



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.

One of the greatest delights that I have had happen to me over the last 24 hours or so is my eldest child, Phoebe, called me up at 28 years old to tell me about a date. And I delight in this because to have this kind of relationship between adults with your child is kind of wonderful, and it's beautiful and it's intimate and it's real. And we walk through these things together. It's one of the greatest blessings of being a parent is to have these kinds of conversations.

And she had a date this weekend. Imagine that! Valentine's Day. Someone connected with her over a socially appropriate app and they traded the Instagram accounts that they had. And so they looked at each other's Instagram accounts and he was taken by Phoebe's most popular account. She's a potter and there's this one piece she put out, this one video she put out that got a ton of hits. And it's where she was taking some pottery that had suffered imperfections in the kiln, and she holds it together and she films herself letting go of the pottery and it lands on the floor and breaks. And this for some reason is delightful to the online audience.

And so the date decides to take her to a rage room. What is a rage room? I had to ask the question myself. It started, I think, in LA. There are several there now. Hers was in Sherman Oaks. A rage room is where you check in and you're given protective glasses and you enter different rooms where you can break things. You're supposed to experience the catharsis of destroying things. And so one of the rooms that she went to, they handed you baseball bats and you could beat a 50-gallon drum that has glass on top of it sometimes. Another was they would give you a sledgehammer and you could beat a car. You could reduce a car to nothing. Another one, if you felt like being slightly less violent, you could engage in ax throwing. And then finally they had these drums set up where you had to put on a little more protective clothing and when you would beat the drums paint would come off the drums and fly all over the place.

A rage room. There are three in Detroit. There's one in Farmington Hills, there's one in Sterling Heights, and there's one in Detroit Proper. And I said, what kind of fool takes a date to the rage room? And she agreed. It was even expensive. It was \$90 a ticket. He paid for both. And then she, because she's young, paid for

dinner. I said, never do that again. And I kept on thinking about this, and just in case any of you are back in the game or getting into the game, young people know this. Do not take your first date to a rage room. It's really a poor first move because the artist who lets things destroy around her is fundamentally a creative person, and if he really wanted to impress her, he would've taken her someplace creative and life giving.

But I also had, when I heard this story, another question. Why are rage rooms the rage? Why are they so popular? We all know that giving vent to rage only makes the anger sink in deeper. Psychologists have studied this for years. The more you try to vent the rage, the more the rage actually sinks deeper. This is a psychological truth. And so while there may be that wonderful frisson of excitement the first few times you hit the car with a sledgehammer or beat something fragile with a baseball bat, the rage does you no good. And in fact, it creates a kind of false community because rage rooms exist not only in physical space, but we're living in a time in which so much of social media could be described as little rage rooms. Where we could pile on to something we don't like and experience that incredible thrill of judgment and shared distrust and shared resentment.

Human community cannot be made out of rage, not for long. It can gather people together. A shared resentment can get people burning torches, right? But it can't actually create something new. It can't engage into an act of visionary creativity. It can't engage into the kind of communities we need more of this day and age. We don't need more rage rooms. We need more rooms that are full of grace.

On Friday night, we had an incredible concert that celebrated the African American musical tradition, which is also a spiritual tradition. And we had about 30 entertainers on a stage right here, and everybody gathered together and it was transcendent and powerful. It's coming out on Detroit PBS, and the producer of the show was so impressed with what we were doing. And I got up to say that all of this is meant to convey one simple point about us as human beings: we need each other. We need to be with each other. We were created to be in community with one another. That was, in other words, a place where I was naming God's grace. And it was powerful. Everybody realized that in that moment, it was transcendent. We need more spaces for grace.

And one of the things that we have in a church is we have a place in which we create very human communities dedicated to grace. Grace comes in all of the ways we gather together in community. The 60 or so people that showed up on Saturday to do second Saturday and do all the service and all of the wonderful blood drive we did, all of that was a kind of space for grace that we created in this community. Grace is what we need right now. Grace is what is in the shortest

supply, and interestingly enough, grace is the only thing that can heal us together. And we need to be healed together, don't we?

