Easter 5

John 15:1-8

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 5-2-21

Before I went to seminary and became an ordained pastor, I taught first grade, and in that capacity had one of the greatest joys of my life, namely teaching children to read; an effort which, as I quickly learned, had many different "paths to success" depending upon the child…

For some children (many actually), the best tool in the "learning to read tool box" was the "phonetic" approach, that is, learning the letters of the alphabet and how to "sound them out", like putting C-A-T together to make "cat"… For others it was using picture clues or predictable word patterns… and for others still it was actually writing their own stories and then "reading" what they had written, even if no one else could figure out what the letters on their pages were trying to say…

For most children it was a combination of some or all of the tools in the "learning to read toolbox" that finally opened up the wonder of reading to them. And when the day came when they recognized they were actually **reading** (rather like the day when you realize you're speeding down the road on your two-wheeler without anyone running alongside), there was this look on their faces that's unlike anything else in all the world… A look which brought me so much joy in the moment…

But even more joy in recognizing that in time, with practice, the reading skills each child had mastered would bring them **inside** a story

so real and true to their being, all the tools they had used to get there would fall away, and the child would find herself or himself in a world they had never before imagined **and yet felt intimately part of… connected to…**

Just as happened to me in the third grade when Frances Hodson Burnette's "The Secret Garden" opened me to the **possibility** of bramble-choked-tucked-away-forgotten gardens being **anywhere**, and keys to opening those gardens' gates being **anywhere,** and unpopular, misfit little kids who could find those gardens and restore them to beauty being **anywhere,** even in the unlikely, seemingly gardenless places where a misfit little kid like me lived…

In other words, even as I knew teaching children to read would provide them with the tools necessary for following directions, and deciphering instruction manuals, and unpacking the daily news, my most important goal in teaching first graders to read was for the sake of something else…

That is, for the sake of **the mysteries** they would encounter through the written word, **the stories** that would incite their imaginations, **the impossibilities** that would suddenly come to feel possible, the **sadness and struggles** that would break their hearts open, and **the sense of belonging** they would come to feel in the vast universe held together, connected, and constellated by love…

I speak of learning to read this morning because the process of it, the wonder of it, the gift of it has helped me in my understanding of what it means to learn to pray… Prayer being at the heart of this morning's sermon, in part because our texts about our abiding in God and God in us are perfect entrances into the meaning of prayer… And in

part because we will be having a conversation about this gift of grace during our coffee hour….

But also because a number of people at St. Brendan have raised questions about prayer in the past year with all of its loss and death and grief… Questions like, "What is prayer anyway, and what does it ***do*** or ***accomplish***?" "Is one way of praying 'better' than another?" "Is anything 'off limits' when it comes to prayer?" "If I wanted to learn how to pray, where would I begin?"

All of them very good questions, and truth be told, questions that pastors and priests and theologians never stop asking themselves (including this pastor)… Which makes me particularly grateful for what I learned when I was teaching children to read, especially as I've come to see how the many tools in the "learning to pray toolbox" live in service to something glimpsed or sensed or known when the tools (just like those children use when learning to read) "fall away"…

Actually, when studying the historical background and the theological literature on prayer in the Christian tradition, it doesn't take long to see that the "prayer tool box" is chock full… Even from the very beginning of the Christian movement, teachers of prayer differed among themselves about "how" to pray, in the end deciding that there were many different ways into prayer…

An understanding underscored by many contemporary theologians, poets and writers… among them poet Mary Oliver who says prayer is a *"doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak"*…. Or Mother Teresa, who, when asked what she says to God when she prays, responded, "Oh I don't say anything; I just listen." And then when asked the follow-up question, "Well what does God say?" Mother Teresa said, "Oh God doesn't say anything. God just listens."

Then there's writer Anne Lamott, who after years of drug and alcohol abuse said she has one and only one prayer… this one… "Thank you, thank you, thank you… Help me, help me, help me." And there was the man I visited once as he lay close to death at EMMC who asked if I could pray with him the only prayer he knew… a prayer from his childhood. And so we prayed together, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Some people say that for them putting paint on a canvass is prayer, or playing music, or writing a poem, or peeling potatoes… Or there was the woman who, after the loss of one of her children, said she couldn't articulate any kind of prayer at all, and so finally decided just to recite the alphabet and trust God to make the words…

And then of course there are the Collects and prayers we pray together in worship, primary among them the Lord's Prayer, but many of them also asking God's healing presence for those in our world suffering from hunger, illness, natural disaster, war and injustice…

The truth is, just as the "learning to read toolbox" is full of "ways into the written word," so too is the "learning to pray toolbox" full of "ways into prayer"… But the "ways in," the "tools" themselves, just as the tools children use in learning to read, **live in service to something else…** something we come to sense, to glimpse, to see, to know as we take the time to follow any prayer to where it leads us… all the way to the heart of where it leads us…

A "something" of which I can best speak by going by way of a story about a **prayer** I did not pray and a **"pray-er"** who was not me… The "pray-er" being my bother-in-law Joe, Michael's younger brother

by 13 years, who happens to be an Assembly of God pastor. And the prayer he prayed with much frequency for a very long time being a prayer asking God to convict those in his family who did not claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior with enough fervor or certainty to make it really count… Which meant all of us really, including the Lutherans and the Episcopalians, right alongside those in the family who wouldn't darken a church door if their lives depended upon it.

