Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Eccles. 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23 Lk. 12:13-21

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Aug. 3, 2025

On this, my first Sunday back in the pulpit since my husband Michael's unexpected death almost a month ago, the irony does not escape me that at the very same time my children and I are dealing with the many matters associated with settling Michael's estate, we have a text from Ecclesiastes that names as "foolish" all efforts to pass one's possessions on to those who come after…

And at the same time I'm receiving so many words of consolation that speak of Michael's fine wood-working and home-building skills that have led to the construction of some of the largest and most beautiful homes on Maine's coast (including my own), we have a parable from Luke that pokes fun at a man who seems to keep his builder very busy constructing for him ever bigger houses and barns…

These are not the texts I would have chosen to preach on today if I had had the choice… Because what could I possibly have to say about the lessons they have to teach us or the wisdom they have to give us, when I myself am caught up in the very situations and life choices they seem to critique…

Actually these are challenging texts for any of us who are nicely settled into the landscape of 21st century American life… Tempting us to do what we often do when faced with Biblical texts warning us about

the detrimental consequences of wealth, possessions, and the tendency to want more, more, more…

That is either to say the texts are literally, absolutely and only about money and possessions, demanding that we sell all our assets and give the money to the poor… Or to say the texts are not about those things at all, but rather a metaphor for something more abstract… more connected to good intentions than concrete actions, and so not asking much of at all in the practical sense of the word.

Both of these ways of looking at these texts missing the point altogether… Because really, they are beautiful texts of invitation and liberation… texts that offer a gift about which I can best speak by going by way of the old story about the abbot who held up an apple for all the monks in his charge to see, and asking them, "What's inside?"

And, in response to his question, entering into a back and forth with the monks that went something like this as one monk said,

"Inside the skin is the flesh or fruit of the apple."

"And inside the flesh?" continued the abbot…

"The core," responded another monk…

"And inside the core?" queried the abbot…

"Seeds," said a brother from the back of the room…

"And inside the seed?" the abbot pressed further… a question met only with a great silence…

Until finally the abbot said, "Ah… Inside the seed is an orchard"…

I love that story. And really, if someone were to ask me to sum up the entire meaning of the Christian faith, or to speak of what lives and moves and has its being at the heart of our Holy Scriptures I would tell this story…

Because it offers a hint of the mystery inside the skin, the flesh, the core and the seed of our faith… that is, something like an orchard that promises ongoing and unending blossoms and leaves and bees and honey and sunlight and music and life beyond our capacity to hold, to comprehend, or even to imagine…

At the same time it warns us of our tendency to focus ourselves on the outside of the apple… preoccupied as we so often are with the shine it, the allure of it, the size of it, the "success" of it, the guarantee it provides for a life that is intact, secure, independent, well-positioned…

Which is exactly what this morning's texts from Ecclesiastes and Luke warn us about… This tendency to always resort to the "human default mode" of apple-shining and apple-protecting and apple-preserving, when all along the real gift of the apple… the pearl of great price… is only accessed, only glimpsed and sensed and seen when the apple is broken open, stripped bare…

Echoing Jesus' words of startling paradox, "Whoever loses his life will gain it," and "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single seed, But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

The thing is, who of us would choose to lose our lives, or to be broken open or stripped bare? This is not where our "human default mode" leads us…

Which is why wisdom teachers in almost every faith tradition say there are only two things in this world powerful enough to take us from the skin of the apple to the orchard, where there is the possibility of our sensing the mystery hidden at the heart of it all… One of those things being suffering or grief, and the other being love…

Mind you, we are entering a frightening and fearsome territory here… A territory where words are wholly inadequate, and generalizations are demeaning, and self-help slogans are rendered useless…

….A territory where the only thing that makes sense when the well-shined skin, the perfect flesh and the intact core of the apple have been stripped bare, reduced to nothing, leaving only the seed… A territory where the only thing that makes sense **is silence… or sobbing… or story**… Story being the way we try as best we can to speak of what we sense with our raw braille fingers when all supports have be taken away… our world turned up-side-down… when our many possessions, our lofty position, and our big houses have been rendered useless… When we sit in the dust with only the seed in our empty hand…

Silence… sobbing… story…

This morning I choose story… In the aftermath of Michael's death, I choose story… I choose to speak of a few of the things I have glimpsed in the territory of loss and grief as I have sat in the dust with only the seed in my empty hand…

Because it's what we do in the community of faith… We bear witness to what we sense with our raw braille fingers when so much has been stripped away and the pieces of our lives are in a shambles… We bear witness to even the slightest sense we have of the promised orchard inside the seed…

And so I share with you a few of the glimpses I have had over these past few weeks…

Over and over again, despite the fact that the idea of "Heaven" has played a minimal role in my life of faith over the years… Over and over again I have heard in my head the last verse of Wendell Berry's poem "To My Mother"… Which goes like this…

And this, then,

is the vision of that Heaven of which

we have heard, where those who love

each other have forgiven each other,

where, for that, the leaves are green,

the light a music in the air,

and all is unentangled

and all is undismayed.

This vision of heaven, a realm of promise still not visible to these earth-bound eyes…

where those who love

each other have forgiven each other,

and where, for that, the leaves are green,

the light a music in the air,

and all is unentangled

and all is undismayed.

