17th Sunday after Pentecost

Hab.1:1-2:4 Ps. 37:1-9 2Tim.1:1-14 Lk. 17:5-10

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Oct. 5, 2027

Since the word "faith" is mentioned seven times in our texts for this morning, I decided this past week to re-read one of my favorite stories about faith, told by Ben Birnbaum in a collection of essays entitled, "Why Believe in God?" It's a story about a time during his rabbinical studies when he realized he no longer believed in God. So assuming his unbelief would pose somewhat of a problem for his future as a rabbi, Ben Birnbaum decided to confess his lack of faith to a professor at his rabbinical school; a professor who also happened to be one of the deans at the seminary, as well as a rabbi and a holocaust survivor; "a short, bearded, broad-shouldered, and homely man in a black frock coat," as Ben Birnbaum describes him…

It was to this man Ben Birnbaum made his confession one day, writing of that encounter, *"I went to tell this rabbi, who reminded me of Toulouse-Lautrec, that I no longer believed in God. He absorbed the news that I was an atheist, and he nodded and said, 'But you still pray three times a day, right?'"*

Not so different really, from what Doris Betts said one day in the midst of endless days and nights caring for her husband as he suffered the ravages of dementia… *"I keep deciding to believe in God,"* she wrote,

"even on bad days. In this, my seventh decade, faith seems to me not certainty but commitment, a renewable vow."

Not so different really, from the pastor who, when asked what makes a Christian community a Christian community said, *"Even at the grave we sing God's song."*

Not so different really, from Pablo Casals, who for the last 50 years of his life, got up every morning the morning and played Bach…

Not so different really, from St. Francis, whose Feast Day was commemorated yesterday, and who is remembered and celebrated for the way his faith was integrated so deeply into the way he practiced loving kindness toward the poor and toward all the winged, furry, scaly and vulnerable creatures of God's beautiful creation…

Not so different really, from the knitters at Redeemer Lutheran Church, who, during a difficult time in the life of that congregation, when relationships were strained, and it seemed like everything might fall apart… these women (who were called the "Fiber Arts Queens") kept meeting every Tuesday morning, knitting sweaters for the maternity ward at EMMC and prayer shawls for those in the community going through a hard time… Their devotion to their practice, it always seemed to me, bearing witness to a commitment to make beauty from a mess and tangle of yarn, and giving the rest of us the faith to believe

we might be able to do the same in the mess and tangle of congregational life if we too practiced the art of picking up loose and broken threads of relationship, and knitting them together to make something beautiful and life-giving and whole…

Something so beautiful, I sometimes told those fiber arts queens their creations reminded me of a poem Pablo Neruda wrote about a pair of socks someone had once knit for him, which he said were….

knitted with God's own

sheepherder hands,

two socks as soft

as rabbits…

knitted

with threads of

twilight

and the pelt of sheep…

ultramarine blue

crossed

by one golden hair…

Each of these little stories suggesting a relationship between practice and faith, which is, I think, what Jesus was trying to get his disciples to see in our Gospel text for this morning when they asked him to give them "more" faith… This request coming on the heels of Jesus'

admonition to his disciples that they must forgive the one who has sinned against them, even if the offender sins against them seven times in one day.

No wonder the disciples asked for more faith… Any of us who has ever tried to forgive someone who has hurt us even once might imagine how challenging it would be to forgive them seven times in one day, and how helpful it might be, when tasked with such an impossible venture, to get a little fill-up on faith when we feel like we're a "quart low."

But in response to their request for "more," Jesus refused to make faith into something quantifiable, suggesting that it's not something you "have" in a variety of sizes ranging from the smallness of a mustard seed to the hugeness of who-knows-what, but is rather something you "do" or "practice" as a matter of course, following in the way of Jesus…

(Just as a servant would follow the cultural protocols of the day as related to the expectations inherent in the "slave-master relationship," Jesus suggested… That is, the slave coming in from the fields, preparing and serving his master supper, and then, when his master is enjoying his after-dinner coffee, going to the kitchen and having his own supper…)

"So it is with you," Jesus said to his disciples… "When you've done all your 'practicing' for the day… When you've done all that's expected of you in terms of practicing justice, mercy and kindness, then you can say, 'The work for the day is done… We can put down our knitting needles and take a rest."

And then, although Luke doesn't say so, I think Jesus might have followed up on this little analogy by showing his disciples the American Sign Language for the word "forgiveness," which is made by brushing

the open palm of the right hand over the open palm of the left hand in a repeated action…

As if to say forgiveness is not a one-shot deal successfully delivered in proportion to how much faith you have, but is a certain way of responding to those with whom you've had an altercation, saying again and again, "I will not let the pain of the past dictate the future… I will not let the pain of the past dictate the future…" A practiced response repeated again and again until from the loose and broken threads of a challenging relationship something else begins to seem possible…

What a different way of seeing faith; not as the ability to confess the truth of a given set of propositions, the strength of which is directly proportional to the amount of faith one has… But as a ***practice*** that shapes the way you might respond to…

- a day when, despite all efforts to be a "true believer" you're quite sure you're an atheist after all,
- or as a practice that shapes the way you respond to a tangled mess of yarn,
- or to the finality of the grave,
- or the friend who has hurt you…

