Seventh Sunday after Easter

John 17:2-26

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church June 1, 2025

A couple of years ago Jo Jacob gave me this bag and said, "I think you might be interested in what's inside." And so I looked inside and found this clergy stole and a book that told its story…

- How it had been commissioned by a beloved St. Brendan priest named Holly Antolini 31 years ago when the congregation was still worshiping at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Stonington on Sunday mornings…
- How it was made by a fabric artist named James Day from St. James Episcopal Church in Old Town using pieces of cloth folks at St. Brendan volunteered for the project… (James and Holly had become friends through their work together on the then newly-formed diocesan Committee on Indian Relations).
- And how it was consecrated and first used on Pentecost Sunday in 1994… The book detailing as well who in the congregation gave which pieces of fabric and why…

I knew as soon as I saw the stole and looked carefully at the book that it would make a perfect "show and tell" item for a sermon one day… That day, I decided, being today as we celebrate five years of mutual ministry between this pastor and this congregation and as we

hear Jesus' prayer on behalf of his disciples just before his suffering and death that they might be one just as Jesus and God were one **so the world might know the love of God that holds it all**…

Both the Gospel text from John appointed for this morning and the mutual ministry we celebrate today in the yet-unfolding story of St. Brendan the Navigator Episcopal Church (officially 40 years old this year), inviting us to consider what it means for a community to be "one in Christ"…

What it might mean for a community to be so fully "in, with and of" Jesus (who was so fully "in with and of" God), that that community might make known the very "presence" of Jesus in the same way Jesus made known the very "presence" of God…

Meaning it would necessarily be a "oneness" that would have certain "qualities" about it… Qualities reflective of the God of creation, liberation, justice and love… Qualities it turns out the world does not always appreciate… Qualities it turns out that Jesus' followers do not always find easy to live by…

Qualities I think the stole made for the St. Brendan community some 31 years ago can help us to see…

So if you were to study the stole carefully and look at the many pieces of fabric given to the stole project by the people of St. Bredan at the time, you would notice the amazing variety of colors, textures, and shapes… And if you were to read about where the pieces of fabric came from, you would see that some of those contributions were given by

folks who are still part of the St. Brendan community today or by family members from previous generations… including,

- a piece of Dacron sailcloth donated by Tom van Buren's father Paul, which, as he writes in the book, was a scrap "from the covering of a 12-foot Whitehall dinghy built in our living room our first winter on LDI as year-round residents in 1991-92,"
- a piece of one of Jo Jacob's maternity dresses,
- sections from Marcia Scott's favorite uncles' dress ties,
- part of an old tablecloth given to Joyce Dunn by one of her best friends,
- a swath of silk from fabric Holly Antolini's parents brought back from the People's Republic of China in the 1970's,
- pieces of Halloween costumes which transformed one of Holly's sweet little girls into a scaly green alligator and another into a wicked witch…
- a portion of Carolyn Mor's son Mackenzie's baptismal shirt,
- a piece of beautifully decorated red sewing tape given to Fran Greenlaw by her mother on the day of Fran's wedding because, as Fran writes, she had always loved it and played with it as a child…
- a number of Girl Scout badges…
- and even a "color band used to identify individual birds used in a study of Savannah sparrows on Kent Island in Grand Manan, Canada."
- (In an email to me Holly said there was once a great trailing plume of feathers hanging from the back of the stole, which somehow went missing over the years… a trail of feathers

given in homage to the Wabanaki tribes on Indian Island in Old Town on the shores of the Penobscot River)…

These and so many other pieces of fabric in the stole reminding us that the "oneness" reflected in the Christian community (which in turn reflects the oneness between Jesus and God) is a oneness made up of an infinite diversity of God's children, each of them (each of us) bringing to the community of faith pieces of our ordinary, beautiful, broken, earthbound lives… Pieces not restricted to things that are "morally upright," churchy, or "holy" as in h-o-l-y… but inclusive of the pieces of our lives that are actually holey… h-o-l-e-y… as in full of holes, broken, true to the reality of this human life…

The mix of people and gifts and vulnerabilities and wounds and joys in the Christian community being what one bishop in the Lutheran Church calls an **"ecclesial estuary"**… ("ecclesial" referring to anything of the Church, and an "estuary," in environmental terms, being that place where salt water and fresh water mix, creating just the right conditions for an abundance of unusual and beautiful forms of life that would not be possible in salt water only, or fresh water only… As if to suggest that it is the mix of the beautiful mess of it all that life blossoms most fully)…

The stole reminding us that the "oneness" for which Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples of every time and place is a oneness made known in its capacity to hold not only an endless variety of colors, shapes, sizes, and backgrounds of people, but the full spectrum of joys and sorrows, failures and successes, hopes and fears that make up the Christian community… **Along with the trust that by the power of God's**

spirit moving in the "ecclesial estuary" of all those unlikely things, life both abundant and beautiful will flourish…

If the St. Brendan stole reminds us that the oneness of the Christian community is known in its capacity to hold people of every color, stripe, and background, as well as all the baggage and beauty those people carry with them, **then it also reminds us that the oneness for which Jesus prayed also has a particular purpose and passion…**