It was a prayer that infuriated me for about a thousand reasons. A prayer that formed such a barrier between Joe and me I couldn't see him past it, even after he stopped praying it in a way that was overt or noticeable or audible…

My rage over Joe and his maddening "kind of prayer" taking on increased intensity at the rehearsal dinner for our daughter Emily's wedding in Managua, Nicaragua in 2009 as about 18 of us upper-middle-class Gringos from the United States and about 50 members of our soon-to-be son-in-law's humble Nicaraguan family met in a banquet hall to celebrate the next day's wedding festivities… Emily's marriage to Josue…

Joe, as I quickly noticed, fresh from two years as an Assembly of God missionary in Ecuador, moving around the large banquet hall, gathering small clusters of Josue's family together and leading them in prayer in the language they could understand, because of course, after two years in Ecuador, he knew Spanish…

But really, what nerve… How dare he? It was **our** daughter's wedding rehearsal dinner, and **we** were paying for it, and what right did **he** have to interrupt the conversations of the Nicaraguans who were happily chattering in their little family clusters on one side of the room while we Gringos were on the other, sipping our Pino Grigios and our Cabernets?

But there was Joe, gallivanting around the room, interrupting conversations, gathering people into little groups and praying with them… And what was he praying for anyway, I wondered?

(I, a "theologically liberated Lutheran pastor," suspected it was for the salvation of all our souls, but couldn't be sure, as I couldn't hear what Joe was saying from across the room, and couldn't have understood him anyway, as I had learned only about 15 Spanish words in preparation for our travels to meet our new son-in-law's family)…

It was all very maddening. And would have remained that way for me to this day if I hadn't been stopped in my tracks a number of times since then and forced to see something I hadn't seen before…. Once when my Buddhist sister-in-law Audrey (with whom I often share my grievances) said (when I was complaining about Joe yet one more time), "Elaine, what if Joe prays we will know Jesus as our Lord and Savior because Joe loves us and wants the best for us, including our entrance into heaven as he understands it?"

And then again and again and again as I have come to notice over the past years that whenever Josue's mother and father inquire about their Gringo family in the United States, the person at the top of their list… the person they want to hear about most is Joe…

And what I want to say about all of this is what I have come to see as I have taken the time to follow Joe's prayers all the way to where they lead me… (never mind whether they're in Spanish or English…never mind the content of his prayers or what tools in the "prayer tool box" he tends to use)… When I have taken the time to follow his prayers to where they lead me, I have noticed that sometimes the words fall away, and I begin to sense the presence of something for which there is no other name except "love."

(Which must have been a bit of what my Nicaraguan family and Joe sensed as they stood in small circles in that restaurant in Managua that night with their arms around one another; that unlikely little band of pray-ers following Joe's prayer to where it took them… all the way to that place where the words fell away and what they saw was one another through the eyes of love…)

No wonder the desert mothers and fathers of the fourth century used to envision prayer as a wagon wheel, saying that the center of the wheel was God and the spokes were people, and that the closer they came to God in prayer, the closer they came to one another…

No wonder Church historian and theologian Roberta Bondi has said, "The goal of the Christian life is love of God and love of neighbor, and prayer is the ground in which that love can grow, making prayer broader, more inclusive, more painful and more transforming than I thought."

I hope it doesn't sound like I know what I'm talking about. Because I don't. Which is rather frustrating for a pastor who likes to have all the threads of her sermon come together nicely at the end in a helpful and edifying way… But really, when it comes to prayer, as hard as I tried, I just couldn't manage the "tying it altogether thing"…

Instead, what I decided I really wanted to do was to share a poem with you that I recently wrote about prayer. It goes like this…

There is no judgment

about our refusing or our forgetting

to pray.

There is no judgment.

There is only the missed opportunity
to enter the portal
where a girl sits by an open window,
sunlight encompassing her
and a small breeze whispering
through her hair.
She's knitting something
using blue angora yarn spun with stars.
She looks up when you enter,
holds out the needle and yarn,
and says,
"Here, this is for you."

Here, this is for you…
This gift of grace,
This gift of blue angora yarn spun with stars…
This gift of prayer…
This gift of letters and words,
    Of evocations and articulations,
    Of cries and songs…
This gift of a doorway into thanks
    and praise and pain and sorrow

and hope

and silence

in which another voice can speak

when everything else has fallen away,

and we find ourselves in a world

we had never before imagined,

and yet feel ourselves

intimately part of…

abiding in…

a vast universe held together,

connected and constellated

by love…

Here, this is for you… Go where it leads you, and don't be surprised if along the way, you meet a guy whose name is Joe.