

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

St. Brendan Episcopal Church July 5, 2026

In her poem “Where I’m From,” Kentucky poet George Ella Lyon, writes, in part,

*I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride,
I am from dirt under the back porch,
(black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own...*

*I’m from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I’m from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons...*

*I'm from He restoreth my soul
with a cottonball lamb
and ten verses I can say myself...*

I have no doubt that even those of us who don't consider ourselves to be poets, would be able to write compelling "Where I'm From" poems, since doing so only requires us to think back to the people, the events and the moments that shaped us and to put them down on paper... The first line of such a poem for me being this...

I am from Swedish coffee bread every Saturday morning, church every Sunday morning, and trying to be "lady-like" every day of the week...

I refer to "Where I'm From" poems this morning because I think, as we come to church for worship (as Christians) to remember what it means to follow Jesus **on the very weekend** we come to family and community gatherings (as Americans) to celebrate the 250th birthday of our nation, it would be helpful to think about what we might include in a **communal** version of the "Where I'm From" poem, taking time to think about how the **"where we're from" as Christians** and the **"where we're from" as Americans** might each shape our lives in their own particular ways...

So, in thinking about the communal form of the "Where We're From as Americans" poem, we might include these lines...

- *We are from a magnificent and bold document signed in 1776 that set forth a vision of equality for all people...*
- *We are from a constitution that, with the addition of amendments when the times called for them, set forth non-negotiable promises such as freedom of speech, freedom of worship, voting rights for women and people of color, marriage equality...*
- *We are from a land of immigrants from every nation in the world...*
- *We are from jazz and hip-hop and rap and Broadway...*
- *We are from courage and innovation and imagination and hard work and from a resolve to stand up to the tyrants of the world, even when it requires the ultimate sacrifice... AND...*
- *We are from a country stained with the blood of Native Americans, economically built and sustained by the enslavement of people of color, schooled by the myth of manifest destiny, by the image of the Marlboro Man, by the belief that God is on our side, and by the trust that in the end, might makes right and the guys with the most toys win...*

Please hear me when I say that these fault lines in the vision and the promises of our country are not fault lines particular to our nation alone... Because they are universally part of the kingdom of this world... universally part of the ways in which empires work... universally part of our universal bondage to sin, which tempts us always to choose the “good life” over the “common good,” to make sure we are at the top of the pile, and to support systems that benefit our family, our tribe, our

club, our political party... systems rooted primarily in fear and fueled by greed, violence, scapegoating and “othering”...

Which is why, as Christians, it is so important for us this morning (and every morning really) to write a communal “Where We’re From” poem rooted in our faith tradition so we will not forget where we’re from... because if we were to write such a poem, it would, in part, read something like this...

We are from a creator, liberator, lover God, who from the beginning breathed God’s Spirit into the creation God so loves so there would be no between between God and the creation God so loves...

We are from prophets who, speaking on behalf of the creator, liberator, lover God, cried out on behalf of the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the marginalized, demanding justice from those in political power and mercy from those in religious power...

We are from Jesus, the one who most profoundly revealed the presence of God through accompanying suffering love, nonviolence, compassion and a passionate embrace of every part of God’s creation and every person, no exceptions...

We are from Easter joy in a Good Friday world and from a story, a vision of Shalom, that bears witness to a love that is stronger than hatred and violence and death, promising that in the end, everything will be alright, and freeing us in the meantime to live as if this is true...

We are from paradox... from the ridiculous notion that it is by giving that we receive, by dying that we are made fully alive, and by taking into ourselves Jesus body, broken and shared, that we are made whole, one body in Christ...

It's not hard to see how the "Where we're from" poem written from the perspective of being an American and the "Where we're from" poem written from the perspective of being a Christian offer different ways of seeing, different ways of relating to our neighbors, different ways of measuring "success" Different visions by which to live...

The difficulty of course, is that we are **from** and live **in** both the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God... both the community called the United States of America and the community called the Church... And called as Christians not to leave the world, not to turn our backs on the nation in which we live, but to engage in all its beauty and brokenness in the name and in the way of Jesus...

Which means, as Episcopal Bishop Sean Rowe wrote in his 4th of July message to the Episcopal Church, *"It's time for the church to stand in solidarity with those who have no voice, to speak up. **It means us taking a hard look at the systemic work that still has to be done** ... to make lives different, to bring people closer into relationship with God, to show love in the world."*

I think most of us would agree that it's not always easy for us to do what Bishop Rowe and faith leaders in partner denominations are calling us to do on behalf of the kingdom of God in this time in which we find ourselves...

It's scary for one thing... people who are standing alongside immigrants, working for voting rights, and advocating for those in the

LGBTQ community these days can sometimes find themselves under scrutiny by the authorities... And for another thing, it's not always clear how or when or where to stand up and speak out on behalf of the kingdom of God in ways that we know will be beneficial or successful...

Which is why, this morning, I am so grateful for an insight offered by theologian and ethicist Walter Wink and for a lesson I learned long ago and am still trying to integrate into my being and my doing...

The insight offered by Walter Wink, specifically in regards to how we might bear witness to the kingdom of God even as we live in the kingdom of this world, is something he calls "the third way of Jesus," which, as Walter Wink describes it, is not **resignation** (as in, "oh well, this is just how the world is, so we best resign ourselves to its injustices and suffering, put our heads down, and doze off in the Easy-boy chair")...

And it's not **retaliation** (as in, "everything they do to us we'll do back to them, only worse")...