Strangely enough, despite what we may have grown up hearing in the Church of our childhoods, it was the ***practices***, not unified belief around certain creedal formulations, that created and shaped the life of

the first Christian communities… As Robin Meyers writes in his book "The underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus,"

"*The earliest Christian communities were not unified around ecclesial hierarchy or orthodoxy, but around a Spirit that hovered over that holy ship of fools… In the chaotic and violent world of the Roman Empire this radical movement transformed their lives. Not because it promised a heavenly reward for earthly suffering, but because it promised a way of life that lifted all followers, regardless of class or ethnicity, into the joy of belonging to a Beloved community. They were not, after all, called 'true believers.' They were called 'The People of the Way.'*

This new sect infuriated Rome and led to charges that it was immoral and that it undermined traditional Roman values of loyalty and family. The offense was never described in doctrinal terms, but in terms of Christian devotional practices that were subversive and dangerous. Under the influence of a martyred Jewish peasant, the movement was rapidly expanding across Asia Minor, defying the status quo by living out an alternative existence complete with its own laws and its own patterns of behavior; those patterns of behavior including sharing of resources, living in relationship with different tribes, and praying for their enemies."

How can we play Bach if we don't practice every morning? How can we become the music if we don't practice the music? How can we look at a bag of disheveled yarn and see the possibility of something beautiful and warm and life-giving if we don't pick up the yarn and the pattern and the knitting needles, and then sit down, take a deep breath

and begin practicing? How can we learn to see through the eyes of Christian faith if we don't practice the way of Jesus?

In response to these questions, I think Antoinette Tuff might have some wisdom to share with us… Perhaps you remember Antoinette Tuff… She was the middle-aged African American bookkeeper who, in September of 2013, saved a school full of children and their teachers from harm when a man armed with an AK-47 and 500 rounds of ammunition entered the McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Decatur, Georgia, took Antoinette Tuff hostage, and told her he wasn't afraid to die.

In an article about this event in "The Christian Century" entitled "Emergency Prayer," author Stephanie Paulsell tells the story about how Antoinette Tuff responded to the young white man as if he were part of her own family, calling him "baby," telling him she loved him, promising she would stay with him until the police arrived and assuring him he would not be hurt.

"Antoinette Tuff was as good as her word," Stephanie Paulsell writes. *"No one was physically harmed that day, not even the gunman. In the summer when the killer of an unarmed African-American teenager claimed that his fear justified his actions and was found not guilty, Tuff's ability to reach across the boundaries of race and fear – to risk herself not only on behalf of the children in her care but also on behalf of the man pointing the weapon – feels like a miracle.*

"What allowed her to make the choices she did?" asks Stephanie Paulsell… *"What kind of formation kept her so peaceful, collected and passionate?"*

The author then goes on to say that Antoinette Tuffs admits to being more frightened in the presence of that armed man than at any other time in her life, but says she was able do what she did because she had been trained by the school to follow certain protocols for such emergencies **and** because, as Antoinette Tuff put it, she had learned certain **practices** in the church…

Practices like "praying on the inside" and "anchoring herself in God no matter what was happening around her." **Practices** that helped her draw upon her own experiences of hopelessness, making her able in that terrifying time to share stories of her own struggles with the gunman, reminding him how human it is to feel that you have come to the end of your rope… **Practices** like praying "on the inside" for the gunman even as she spoke with him; that practice helping Antoinette Tuff see the gunman as a struggling human being… (When the gunman told Antoinette Tuff his last name was Hill, she replied, "That's my name too. My mama was a Hill.")

Antoinette Tuff says she was able to respond to the gunman as she did because she had been taught by her pastor, formed by Jesus, and because she had learned certain practices in the community of faith…

Or as we might put it using the threads of this morning… Because she had practiced every morning, she could play Bach. Because she had taken up knitting needles and tended to tangled messes of human frailties way before the day the gunman entered the school, she was able in that time to terror to create something beautiful and tender and life-giving… Because she had practiced praying on the inside and anchoring herself in God, she knew what to do when all hell broke loose…

It wasn't a matter of how much faith she had. It was a matter of the practices she had learned… Affirming the old word of wisdom, "Practice faith, and faith will come."

Which means there is still hope for me… Me, whose faith on any given day is as about as big as a mustard seed… Me, who only knows that on days when I cannot believe there is a God, I can do what I was taught to do as a child at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in St. Charles, Illinois, and this is to recite a portion of Psalm 51…

Create in me a clean heart O God,

And renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from thy presence,

And take not thy Holy Spirit from me,

Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation,

And uphold me with thy free Spirit…

That's all I know how to do… And then of course to come here, with you, my community of faith, this Holy ship of fools, and to be shaped by a story about how a body broken and shared in love can become bread for the world… A story about how cast-off-dead-end-messed-up threads and people and moments and relationships can, by the power of love and through the persistence of practice be made whole … *(Show the ASL sign for forgiveness)…* a story about how even at the grave we sing God's song…

All I know how to do is to bring my mustard-seed-size-faith to this story, messy and tangled and tenuous and fragile as my faith is, and to

practice giving it into the hands of the One who promises to make beautiful things of my life… to make beautiful things of our lives…

Not so different really from

a pair

of socks

knitted with God's own

sheepherder hands,

two socks as soft

as rabbits…

knitted

with threads of

twilight

and the pelt of sheep…

ultramarine blue

crossed

by one golden hair… +