Now, I begin with this story because I want you to see something really powerful at work in today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew. It is traditional to see Jesus on this mountain revealing glory as it is often defined. Jesus's face is changed, His appearance is changed. He is put alongside Moses and Elijah, and this is a moment where the glory of God shines. And it has been tempting for the church for generations to see that glory as an expression of power. But in fact, I want you to see the truth of that reading which is, it is a manifestation of God's grace.

When God comes to Israel in the wilderness, when God comes to Moses, God is coming with God's glory, which is known as God's *kavod* in Hebrew, and that means fundamentally God's presence. God who is perfectly at home in the heavens chooses to enter human existence and creaturely confines so that we would know God's presence here. It is an act of grace. Jesus, when He is anointed in that moment with the light that initially shined from the face of Moses after he was with God in the mountain, Jesus is the personification of God's glory, but more importantly, God's grace. God's *kavod*, God's glory. *Doxa* is the Greek. God's glory was manifested first as fire. And that fire refers not only to the burning bush that Moses saw, but also the fire of sacrifice in the temple and the tabernacle. But Jesus comes not as fire, but as completely embodied.

And that's why Jesus tells them He doesn't want a tabernacle or an altar built to Him on that mountain. That's why Jesus tells them He doesn't want that mountain to be remembered, because that was how you remembered things in Jesus's time, you would build a tabernacle or an altar. Jesus tells them to listen to God's voice, “This is my beloved Son,” and to follow Him all the way as He makes His way down the mountain and through the valley to Jerusalem where He will die so that we might live.

Jesus expresses incredible grace in that moment where the disciples get it wrong and they are trembling with fear. Look at the readings. Jesus touches them and tells them it's okay, and they open their eyes and they see Jesus. And He tells them the common to say nothing until the fullness of that revelation is made until Jesus is crucified for us and dies and then is raised from the dead.

Now all of that can seem like a hard way to go. It all can seem like some kind of effort I'm inviting you to do. “Take up your cross” you've probably heard once or twice in sermons from this kind of text, but I want you to see today, it's grace that Jesus is leading with today. He is inviting them to walk with them in grace. That means that they will fail, they will falter. They will fall short. They will be compromised. They will abandon them. They will betray Him, but Jesus will not let

any of that happen. Jesus is completely committed to be in grace with them. Because grace is what He is about. Fundamentally, grace is what they need.

Now, all of this is important for us to keep in mind because we are all living in a time in which there are a lot of rage rooms and creating the space for grace, creating rooms where grace can be, that's the work of the church. We aren't here to somehow avoid the problems of this world, but we're to see the problems of this world in the context of God's grace for us, and to find that to be the powerful thing we speak to the world around us. That grace turns the world upside down, that grace upturns an empire, that Grace leads us home, that grace is the heart and soul of what it means to be human, that grace comes from Jesus.

Over the past year, I've seen a movie that I love so much because I think it's all about grace. It has been shockingly ignored by the academy in this year's Academy Awards, and I say shockingly because it's the best movie I know that I've seen in the last year. It's called Knives Out 3: Dead Man Walking – I mean, Wake Up Dead Man. Sorry. Got excited there for a moment. Went Helen Prejean on you. Wake up Dead Man. And in it, it's about a young priest who has a penchant, because he is a former boxer, to somehow solve problems with his fists. And he knows this about himself and he is trying to make amends.

And he is assigned to a dysfunctional parish, a parish that is very much a church embattled, very much a church that is ideologically violent and sees itself as a way of kind of holding to a line that has got no grace in it. The church is basically an addictive organization, if you listen to sociology. It is full of grandiosity, rigidity, and secrecy. And he is called to be there. And as he says to his bishop that he's going to go in there, not like this, but like this, because the grace that he has been called to preach is not that the church is against the world, but that the church loves the world as Jesus loves the world.

And he gets there and he is promptly framed for murder because this is a detective story. And he is rescued by a detective originally from New Orleans named Benoit Blanc. And Benoit Blanc is someone who is a bit church wounded, he reveals in a brief moment in exchange, but he's someone who worships, he says, at the altar of the rational. That altar of the rational makes it impossible for Benoit Blanc to understand what Father Jud is about and makes him only see the inversion of who he is in the church that he's trying to save Father Jud from.

