11th Sunday after Pentecost

Ex. 16:2-15 Ps. 67 Eph. 4:1-16 John 6:24-35

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church August 4, 2024

Many years ago, not long after Michael and I were married, Michael made this heart for me to take with me whenever I went off on a retreat or a workshop by myself. He gave it to me, as he said, so I could take his love with me wherever I went…

Michael's a woodworker, and so he created and shaped this gift in his shop using his own hands. It's made of walnut, and although you may not be able to tell from where you're sitting, the wood is very smooth, and the grain is beautiful… Making it easy to appreciate even if all you ever took time to notice was the heart's outer appearance… the way it looks and feels on the outside…

But of course, there are other layers of meaning to the gift beside its outward features… There is its shape for instance, which carries with it our cultural understanding of the heart as a symbol for love, albeit oftentimes the sweet and easy Hallmark understanding of the word…

And then, deeper than that, there is the love that is neither sweet or easy… the kind that is honed and deepened through the challenges and sorrows of life, as both people in a marriage relationship begin to learn the gifts that come with being vulnerable and real and true in one another's presence… Giving each person a glimpse of something deeper still…

Michael's wooden heart being for me then, an invitation to appreciate not only the beauty of its outward appearance, but also the

gifts that are found deeper and deeper still, all the way to that place where love, so intimate it becomes infinite, and so infinite it becomes intimate, presses the limits of all language…

Rather like the old story I tell every once in a while when words are totally inadequate, about the abbot who invited the monks in his charge to focus their attention on the outer appearance of a beautiful, shiny red apple… And then, after a moment, asked them to say what was inside…a question to which one monk replied, "the flesh of the apple"… "And inside the flesh of the apple?" the abbot asked… "The core," responded another monk… "And inside the core?" pressed the abbot… "Seeds," said someone from the back of the room… "And inside the seed?" the abbot queried… after which there was a long moment silence… until the abbot said, "inside the seed, my friends, is an orchard."

The abbot thereby inviting those in his charge to recognize the beauty of the outside of the apple, yes, but then to go deeper, all the way to the place where the only possible response could be a "gasp."

I speak this morning of the apple and of the heart Michael gave me because the bread Jesus speaks of in this morning's Gospel text when he says, "I am the bread of life," offers us a similar invitation to go deeper than the surface of things… deeper than the literal, moral, historical, allegorical and even Biblical meaning of things… all the way to that place where we reach the limits of all language, and the only possible response is, "Gasp!"

We start at the surface of things of course, as we continue last Sunday's Gospel reading from John 6, and encounter the crowds of people who, after being fed with the loaves and fishes, find themselves

hungry again, and so go looking for Jesus to see if he might repeat the feat he had worked before…

As John the Gospel writer tells the story, he makes it clear that these folks had "literal" bread in mind when they went in search of Jesus… (And lest we move too quickly to judgment here, let us consider what we might want if it were our stomachs that were growling… And let us remember too, that Jesus cared deeply about people's physical hunger, insisting always that justice-making included feeding the hungry)…

John has a different end-game in mind however, when he uses bread in the 6th chapter of his Gospel, as he invites his readers to see the bread first as food, bodily nourishment for 5,000 hungry people… and then invites his readers to go deeper…

Deeper into Israel's ancient story, as John's readers are reminded (just as the crowds were reminded by Jesus), that the manna provided for the Israelites during their 40-year-wilderness sojourn from Egypt to the Promised Land was not provided by Moses, but by God…

And then deeper still, to see that this manna was provided not only for the sake of nourishing bodies, but for the sake of nourishing hearts and souls and minds and imaginations with the intimate and life-giving knowledge of God's unwavering presence and care… God-saturated bread we might call it… "Bread from heaven," as Jesus called it, given for the "life of the world"…

And then, as if that wasn't enough, John invites his readers to go deeper still as Jesus says to those who ask for this God-saturated bread (this bread from heaven, this bread of life)… As Jesus says, "I am the bread of life… Whoever come to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty…"

"I am the bread of life," Jesus says… "the one standing here, right in front of you… I am… 'Ego emi'"… Using the same name God used for God's self when Moses asked for God's name at the burning bush, as Jenny Reece reminded us so beautifully last Sunday… "Ego emi"… "I am"… **Present tense present**… The creator God whose Spirit moved over the waters from the beginning to bring light from darkness and life from death, **present** now in the Word made flesh, to use the language from the first chapter of John's Gospel…

The very creator God made flesh, who for the sake of love would become a body broken… bread broken… bread so infinite it becomes intimate… so intimate it becomes infinite, given to the world God so loves again and again and again in ways that feel like… an orchard… "Gasp!"

