6th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 18:1-10a Col. 1:15-28 Luke 10:38-42

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church July 21, 2019

What a joy for us that we will be baptizing Oona Virginia this morning… The witnessing of this sacrament inviting us, as it always does, into the mystery of its meaning for our lives… A mystery that is so much deeper and wider and wilder and excruciatingly beautiful than the old churchy way of explaining baptism as a kind of insurance policy guaranteeing our entrance into heaven when we die… (with its not so subtle implication that without baptism a person would have “hell to pay”).

At the heart of it, baptism is a mystery beyond understanding, and an opening into something very hard to put into words… the very thing, I would like to suggest, that Luke is trying to get his community to see in his story about Mary and Martha in our Gospel text for this morning… A story that, on its surface, has **nothing** to do with baptism, and is even seemingly at odds with one of the most important themes that runs throughout the Bible… the theme of **hospitality**, as Jesus appears to chastise Martha for the hospitality she lavishes upon him, and to praise Mary for her single-minded focus upon his teaching, even as Martha scurries around being the “hostess with the mostess” …

Which makes it such an odd story given that hospitality is one of the standards of “faithfulness” in the Judeo-Christian tradition… “Be hospitable to one another,” we read in First Peter… “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” Jesus said as he spoke of what it means to live as God’s kingdom people…

Or just look at the text from Genesis appointed for this morning, as Abraham is held up as an example of faithfulness for the hospitality he showed to three men who appeared at Abraham’s tent one day… Abraham running madly about in order that he might extend to his guests the gifts of rest, shelter, food and drink…

Leaving us to wonder why Martha’s ***similar*** expression of hospitality lavished upon Jesus seems to be critiqued, all the while Mary’s single-minded attentiveness to Jesus’ teaching is praised…

A question I have long wrestled with given **my** penchant for being that “hostess with the mostess” when guests arrive at our door… My apron always at the ready, Swedish coffee bread fresh out of the oven, the table set with candles and flowers… “What was Luke hoping his readers might see in this story of Mary and Martha?” I have long wondered…

“And **what**,” you may wonder, “does this story have to do with the meaning and the mystery of baptism?”

Two questions for which I have found some helpful insights in more contemporary versions of Mary and Martha…

The contemporary “Martha” being a certain pastor called into EMMC one night some years ago in her role as a chaplain, the charge nurse explaining to this chaplain that the parents of a stillborn baby had requested that their infant son be baptized…

A request to which that pastor, whom we might call Pastor Martha, alias Pastor Elaine, responded by summoning all of her “pastoral skills” (which, with certain personalities, is not so different from being a hostess with the mostess)… this Pastor Martha, alias Pastor Elaine, donning her **clergy shirt** with its stiff white clergy collar and packing in her bag her **little green book of occasional services** with its helpful prayers and Scripture verses, her **theologically sound understanding** of baptism, (which, in keeping with church doctrine, as she well knew, is for the ***living)***, and her **beautifully honed Martha way of responding** to the request at hand with offers to lead a service of “blessing and naming” with its steadfast assurance that God’s love was most certainly holding the little baby boy in a tenderness and completeness beyond all understanding…. A service of blessing and naming which would be done in lieu of baptism, as baptism, per church doctrine, is reserved for the ***living***…

I wish you could have seen Pastor Martha, alias Pastor Elaine, go into that hospital room where the papa of the stillborn baby held his little son, wrapped in a blue blanket… I wish you could have seen her in all her expertise and “hostess-with-the-mostess-mother-superior-I’ll-take-care-of-it-all” approach to the situation, even as the father asked if she couldn’t use just a little bit of water…

I wish you could have seen it… Because you would have seen a fine example of someone very like that enthusiastic and earnest Zen student who came to his teacher one morning saying he was all ready to begin the lesson for the day… whereupon the teacher gave the student a cup into which the teacher began pouring tea, and pouring tea, and pouring tea, until the student cried, “Teacher! Stop! My tea cup is already full!”

To which the teacher said, “And so are you my child… You are so full of the things you think you know, there is no room for anything else. Come back when you are empty, and we will begin…”

So too with Pastor Martha, alias Pastor Elaine, who entered that hospital room that night already full… full of theological knowledge, doctrinal correctness, clergy tools of the trade… so full of all the supports she would need to be a good “hostess with the mostess,” so full of the things she thought she knew, there was no room for anything else…

No room for acknowledging the excruciating pain of that young mother and father, holding their little stillborn son in his blue blanket… no room for true empathy… no room for throwing doctrinal “correctness” out the window and replacing it with prodigal amounts of baptismal waters… no room for emptiness… no room for recognizing that in that moment of unfathomable loss and pain, there was nothing to do but kneel down into the void with the mother and father and search in the darkness for a hint of light… for the presence of something… other… than death…

On that night in the hospital room, Pastor Martha, alias Pastor Elaine, was a fine “hostess with the mostess”…. She got it all “right” in terms of protocol and policy, efficiency and proficiency… She was just so totally distracted by the many details of being a “**chaplain** with the mostess” she had no room for seeing or knowing or sensing the “something else” that was present in that room that night…

The “something else” that cannot be known or sensed or seen as long as we are full of what we already know…(or so full of fear over our “inadequacies”, we try to fill every moment with tasks to do and achievements to accomplish and good-conduct stars for our report cards… which, being a life-long Martha, I can tell you is often the case).

Bringing to mind the story about the man who came up to a young boy as he was whittling a block of wood; the man asking, “What are you whittling there, son?”

And the boy responding, “A bird.”

“Well how do you know how to do such a thing?” the man asked…

“Oh it’s easy,” said the boy… “I just cut away anything that isn’t the bird.”