A purpose and passion that burns at the heart of the God made known in Jesus, and brought to our attention in the caricatures at the bottom of each side of the St. Brendan stole… Caricatures which I will admit jarred me when I first saw them… My first reaction being dismay as they seemed not to fit at all with the beauty and texture of the rest of the work…

But then, in reading about them in the book that accompanies the stole, and realizing that they were part of a favorite T-shirt given by Paul van Buren (a T-shirt celebrating the Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt signed in 1979 as a result of the unflagging and determined work of Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin), I realized that by insisting that those pieces be part of the stole, Paul was reminding the St. Brendan community that the "oneness" of the Christian community with the God made known in Jesus means nothing if it doesn't reflect a deep and committed engagement in the struggles, the suffering, the injustices and the needs of the world…

As Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who was killed by the SS for his witness to the way of Jesus during the Third Reich put it, "In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God

and the reality of the world at the same time; **the one not without the other."**

For far too long the Church over the millennia has acted as if its sole purpose was to get people to believe in Jesus so they would go to heaven when they died; non-believers be damned… When all along Jesus was trying to get people to live full, open, compassionate, loving lives in this world so God's kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven…

"The Church is the Church only when it exists for others" Bonhoeffer said… "not dominating, but helping and serving."

"Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and its pride of power," he continued… "and with its plea for the weak…"

Whether we like it or not, Paul van Buren's fabric pieces remind us of this, as do the feathers from the Wabanaki Nation which were originally part of the stole, as does a scrap of a weaving from Guatemala and a piece of a scarf given to the project by the Reverend Henry Bird, one of St. Brendan's first priests… A piece of scarf accompanied by these words written by Carolyn Mor… "This piece of scarf is given to the quilted stole project with the prayer that the tremendous sense of justice brought to us by Henry Bird and his wife will be firmly woven into the fabric of our congregation"…

Words of wisdom and challenge and hope spoken to us in the injustices of our day just as they were spoken to the St. Brendan community in the injustices of their day 31 years ago…

If our stole reveals a oneness born of God that embodies an **"ecclesial estuary of wild diversity"** and a **deep passion for the well-being of all the world (no exceptions),** then it also reveals a oneness that can best be described by my telling you about how the stole project came about in the first place…

Because, by the power of God's wild, windy Spirit, it was born in the creative, imaginative heart of St. Brendan priest Holly Antolini in response to a cancer diagnosis James Day had recently received… A piece of devastating news, on top of James' financial difficulties and the struggles he as a gay man was experiencing in the culture at large in those days…

And so Holly, with the Spirit's leading and James' blessing, responded to his dire situation with imagination and creativity, in effect saying to the people of St. Brendan, "I have an idea! Here in the messy untamed ecclesial estuary of illness and struggle, thread and needle, congregation and fabric, artist and cancer, how about if we commission my friend James Day to make us a stole? And that way he can do what he loves to do, and St. Brendan can pay him, and then have something beautiful at the end to remind us who we are and what we are called to be and do in our little corner of the world! How about it?!"

And so the beautiful stole before us this morning came to be…

In light of the world's immense suffering, the stole project at St. Brendan Episcopal Church on the little island of Deer Isle, off the remote coast of Maine, seems of little consequence… But I want to suggest that Holly's creative and imaginative response to her friend's

cancer (and St. Brendan's participation in it), revealed the very heart of God's presence…

An "in-ness" and a "with-ness" and an "of-ness" in whose presence beauty happens. And creativity happens. And love happens. And relationships happen. And compassion happens. And prophetic challenge happens…

And, truth be told, messes and setbacks also happen. Because sometimes feathers get lost. And, as happened in the making of the stole more than once, sometimes the sewing machine breaks.. And sometimes the people who gave pieces of fabric for the stole die…

But by the power of God's spirit of love and grace made incarnate in Jesus and sent forth into the world, in the wild ecclesial estuary that is the community of faith, the presence of the God made known in Jesus is revealed once again, things that are closed and tight and narrow are put to death, love rises in the midst of the torn and broken pieces, and Easter dawns yet one more time…

And what I want to say to you this morning dear ones, on this, the anniversary of our fifth year of mutual ministry together, is the very thing the St. Brendan stole says so beautifully… "The Spirit of God has always been present in the **wildly alive ecclesial estuary** that is St. Brendan the Navigator Episcopal Church… Just as that Spirit will be present in this community of faith in all the days and months and years to come… Because that is the promise of God.

"The Spirit of God will always be present, reminding you, reminding us…

- of Love's capacity to hold it all to hold us all, to hold all of creation, no exceptions…
- reminding us that being one with God means being one with our beautiful, suffering, dying world in ways that insist on justice and undermine all forces of evil and hatred …
- reminding us that by the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of God's unconditional love and grace we are set free to bring all the pieces of our lives, no matter how holey (as in h-o-l-e-y), to the dawning of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, using our imaginations and creativity on behalf of the One who teaches us how…" +

I couldn't be more grateful to be part of the beautiful, wild ecclesial estuary that is St. Brendan Episcopal Church in this time of the congregation's story… I give thanks for all those who have gone before us to stir the waters and plant the seeds and sew the pieces together…

And I look forward to seeing what beautiful, revolutionary, trouble-making, community-building, life-giving, crazy-quilt kinds of things are yet to come in the name of the one who makes us one…

Trusting always the words sewn onto the back of the bag that holds the stole… the words that say, "All you need is love."