Paul on this one, that there is nothing, nothing, neither death nor life, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation that would be able to separate us from the love of God. So as Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." God's mercy is not limited by our maps and our small minds. God's grace was never confined to our categories, and God's love is never hindered, no matter how much we get lost.

If you know somebody who has stepped away from the church, God has not stepped away from them. If you know someone who's never been baptized, God has not forgotten their name. If you know someone you love who is searching and still struggling, know that God is with them even now and will not quit until all of His children are brought home because in God's house, there is more room. There is always more room, more room for mercy, more room for grace, more room for all. All.

Amen.