Both the Martha in our Gospel text for this morning and the Martha who went into the hospital room that night choosing the “intactness” of being a “hostess with the mostess” to the breaking open, the stripping away, and the emptiness required for becoming the bird… Which is the “gift” Jesus was offering to both Mary and Martha the day he went into their house and began to teach…

Which brings us to the contemporary version of Mary, which comes by way of a story that was told to me by an elderly man at Redeemer Lutheran Church some years ago… A story about something he witnessed while waiting to use the swimming pool at the YMCA in Ellsworth one day. As Lee Smith shared his experience, he told the story this way…

*I was waiting for a swimming class for young children to be over when I saw a small boy, maybe five years old or so standing a good distance from the pool, his skinny little legs sticking out from his swimming trunks, his towel tightly wrapped around his body, tears streaming down his face…*

*He was surrounded by adults trying to get him to go into the water… All of them bringing with them their well-honed tricks of the trade…His mother promising him a trip to Dunkin’ Donuts after class if he would just get into the water… one of the swimming instructors promising to go into the pool with him and another promising he could hold onto a floatation device of some sort… Even a couple of the kids yelling happy words of encouragement as they poked their heads up from the water at the edge of the pool…*

*But nothing could compel the young boy to budge… No promise of reward, no offer of support, no encouraging enticement… So palpable was his fear, so deep his resistance… The grown-ups finally giving up; the swimming instructors going to join the other children in their charge, the boy’s mother taking her seat on the bleachers…*

*But then a woman who had been standing off to the side watching the whole thing walked up to the boy, knelt down, looked into his face, and spoke some words no one could hear… And after a time the little boy let go of his tight grip on the towel, let it fall to the floor, and walked over to the side of the pool where one of the instructors, amazed at what he had seen, helped the boy into the water.*

As Lee Smith told the story, he added that he later found out the woman who had knelt down by the boy and spoken to him was local artist and children’s book illustrator Rebekah Raye, who is best known for her paintings of Maine wildlife and for the way those paintings seem to capture not only the color and texture of the animals’ feathers and fur and scales, but also the lightness of their bones, the hunger in their stomachs, the wildness in their eyes, the softness of their underbellies, the alertness of their senses, the fear in their hearts, the scars and wounds that tell the stories of their lives…

The wild light and raw life of Rebekah’s animal paintings resulting, I think, from her **willingness to relinquish, to cut away, anything that would keep her from entering into their wildness…** anything that would prevent her from entering their feral beauty and sharp instincts… their hunger and joy, their fear and their scars… Rebekah Raye, **in the process of such relinquishment, such whittling away,** taking on feathers herself, or fur, it seems to me… going all the way to the place where the soft underbelly of each animal meets her own; that place where the darkness is most palpable and real… and giving her, in turn, the very gift the little boy most needed in order to move through his fear into the water… the very thing that lives and moves and has its being at the heart of the kingdom of God…

The very thing Jesus was trying to help Mary see as she sat listening to him that day while Martha ran around “distracted” by the many hospitable things she wanted to do for Jesus… **the very thing the sacrament of baptism intends to do to us as we live every day of our lives out of its mystery…**

And that is to take us to that place in ourselves Thomas Merton calls our ***“Point Vierge”… Our “virgin point”***… that point of nothingness that belongs entirely to God… that empty place where God’s name is written deep within us… that place of mercy and hope that lies deeper than all fear and doubt… the very bedrock of being itself… **the place where we come to know the wild, unfathomable and unconditional love of God in such a deep, fierce and beautiful way, everything else but the bird is stripped away…**

No wonder we speak of baptism in terms of dying to the old and rising into the new… No wonder parents and sponsors and communities of faith promise to raise children in the story of such love… of such dying and rising… because left to our own devices we’d all choose being the “competent-in-control-hostess with the mostess-Martha” over leaving ourselves open and exposed like Rebekah Raye and like Mary to the Spirit of love intent on releasing the bird within us…

Which is why this morning, in the little package of gifts we will give Oona Virginia, we will give her a little wooden bird to remind her every day of her life of the love in which she is forever held… the love that longs only for her fullness of being, her release from the bondage of fear and self-justification and “hostess-with-the-mostess-distractions” for the sake of the song that is hers to sing in this world… the song of unconditional love and boundless mercy and justice and peace and reconciliation…

And along with the bird, a book illustrated by Rebekah Raye, so Oona can remember that the love of God, made known in ten thousand ways, but most profoundly in the person of Jesus, is a ***wild love… a love that knows feathers and fur, skin and grief… going all the way to the place where the soft underbelly of God meets our own;*** that place where the darkness is most palpable and real… so even there, in our place of emptiness, in our “point vierge” we can hear God’s song of love, which Oona can learn and sing to the world… a song she can keep by her bed and sing every night before sleep… a song that goes like this…

*Love is strong and love is true,*

*Love holds the world and love holds you.*

*Let the nighttime sounds you hear,*

*Sing of love that’s always near.*

*So my child, good night, sleep tight,*

*Everything will be all right.*

A song about a love that will invite her, every time she is tempted to be a Martha… a “hostess with the mostess”… to come and sit at Jesus’ feet, bringing only her emptiness, her “point vierge”… And there, in the crucible of love that longs only for our fullness of life, to become what love longs for her to be…

For the sake of the world God so loves… for the sake of the little boy so frozen in fear he can’t get close to the water… for the sake of the mother and father who long to have their little stillborn son baptized in the prodigious waters of God’s grace…

There, in the crucible of love that longs for her to be what love longs for her to be… ***a servant of God’s love, extending hospitality without condition, with her heart broken open, and from that point within her where everything is whittled away except the bird… a bird on fire with love…***