Second Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 116 Romans 5:1-8 Matt.9:35-10:23

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church June 14, 2020

It seems a bit funny to me, a Lutheran pastor, that while this is my first Sunday as an officially-called priest in an Episcopal congregation, the lesson for this morning from Romans is a "quintessential" Lutheran text – and by that I mean one of those texts Lutheran pastors most love to preach on because it further articulates, expands upon, and brings to a climax the themes introduced in Romans 3 that are said to have led to Martin Luther's "watershed moment"….

That moment when, after years of deep anxiety and uncertainly about his "rightness" in relationship to God, Martin Luther finally heard Paul's astounding and unbelievable good news that we are "made right" with God not through any merit or work of our own, but only through God's grace, revealed most profoundly and deeply in the **expansive relational reach** of Jesus' accompanying, suffering love…

The heart of Paul's rhetorical argument, being found in Romans 3:23, where he writes, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." And in Romans 3:28, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."

Paul continuing his argument then, by telling the story of Abraham, and of how his covenantal relationship with God was conceived and received before the Law was even given to the People of Israel; including the law that sought to make one's "rightness with God" dependent upon circumcision…

Abraham's "pre-circumcised, pre-law-abiding self" finding the full embrace of relationship with God to be his not through anything he did or didn't do, but only through the gracious presence of God into which he shockingly found himself called one night out under a star-filled sky…That gift eliciting from Abraham his full-bodied, full-hearted affirmative response to the mystery and wonder of what was being offered him…

This utterly unconditional, free and gracious gift of our "rightness with God" being the theme of the chapters leading up to the portion of Romans appointed for this morning, all of Paul's rhetorical arguments in those previous chapters **being in service to** and **finding their climax in** the very first word of the very first verse of Romans 5…

The beautiful "hinge word" that takes all that Paul had previously said, and brings it to the glorious climax of Paul's insights… That beautiful "hinge" word that, **by virtue of what has**

come before, opens the door, the gate to what's possible now and forevermore… that hinge word being the beautiful, open-ended word, "***therefore***"….

"***Therefore***, since we are justified by faith (and not by works), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ… Peace, and hope… because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us… Given as a **gift**… even when we were yet sinners… given without condition…"

"The word **therefore**," as I always tell my confirmation students, **"**being the opposite of the word **"if"…** As in… "**If** you go to church every Sunday, God will love you." Or, "**If** you repent ardently enough of your sins, God will forgive you." Or, "**If** you can claim Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will go to heaven when you die."

"No," I always say to my confirmation students… "Abraham knew it first, and Jesus made it incarnate, and Paul proclaimed it, and Luther breathed new life into it at a time when the Church was in bondage to the word "if."… All of these guys head over heels in love with the word "**therefore",** as in "**Therefore,** since we are justified by faith (and not by works), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"….

As in, **"Therefore**, since the love of God is not **given** for good behavior or right belief, but is rather **a given**, free for the moving through, the taking in… free for the full-bodied, full-hearted receiving, even in the most God-forsaken of times and places, we can rise without fear into the fullness of life into which the **"therefore" of God's grace** has called us…"

No wonder one of my pastor friends is fond of saying that reading the first six chapters of Romans is like listening to the Prelude to Bach's Cello Suite No. 1, with that word **"therefore"** in first verse of chapter 5 being like that place in the Cello Suite where the ascending arpeggios of rising rapture finally burst forth into a sound that **devastates** its listeners with its beauty …

"Therefore"… the opposite of "if"… Therefore…

Who knew such an ordinary, nondescript word could be a "hinge" word, a climactic place so rich in grace and love it might be considered… **devastating**… devastating to all the **"ifs"** that seek to hold us in bondage….

No wonder poet Jane Kenyon, in one of her poems, speaks of God as a "working hinge."

No wonder one theologian, when trying to describe the unconditional grace of God said, "It's not expensive. And it's not cheap. **It's just utterly free, and costs only our lives…"**

How does one speak of something that's utterly free and yet, upon the receiving of it, the taking in of it, costs our lives? How does one speak of the devastating beauty of the word "**therefore**," opening as it does possibilities for life free of all "ifs" by a grace so unconditional and radical and achingly relational it sends every "if" packing? How does one speak of something that both kills and raises from the dead?

As I pondered this question this week in the midst of our national reckoning with the of evils of systemic racism and the deadly effects of white privilege, I was reminded of a time in my life when I recognized the **"therefore"** of God's love to be both utterly free and yet, upon the receiving of it, costly to the point of… well, death…

It happened in 1996 and '97 at Reformation Lutheran Church in Philadelphia, the congregation my three children and I attended while I was studying at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philly for a year… I chose Reformation Lutheran Church as our worshipping community because it was close to campus and had been recommended to me by a number of folks at the seminary…

Reformation Lutheran Church was then, and continues to be, 98% African American, and we were a little white family from Maine, eager to participate in the life of the community, which meant our son joined the confirmation class, and all three kids joined the youth group, and I joined the choir, all of us being, with just a few exceptions, the only white people in each particular group of congregants…

I really can't explain what happened to us in that place… Except to say they took us in… without any conditions… No "ifs" attached… Inviting us to their picnics and celebrations… Inviting me to preach, even though I wasn't even yet ordained… Me, a white woman standing up in front of that sea of beautiful black faces one Sunday and having the audacity to say, "Before knowing all of you, the only African Americans I had ever known worked at my father's country club."