But rather it's **improvisation... improvisation in the key of grace, in the key of justice, in the key of love** (as in, "we will find ways to challenge the powers that be by engaging in actions that undermine and subvert through nonviolence, compassion, color, creativity, imagination, story, and song)...

"This is what Jesus did with every fiber of his being," writes Walter Wink... "through parable, story, riddles, puzzles... through invitations to dinner extended to those intent on destroying him... through meeting hatred with love...Improvising in the key of grace, love and justice in response to every closed and hateful thing that came his way..."

Just as many of our friends and acquaintances are doing in Portland and Lewiston and Minneapolis and a hundred other places across our nation as they bring groceries and other necessities to immigrants too frightened to leave their homes for fear of ICE...

Just as a Lutheran colleague of mine is planning to do should the police in her midwestern town try to arrest those who sleep in the town park because they have no home of their own... My friend having mobilized her congregation to be prepared for such a police action, and when it happens, to be ready to march down to the park with sleeping bags in hand, and there to unroll them and get inside for the night... "What are the police going to do," my friend asks, "when they see 45 elderly Lutherans sleeping in the park, some of them being their neighbors and old Sunday School teachers?"

Just like Freeman Vines, descended from slaves in North Carolina, who over five decades used wood from the trees in Greene County to make guitars... Some of that wood coming from the very trees from which his people were hanged... lynched... You want to read a book about improvisation in the key of justice? Read "Hanging Tree Guitars"...

Not resignation. Not retaliation. But improvisation in the key of grace, of justice, of love. It's the third way of Jesus. And there are a thousand thousand ways to do it... perhaps we will think of some to do together...

As for the lesson I learned over 60 years ago, and which I'm still trying to live into and out of... a lesson which I know has something to say to me as I consider how to work on behalf of the kingdom of God in the kingdom of this world...

So, the story is, I did not much appreciate my grandfather on my father's side, mostly because his drinking problem ruined every family gathering... Every holiday would drink his "schnapps" against my grandmother's wishes, and have to leave the dining room table before the food was even served, whereupon he would go to his chair in the living room and fall asleep with a cigar in his mouth and an empty Mrs. Smith's pie plate balanced on his chest to catch the ashes that would inevitably fall. My grandmother would cry. And everyone else would be miserable for her sadness.

It was the same story over and over, causing me, after about 12 years of such bad behavior on my grandfather's part, to decide I would have as little to do with him as possible. As a matter of principal. As a way of making him suffer for his actions. As a way of making it clear to everyone in the family that I was not putting up with his behavior any more...

Until one day when my father, having recognized my attitude, took me aside and said, "Elaine, I want to tell you some things about your grandfather, my father... He came over to this country from Sweden in 1917 when he was 20 years old. We were in the middle of WW1, and immigrants to our country at that time were promised expedited US citizenship if they enlisted in military service... So, that's what your grandfather did... And was sent to France to fight very soon thereafter...

"While in France he was in a battle in which only 5 soldiers in his company survived... He was one of them. Which I guess you could say was a blessing. But he went to France a hopeful and considerate young man, and he came back emotionally wounded... Never to be the same...

“And despite all that, he provided for his family, even through the Great Depression, traveling from one side of the country to another laying bowling allies for Brunswick, which requires fine craftsmanship and carpentry skills...

“He did the best he could,” my father said. “And I tell you this, because it’s important for you to remember in your life that when you want to take a stand ‘as a matter of principle,’ or stand up for something about which you feel strongly, **you have to get off your high horse first...** You have to get down from your place of “moral superiority” and listen with your ear to the ground to the stories that live in the dirt and the tears and the complexities of human life... Things look different when you have the courage to get off your high horse...”

I love being on my high horse. Everything’s clear there, and I know exactly how things need to be done... which is my way of course. But the work and the mission of Jesus can’t be done from our high horses... That’s the place from which the wisdom and the business of the kingdom of this world are done...

And as we read in our Gospel lesson for this morning, the kingdom of God offers a totally different kind of wisdom... The kind of wisdom about which Cynthia Bourgeault speaks when she says, “*Wisdom is not knowing more; it’s knowing deeper... knowing with more of you involved... It’s not an excuse to withdraw from active engagement in the world, but to engage more deeply – but from a Wisdom perspective; not polarized, not fearful, but fully present*”...

The cost of which, Cynthia reminds us, is aptly revealed in the Wisdom saying, *“What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, Wisdom calls a butterfly... It always involves a letting go and a dying.”*

So, as we write our “Where We’re From” poem from the perspective of our Christian faith, let us include this...

We come from a God who knows about such things as letting go and dying for the sake of love, for the sake of shalom, for the sake of fullness of life, for the sake of the kin-dom of God, where all of creation has a place at the table, no exceptions...

We come from a God whose very God-ness got down from the high horse where we so love to put “him” so we might see and taste and touch and know the power of accompanying suffering love; the kind of love no empire or tyrant or king can ultimately silence... the kind of love that is still on the move in our world today...

We come from a God who frees us by such love to go into the days and nights, the sufferings and complexities of this world always ready to improvise in the key of love, the key of grace, the key of justice...

Trusting that when things are messy and unclear... when we don’t know at all if the efforts we are making will be beneficial or successful... when we find ourselves trying to get back on our high horses out of fear and despair...

Trusting that even then, even there, Jesus is waiting to receive us into his arms... and waiting for us to hear those most beautiful words, *“Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I*

will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

This is where we're from as Christians, dear brothers and sister in Christ... So let us do a little improvising in the name and in the way of Jesus... As if our country and our world depended upon it... because, of course, they do...