And an interesting thing happens between the two forces that are opposed, fighting, as it were for the soul of Father Jud. The church where he is serving is a place where grace has no room to breathe, where grace is denigrated, the name grace is even put down in the face of one person. And Benoit Blanc, in his need to save the innocent and convict the guilty, he needs to be thorough about that too. By worshipping at the altar of the rational, he has no room for grace either.

And yet in the midst of it, one of the beautiful things that Father Jud does is he constantly lives into his calling to be a bearer of grace.

And one of the moments that I think is most beautiful is while he is trying to get some evidence that will exonerate him, he calls a local office and the person there is too busy to get him the receipt. But as he's hanging up the phone, she says to him, "Father, can I ask you something?" And her name is Louise. And he says, sure. She says, "Can you pray for me? My mother, Barbara, is in hospice and she is suffering from a brain tumor. And we had a fight and there's so much brokenness and I feel completely alone." And Father Jud says, "You are not alone. I'm right here." And after listening to her in private, he concludes with the following prayer:

I pray that Barbara may feel her daughter's love. That it will comfort her in this time. And Lord, I pray for Louise. Be with her and give her wisdom and guidance. Hold her in your healing arms and let her know she is loved. She is not alone. We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

At the end of the movie, at the moment in which the murderer is going to be convicted, and I'm trying my best not to give you too many spoilers, Benoit Blanc decides to lean into grace. Father Jud is about to mistakenly confess and he stops him and he says to the sheriff, who happens to be Jewish, that he has had a Damascus moment, and he realizes even though he will have his reputation ravaged for not solving the case, that this case cannot be solved because he has to make room for grace. The sheriff asks him, you believe in God and all this mishegoss is real? No, no, he says. God is a fiction. My revelation came from Father Jud, his example to have grace. Grace for my enemy. Grace for the broken. Grace for those who deserve it the least, but who need it the most, for the guilty.

After that moment, the murderer steps forward and confesses and asks for absolution and dies. It's a wonderful movie. Rian Johnson, who wrote the script, was raised as a Christian in a conservative Christian home, and in his twenties he walked away from the church and from his faith. And when he tried to write this script, he realized that he had to honor those things that he knew and those things that still troubled them. He talked about the church when it can be at its worst, misogynistic, patriarchal, always willing to trade in shame, even though unwilling to see the shameful of their own actions. And he also had to feel inside himself, Benoit Blanc who worships at the altar of the rational, the way he could keep at bay all of this background that he struggled with. But the thing he could not accommodate, the thing that still keeps with him is grace.

Now this beautiful script is not just about one person's struggle with God. I think it's about the struggle each of us has as a community. We can choose grace as a community. We can choose between these polarities and these oppositions. We

can choose grace. That is what Jesus is inviting the disciples to do today when he invites them to give up on making tabernacles and to follow Him on His way to the cross and to resurrection. And there is something to that moment, that choice. Communities can choose to be grace filled. When we step into our Lenten program and join all the small groups that are coming together to talk about the sermons and to spend time with one another, we are choosing in a very embodied way to be people of grace and to be a community of grace.

This is what we're about. This is what the church does. This is what you and I are called to do. We are called to be people of grace. Grace for the broken. Grace who deserve it the least, but need it the most. Grace for the guilty. This isn't about someone who committed a heinous crime. This is about each and every one of us before God. And Jesus has come not to shame us, but to love us because He is grace.

The piece of art I have for you today is on your wonderful cover. I offer it to you as a kind of summation of what I'm trying to say. It's by Bill Viola, and it's a still from one of his pieces. And this is known as Ascension. And you can see this figure in which light seems to be coming up in the shape of a cross as this figure puts his arms out. And it's an interesting moment that is so powerful because Viola creates this image called Ascension by actually dropping someone into a big vat of water and filming it through a lens. And so that movement up is actually a movement down.

As you think about what God's calling you to do this Lent, think about that movement down. Don't be afraid to take on that hard work of grace. Don't think that you're going to earn your way up to God by giving up sweets or chocolate. That would be lovely. We would all do it if it worked. It doesn't work. Find the God who comes down to you. Find the God of grace. Make that your intention. Make it your action. Make it your guide because we are called to be people of grace and grace is what this world needs.

Amen.