21st Sunday after Pentecost

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 Matthew 22:34-46

A reflection given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church October 25, 2020

When I sat down earlier this week to try to get a sense of what direction my reflection for this morning might take, I knew most all of us would come to worship carrying the anxieties of these days… that is the anxieties arising from the ever-present threat of the Corona-virus… from the uncertainty of what might unfold after the election, no matter who the "winners" may be… and from the instability of the institutions upon which many of us have built our lives, thinking them to be "unshakable"…

I knew that many of us would come to worship this morning wondering, in the midst of so much uncertainty and loss, what there might be left to hold onto… Wondering **if there is anything at the heart of it all to give us wisdom and hope in the living out of our days…**

I knew all of this as I sat down to think about what direction my reflection for this morning might take, all of which made me very grateful for the confluence of three threads that come together for us this morning, each of them finding their deepest meaning in the story about the young boy who was whittling a block of wood one day; his carving of that block of wood causing a passerby to stop and ask, "Young man, what are you making?"

A question to which the boy responded by saying, "a bird."

"And how do you know how to go about such a thing?" asked the passerby…

"Oh," said the boy, "It's easy… I just cut away anything that isn't the bird."

If you sense in this story a cutting to the bone… If you sense a determination to go to work on anything that is not the bird, a carving and carving and carving away until all that has gotten in the way of the bird being the bird is heaped in piles upon the floor… If you sense a suggestion that transformation comes by way of dislocation and new life by way of death…

If you can sense how such a frightening suggestion might have something strangely hopeful to say about this moment in which we find ourselves… then I invite you to ponder with me the gift of the three threads that find confluence in our worship this morning… The three threads that come from very different places but sing the same song…

The first being the thread of our natural world cast in the **letting go** of autumn, spoken of beautifully by Lucille Clifton in her six-line poem "the lesson of the falling leaves."

One of the threads that visits us this morning is autumn's reminder of the necessity of **letting go**… letting go of the things that no longer serve our fullest and truest selves… letting go of the things that prevent us from being the person God calls us to be, reflective on the outside of the light of God that shines deep within each of us…

"Let go," the falling leaves whisper in their descent… "Remember the wise little story from rabbinic literature that goes like this…

Once there was a Chassidic rabbi named Rabbi Zusya. Zusya was a timid man, a man who lived a humble life.

One day Rabbi Zusya stood before his congregation and he said, "When I die and have to present myself before the celestial tribunal, they will not ask me, "Zusya, why were you not Moses," because I would say, "Moses was a great leader, and I am not."

They will not say, "Zusya, why were you not Jeremiah?" because I would say, "Jeremiah was a great prophet and I am not."

And they will not say, "Zusya, why were you not Rabbi Akkiba?" for I would tell them, "Rabbi Akkiba was a great teacher and leader and I am not."

But they will say, "Zusya, why were you not Zusya?" And to this I will have no answer…

"Let go," say the leaves… "Let go of all that keeps you from being the bird… all that keeps you from being the person God longs for you to be… **that is a human being fully alive**, which, as second century theologian Iraeneus said, is the definition of "righteousness"… a human being **fully alive**, living from and into the love that sets us free to see love and to be love in this world…"

If autumn's song of **letting go** is one thread in the tapestry of this morning, then another is a thread that comes from the texts appointed for the day from Leviticus and Matthew; both of them saying in essence, that were we to cut away everything in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament that lives in service to what lives and moves and has its being at the center… if we were to cut it all away, what we would find at the heart of it all is **love**…

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself," the great **"I am"** said to Moses as the great **"I am"** prepared Moses to go down the mountain bearing the covenant that would bind the People of Israel to the God who had formed them and freed them to be love in the world…

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," Jesus said in response to the lawyer's question about which commandment in the law was the greatest.

"And a second is like it," Jesus said… "You shall love your neighbor as yourself… On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

(And that despite the propensity of the religious leaders to focus their attention on keeping the **letter of the 603 laws in the Torah** when all along the **spirit of the law** was the bird of love singing at the heart of it all…)

L-O-V-E… Four letters that stand for "life's only valid expression" our texts for this morning would tell us… An expression made valid through the day-to-day, flesh and bone, incarnate and compassionate gestures extended one person to another…

"Love… not a feeling," as Bishop Michael Curry would say, "but a commitment, a decision on behalf of justice for all and dignity for all, and fullness of life for all of God's children and all of God's creatures in the world God so loves…"

"It's easy," said the boy… "I just cut away anything that's not the bird."…

"It's not easy," say our Holy Scriptures… "But cut away anything that's not the bird and you will find what sings at the heart of our faith… at the heart of it all… Cut it all away, and you will find love… and then let love lead the way…"

If one thread of the morning is **letting go**, and a second is **letting love,** then a third thread is **letting loose**, in keeping with today being Reformation Sunday, the Sunday on which many Protestant congregations commemorate and celebrate the 16th century reform movement led by Martin Luther and others in an attempt to **cut away** all the calcified, rigid, and lifeless practices of the Roman Catholic Church for the sake of **letting loose the wild and windy Spirit of God** with her passionate song of unconditional love and grace…

It is a cutting away we are still called to do as people of the Reformation, remembering that transformation always comes by way of dislocation… by way of letting go of the things that prevent ourselves and others from knowing God's fierce and tender love deep in our hearts and our souls and our bones…

Perhaps this is the gift for the church in this time of **dislocation**, as the Coronavirus challenges us to reconsider what is most central to our life together in the Christian community…

For those of us who may have thought it was the church building… well, we have been meeting for worship in the garden and over Zoom for the past seven months, and even this morning we have no church walls to hold us all, as some of us gather over the internet from places both near and far…

And for those who may have thought it was the Eucharist that lives at the heart of the Christian community; the presence of the crucified and risen Christ, come by way of the words and the chalice and the paten and the wine and the bread we have known and loved for ever so long… well, might I suggest that the presence of the crucified and risen Christ has been with us even on those many Sundays when we have not spoken the Eucharistic prayer or called God's spirit upon bread and wine…

Just as the presence of the crucified and risen Christ will be with those of us gathered at St. Brendan this morning as we pray God's Spirit upon our little plastic cups of grape juice, complete with a communion wafer on top ordered from a company called Kingdom.com, located on Lamb Creek Road in Mansfield, PA. (How tacky is that?)

Just as the presence of the crucified and risen Christ will be with those who worship with us over Zoom this morning as they pray the prayer of Spiritual Communion, becoming one with Christ every bit as much as those who take into themselves the body and blood of Jesus carried in the little plastic cups from Kingdom.Com in Mansfield, PA…

All because we have a God who **let loose** all the expectations and requirements and restrictions about how a god should "be" and "act" as told in the story of the love made incarnate in the person of Jesus… a love whose presence will find a way to be present in plastic cups, and in "spiritual communion," and in places where there are no church buildings to be seen, and in times when the only accurate description is "God forsaken" +.

The dislocation of our "normal" life together all of a sudden challenging us to see, inviting us to see at the heart of the Christian faith not the building, not the singing or the proclaiming or the coffee hour… not even the Eucharist…

But a God who **lets loose in love** in ways no god of our making would ever let loose… and asking us in the spirit of the crucified and risen Christ, in the spirit of Reformation, to do the same…

To let go, to let love, and to let loose… trusting that even when all has been stripped away, cut away… what we will find at the heart of it all is the bird… the love that sings in the dark before the world even begins to turn toward the morning…

This is the gift of these dark days… The gift of being in a place and time of such profound dislocation that we allow ourselves love's invitation to transformation, and learn to say, along with Lucille Clifton,

the leaves believe

such letting go is love….

Amen.