



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Have you ever noticed that at times in the Gospel of Luke, it can kind of read like a musical? Unlike any of the other gospels, at least in these early chapters, Luke has his characters breaking out into song. Mary, Zechariah, even the angels, they all burst into hymns of praise and thanksgiving at the coming of God into the world.

For Simeon, it's the face of the baby Jesus. Such a sight to behold that he too breaks into song. But his stands apart a bit because while he also rejoices at God's promised salvation, his joy is followed by a stark prophecy of what is to come. Jesus will be the light to the world, but He will also be a polarizing figure. He will offer hope to all the nations, and he will challenge the status quo. He will take on the political and religious establishment. He will expose their inner thoughts, their hypocrisy, their indifference to the poor and the outcast, and He will spark such opposition that in the end, His own mother's heart will be pierced with sorrow and grief.

The salvation that Simeon has waited his life for, it seems, will be liberating, will be life-giving, but it will also be the path of suffering and strife. The way of Jesus, it turns out, is also the way of the Cross. And so when we find the courage to proclaim the radical love of God, we too can expect to face opposition, to be ridiculed, to be spat upon and jeered in the public square by those who cling to the old hierarchies of power and privilege, of the haves and the have-nots, of the in crowds and the out crowds, and perhaps the biggest lie of them all that some of us, some of us are somehow more worthy than others.

Jesus comes to overturn all of those tables and to replace them with a new economy, one whose currency is dignity, justice, and grace, where all people have a seat at a much larger table where there are no exclusions, no exceptions. Simeon's words were ringing in my ears this week following the Bishop of Washington's sermon. Where she called on all of us, and the President in particular, to show mercy to the marginalized. A sermon that was quickly followed by the all-too-predictable news cycle of partisan side-taking and vitriol on social media.

It's a pattern we've all seen before, isn't it? I remember a few years ago when the last president was denied communion by a priest. A lifelong Catholic denied communion right in the middle of church because of his position on abortion. And I remember how that also got the echo chambers clamoring away for a few days. But this one came real for me when we found out on Monday that my former spiritual home, the Episcopal Cathedral in San Diego had been vandalized over the weekend. It's a church I know very well. I was baptized there, spent seven years on the staff. My husband Joe and I were married there.

The church had always been on the front lines of justice and inclusion, and over the years faced occasional opposition because of it. We had been vandalized by taggers. Someone once even set fire to the undercroft in the middle of the Sunday service. This time they painted messages of hate and profanity on the walls around the cathedral. But I think what really triggered me were the crosshairs and targets, as if looking at the church through the scope of a gun, spray-painted on windows where children attend Sunday school. On the same walls that once sheltered homeless families. On the big red doors that once greeted Queen Elizabeth II and countless others.

My first emotional reaction is, this isn't just vandalism, this is a hate crime. This is terrorism. You want to talk about building walls and deporting people? Let's start with people who put targets on churches. And just like that, my little reptilian brain, that part that controls our fight or flight response was suddenly sounding an awful lot like the vitriol and the condemnation that I would normally condemn.

And it was a reminder to me how easy it is to slip into such thoughts. But it is not the way of love. It is not the way of Jesus, and it is not the salvation that moved Simeon to song. Scapegoating, othering, retaliation, revenge, writing people off, throwing away the key. Those are the ways of the world, and they perpetuate the very cycle of violence that Jesus came to save us from. Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that. *Only light, only love.*

Dr. King's prophetic words reminded me of a fateful day ten years ago this June in Charleston, South Carolina when a young man raised on a steady diet of racism and white supremacy, walked into a black church in the middle of a Bible study and opened fire, killing nine. And it kicked off another round of the necessary, if not always healthy debate about gun control and Confederate monuments and systematic racism, followed by the usual partisan side-taking and finger pointing.

And just as the debate was getting louder and more unhinged, it suddenly fell silent in the face of something truly profound when on live television at the bond hearing, just a few days after the shooting, members of the victims' families stood up and one by one confronted their loved ones' killer. And as the nation watched,

Nadine Collier spoke first. She looked at her mother's killer in his eyes and with a trembling voice she said, "You took something very precious away from me and I will never talk to her again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you."

And one by one, to the astonishment of a nation, the families of the victims returned hate with mercy, and it too was a sight to behold. But it wasn't the only witness to love that awful tragedy would offer. In a lesser known exchange, the 21-year-old killer, Dylann Roof, told the FBI that as he walked into church that day, he was immediately invited to join their Bible study. In fact, they were so warm and so friendly that he actually sat down and joined them for a bit. And as he sat there, he told the FBI that they were so gracious and he felt so included that it almost, almost changed his mind.

Think about that. In just a few precious minutes of being with a group of Christians, experiencing their warmth and their hospitality, the mind of someone bent on killing and starting some kind of a race war was almost changed. What if? What if instead of being his first Bible study, what if that had been his second or his third? What if at some point before that day he had found some other opportunity to meet and to connect with the people that he had been programmed to see as enemies? What if he had had the chance to discover that they were actually just looking for love and for acceptance and for salvation just like him.

Maybe it's time to expand our understanding of what it means to be marginalized and to realize we can't limit it to the groups and demographics and skin color. That you can feel marginalized. Anyone can feel marginalized when you feel discounted. When they feel threatened. When they feel they aren't seen. When they don't feel heard. Maybe what we need now isn't more walls. More people being written off, more lines being drawn. Maybe what we need today isn't more eye for an eye, but to start closing the gap between us and those that we think could not be more different.

Maybe we need to start creating spaces where we can dispel the lies we've been told about each other. Where we can share our stories, share our perspectives, our differing perspectives, our different experiences, and chip away at the false news and the false misconceptions and prejudices and discover that while we will not agree for sure, we are not each other's enemy. And maybe, just maybe we will discover that it is with those whom we disagree, those who have been told to fear us, those who we might be afraid of. Maybe it is time for us to realize that they are the exact people we need – the unrequested, the unwanted, but absolutely necessary partners in what has to be a mutual salvation. One that would be worthy of Simeon's song.

And if we don't, who will? Who will minister to the Dylann Roofs of this world? Or will we leave them to be manipulated and groomed by evil?