This vision… the possibility of such a realm, a time, a place, has offered me a glimpse of the orchard, where the beloved of God, including my Michael, know the fullness and completeness of God's love in a way we can't even begin to imagine this side of the river… And where for that the leaves are green, the light a music in the air… It is an image I hold onto these days with all my might…

So too an experience I had early last week as I visited a dear friend of mine who has recently received a cancer diagnosis… On that summer afternoon we sat on her front porch overlooking the ocean and spoke about loss and grief… We agreed that it was "meet, right and salutary" to have any number of four-letter words in our vocabularies right now… And even OK to use those words in our prayers…

We talked about how for each of us there were moments when we were aware of the beauty of things around us that often go unnoticed… My friend told me she had, since her diagnosis, now and again, felt overcome with a sense of love enfolding her…

We talked for about an hour and a half. And just before getting ready to leave, I asked my friend if she would like to have a prayer together. She said, "yes," and so I moved closer to her and we joined hands…

Just a few seconds into my prayer, I heard a whirring sound in the flower boxes that adorned the porch railing about 10 inches from where we were sitting. (Window boxes full of pink petunias and white flox). I opened my eyes just a tiny bit and saw an iridescent green hummingbird drinking from each flower… All during the prayer he stayed, going from flower to flower…

And then, when the prayer ended, my friend and I just sat still in utter amazement (breathless really), as the hummingbird flew above each of our heads, literally three inches above our heads, as if granting each of us a blessing… (I was actually wondering if he was going to land on one of us or try to drink from our shirts… I remember wanting to look down to make sure I didn't have a pink or red shirt on, but I didn't want to move a muscle for fear of scaring the hummingbird… "What would it feel like," I remember thinking, "to have a hummingbird try to drink from my very own body?")

And then he left, my friend and I both overcome with the beauty of it all… the hummingbird showing up just as we began to pray, and staying until we were done… It was an "opening," I thought to myself…

An opening in a moment of shared pain in which we caught a glimpse of love's presence…

And as I wrote in my journal later in the day, *"I choose also think Michael was present too, giving me a sign that in the presence of love death is of no consequence… A sign that death does not have the power to separate or diminish, because all the love we have ever shared, ever known, ever failed to give, ever longed for, ever held close to our bodies and breathed in, is eternally present… above us, below us, to the right and the left of us, inside us… Waiting for us to see it, to sense it, as is comes in forms and times and places as unexpected as a hummingbird"*… A little sign of the world we can't even begin to imagine, **inside this one**, carried in the most unlikely of earthy things, and most often seen or sensed by those whose hearts hurt so hard they can barely hope… offering a glimpse of the orchard, even as an empty hand or heart hold nothing but the seed…

I will be honest with you, and tell you that over the past few weeks, as the skin of my normally well-polished apple, and the fruit of my normally well-kept apple have lain in pieces all around me, and all I can see is the hard brown seeds of the apple with no whisper of an orchard whatsoever… I will be honest and tell you I've wondered now and then if there is an orchard at all… that vision of heaven about which we have heard, shimmering with grace just beyond our vision, and making itself known in unexpected ways in this world if we have eyes to see…

Once in a while I've wondered… And when that has been true for me, I've held in my hand a patchwork heart made by my dear friend

Lenore, made up of different kinds of cloth, with a button in the center adorned with a sun and tied to the heart with a slender gold thread. Attached to the heart is a little tag, which quotes these words from Ram Dass… “We’re all just walking each other home…”

As soon as I opened Lenore’s package and saw what was inside, I wrote her an email that said, *Dear Lenore,*

Thank you so much for my little patch-work heart with the slender gold ribbon, the "sun" button, and the wise saying by Ram Dass... "We're all just walking each other home." I couldn't believe it when I saw it because the very last card I gave to Michael on Father's Day - just a few weeks before he died - had a picture of a night sky full of stars, with a hint of yellow sun at the bottom... And set inside the starry sky were the words, "We're all just walking each other home."

I think (I believe) God's Spirit is in this "happenstance." And I know you are the dearest friend ever.

I carry Lenore’s heart with me wherever I go these days, because…

- It speaks of the presence of Love’s fullness and completeness on earth as it is in heaven… And provides yet another portal through which that love hints at the orchard, even as the pieces of the well-shined, well-kept apple lay in pieces around me… and all I hold in my empty hand is the seed…
- It gives me the very real sense that Michael and I are still walking each other home, because as I trace its surface with my raw braille fingers, I can sense the Love that connects us now

and always, rendering death devoid of power of no consequence…

- It reminds me that as Christians, our call is to walk each other home in accompanying love, even when that walk is hard and takes us through the valley of the shadow of death in the way and the name of Jesus, who teaches us how… That is with arms wide open, engaged deeply in the complexities, the ambiguities and the suffering of this world, being portals ourselves of the world that shines inside this one…
- It encourages me to think about the many ways I fall back into the human default mode of apple-shining, apple-protecting, and apple-"succeeding" when all along the real gift of the apple… the pearl of great price… is only accessed, only glimpsed and sensed and seen when the apple is broken open, stripped bare…
- And it assures me that when all this fine theological language makes absolutely no sense in the middle of the night, and all I want to do is hold Michael, Jesus is there to hold me… Just as Jesus is there to hold you in the uncertain and frightening times of your life… and putting into each of our empty hands, a seed…

This is the astounding good news of our faith, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… Even if the pieces of our lives are in shambles all around us… Even now, Jesus is putting the seed into your hand, into my hand… and promising that despite all evidence to the contrary, inside the seed is an orchard…