And inviting us always to go deeper still… *Silence…*

Deeper still? How would we ever go deeper still than Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life…" The God-saturated bread broken, put into the palm of each of our open hands with the words, "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven." Or as Lutheran pastors say, "The body of Christ, broken for you." (Even the "you" you try so desperately to hide from yourself and from the world)…

How would we ever… how could we ever go deeper than that?

I hope you know that this is where we press at the limits of all language… where the orchard begins, and preachers would be wise to resort to silence, or music, or poetry, or… better yet, this morning, to a walk out to our meditation garden, where each of us could take some time to stand at the foot of the cross made for us by James Boster with stones from around the world…

Because, while we are invited by that cross to begin at the beautiful surface of things where we see the symbol that lives at the center of our faith, we are also invited through James' accompanying words to go deeper into the story through the stones that make up the cross… stones billions of years old from places like Madagascar, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Finland and Brazil… Stones like the Labradorite, the magic feldspar, which, as James says, "glows iridescently from within like the divine spark in all of us…"

And then deeper still to see that James intends for the many stones in the cross to represent a congregation of many individuals who join to form a simple whole…

And then deeper still to see that a Fibonacci spiral of stones lies where the heart of the crucified one would be, just below and to the left of where the horizontal and vertical members cross… A Fibonacci spiral being a visual example of the Fibonacci Sequence, one of the most famous formulas in mathematics, sometimes called "nature's universal rule," which shows up in everything from large galaxies to tiny snails…

All of it supported on a golden scalene triangle, which has layers of depth of its own…

Deeper and deeper we could go as we plumb the layers of meaning in the cross James created for us until we reach the limits of language where the only possible response is "Gasp!"…

A "Gasp" that came to me last Tuesday morning by way of something I don't think James intended at all… Something I didn't even see until I looked at the photograph I had taken that morning for this morning's bulletin… And realized that in the surface of the cross and the surrounding stone there was a reflection of the sun and the clouds all

around me that day… and along the bottom, a reflection of the trees behind me… and in the cross itself a reflection… of me, taking the picture…

As if to suggest that I was included in the gift James created for us… included in the stone a billion years old… included in the Fibonacci Spiral… included in the community of "e pluribus unum" as many stones came together to make a whole… included in the infinite reach of God's love made intimate in this sign +…

Me… little old me… little old any of us who stand at the foot of the cross… each of us called by name into the wide embrace of God's unconditional love… "Gasp!"

Bringing us, I think, to what's deepest of all… What's at the very heart of the cross in our meditation garden…What's at the very heart of the bread broken as it's placed into the palm of each of our hands…

At the place that presses the limits of all language except for the language of silence… of music… of poetry… As in a poem by Jane Kenyon, who, in her poem "Briefly it Enters, and Briefly Speaks," uses the "Ego Emi"… "I AM"…(the very God-saturated words the Bible uses to speak of God)… Jane Kenyon uses these words, as if spoken from the heart of God, to say such things as,

"I am the blossom pressed in a book

and found again after 200 years…

I am the maker, the lover, and the keeper…

I am water rushing to the wellhead,

filling the pitcher until it spills…

I am the stone step,

the latch and the working hinge…

I am the basket of fruit

presented to the widow…"

Again and again Jane Kenyon uses the sacred "Ego Emi, the "I AM" of God from our Holy Scriptures to give her readers glimpses of God's presence in things and places and ways we wouldn't necessarily expect… Ending her poem this way, as if to say, "were we to plumb the blossom, the water, the stone step, the working hinge, the basket of fruit, the apple, the seed, the orchard, the magic feldspar, the Fibonacci Sequence, the bread of life, the cross of Jesus… **If we were to plumb their depths all the way to the deepest part of God's heart, God's presence, this is what we would find… This is what we would hear…"**

Jane Kenyon ending her poem this way…

"I Am the one whose love

Overcomes you, already with you,

When you think to call my name." (2 X)

“I AM this one…” *(Make the sign of bread being put into the palm of my hand… Make the sign of the cross)…* “Gasp!”