On the Sunday when Reformation Lutheran Church was scheduled to celebrate Kwanza, the annual celebration of African-American culture, the choir was planning to process down the aisle wearing colorful robes and scarves and hats from Africa… A procession, as I told Charlene Jenkins, the choir director, that I would just appreciate from a seat in the congregation, as it didn't seem appropriate for me to wear articles of clothing that celebrated African American culture…

A suggestion to which Charlene responded by saying, "You are my sister in Christ, right? And as such you **will** process with us, and you **will** sing with us, and you **will wear** what I bring you to wear"… which turned out to be a beautiful bright colorful shawl from Africa…

Eight months later, on the weekend of my installation as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Bangor, Maine, 22 choir members from Reformation Lutheran Church got in vans and drove from Philadelphia to Maine so they could sing at the happy occasion… 22 African

Americans come to celebrate the installation of a white pastor in a white congregation in a predominantly white state; an event that understandably made the front page of the "Bangor Daily News" that week…

Five years later, at the celebration of my fifth year as Redeemer's pastor, the choir from Reformation got in vans and drove to Bangor to sing again… And five years later, some of them came to help me celebrate my 10th anniversary…

I don't tell this story to suggest that it has anything to say in this time of national crisis, as we finally begin to look at the raw pain of systemic racism that has infected our country since its inception…

But I tell this story because I'm trying to speak about what happens when all the prescribed **conditions** for relationship are done away with, and all the **"ifs"** are sent packing… killed… buried… and in their place there is something that sounds like this… "You, Elaine, are our sister in Christ, made one with us by the power of love made known in the expansive relational reach of Jesus… **therefore, therefore,** henceforth you can live from the knowledge of this love that has taken you into our hearts and wrapped you in the bright cloths of our people, and loved you, even to the point of crossing the barriers of geography and state lines and the uncertainty of just what kind of welcome we might receive in Bangor, Maine…

I tell you this story because I'm trying to speak of the love, the grace, that isn't expensive and isn't cheap, but utterly free… costing us, in our receiving of that love, only our lives…

So I will be honest with you, and tell you that I am still trying to figure out what the unconditional love extended to me by the people of Reformation Lutheran Church means in terms of "costing me" my life. Because as a white person, I have the luxury of letting that question slip from my consciousness whenever it's not convenient for me to consider it…

But I will tell you this… the memory of that love with no "ifs" attached is still working in me… still inviting me to receive it fully… still calling me to take it in, to know the beautiful and devastating power of it…

Still asking me to remember the night when Michael and I hosted the Reformation Lutheran Church Choir at a lobster fest on Parker Point Road in Blue Hill when the choir was here to celebrate one of my many anniversaries … and Pat Washington's sons, Travis and Michael, black as night, asked their mother in my presence if they could walk down to the shore… And she said "no," and I asked her, "why not?" and she looked at me and said, "What do think might happen if white men found my black teenage sons walking in the woods in the dark on Parker Point in Blue Hill, Maine?" (This is what my sister in Christ, Pat Washington, said to me)….

I can tell you that the unconditional love of Reformation Lutheran Church… their expansive relational reach with no "ifs" attached, is still inviting me to die to the things that prevent me from rising fully into the mystery and the wonder we call "the kingdom of God," where all God's children have a place at the table, and where the "**therefore" of God's grace** raises us from the dead to be God's people in the world…

And I tell you the story of Reformation Lutheran Church because I'm trying to speak of the gift of which Paul speaks in Romans… the **gift** that comes to us like that place in the Prelude to the Bach Cello Suite #1 where the ascending arpeggios of rising rapture finally burst forth into a sound that **devastates** its listeners with its beauty, putting to death anything that keeps us bound by small, narrow, "iffy" ways of seeing and being love in this world…

The **gift** in our faith story first heard by Abraham out under that starry sky… the gift made incarnate in Jesus, proclaimed by Paul and resurrected from the dead by Martin Luther and other Reformers in a time when the "ifs" held the Church in bondage…

The **gift** we will celebrate in just a few moments as we remember our baptisms, and with it the water in which all the **"ifs"** of our lives are drowned, buried, and sent careening downstream as the **"therefores"** of God's unconditional love are poured over us…

The **gift** we gather around now as new pastor and congregation (new priest and congregation), discerning together how we might bring the **"therefore" of God's unconditional love and grace** to a world and a culture and a nation in which the whole system is built upon the deadly conditionality of "if"…

As in, "If you are white… if you have a college degree… if you have a house in the Hamptons… if you know the right people… if, if, if…"

….discerning together how we might bring the **"therefore" of God's unconditional love and grace** to a Church that still seems to be built on the deadly conditionality of "if"…

As in, "If you believe the right thing and behave the right way… If you have a Bible in your hand and the Ten Commandments on your front lawn… If you serve on the stewardship committee for three consecutive terms and make really good treats for coffee hour…if, if, if…"

Into the cacophony of the world's "ifs" we, as the people of St. Brendan Episcopal Church, are invited to tune our ears and our hearts and our lives to the sound of something else… the sound of the word **"therefore"…**

As in… **"Therefore**, since the love of God is not **given** for good behavior or right belief, but is rather **a given**, open to us through the expansive relational reach of God's incarnate, earth-bound, accompanying, suffering love +… free for the taking in… free for the full-bodied, full-hearted receiving, even in the most God-forsaken of times and places, we can rise without fear into the fullness of life to which the **"therefore" of God's grace** has called us…"

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, shall we rise **together** into that fullness of life to which God calls us? Shall we **together,** allow ourselves to be opened by such a devastatingly beautiful gift as this… **therefore…**

Shall we? Can we? Dare we do so, together?… Trusting always that God will go with as we journey beyond the familiar into the unknown, giving us faith to leave old ways and to break fresh ground… helping us to trust in the darkness, knowing that our times are in God's hands… the God, who even now is tuning our spirits to the music of heaven, somehow, somehow, making our obedience count for Love…