Pentecost Thirteen

Psalm 26 Romans 12:9-21 Matt. 16:21-28

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 8-30-20

There probably aren't two Biblical texts that speak more explicitly about what the Christian life entails than do our texts for this morning from Romans and Matthew. Both of which, it seems to me, are about the impossible. In Matthew, Jesus is speaking to his disciples about what it means to follow him. And over the protestations of Peter, Jesus says such following will inevitably mean losing one's life…

Paul's words to the Romans are no easier to hear as he spells out the Christian life in these terms… Christians are to love and care for one another within the faith community… And… and… they are to do a whole lot of other things beyond all logical sense, like blessing those who persecute them, associating with the lowly, feeding the enemy, considering the needs of others in all situations… weeping with those who weep…

So how does one do such impossible things I'd like to know? How does one do such impossible things in a world where **everywhere we look** there are people **weeping** from hunger, poverty, injustice, illness, fire, war, addiction, displacement? How does one do such things when so much in our culture and in our human nature tempts us to protect our own, to defend our own, to keep our lives intact and safe; certainly not to lose them for the sake of another?

On a Sunday morning when our texts lay out before us the defining markers of the Christian life, and they seem so utterly impossible, where do we begin? How do we proceed? What do we actually do if what we want to do is follow Jesus?

This is probably the quintessential question with which all Christians wrestle if they take their faith seriously. It is certainly a question with which I have wrestled for a very long time, recognizing that the answer will never come nicely packaged with clear directions, nor will it often look like we expect it to look…

But in thinking about the question of what it means to "be a Christian," there is a poem that offers some wisdom and insight, I think. It's a poem by Tess Gallagher entitled "The Hug," and is told from the vantage point of a woman who's standing with a friend in a city neighborhood somewhere, listening, along with others, to someone reciting a poem… The woman listening and her friend are, as the poem says, "wrapped in a hug," when suddenly, out of nowhere, a man, who has the look of "homelessness," comes up to the couple and asks the woman if he can "have one of those…"

So, as the poem goes, the woman walks over to him, puts her arms around the man and tries to hug him "like she means it." She says he's got an overcoat on so thick she can't feel him past it. And as she starts the hug, she thinks to herself,

"How big a hug is this

supposed to be?

How long shall I hold this hug?"

"Already," she says, "*already*

we could be eternal, his arms falling

over my

shoulders, my hands not

meeting behind his back, he is so big!

I put my head into his chest and snuggle

in," she says…

"I lean into him. I lean my blood and my wishes

into him.

He stands for it. This is his

and he's starting to give it back so well

I know he's

getting it. This hug. So truly, so tenderly

we stop having arms and I don't know if

the friend I was with has walked away or what,

or if the woman is still reading the poem,

or the houses – what about them? –

the houses.

Clearly, a little permission is a dangerous thing.

But when you hug somebody you want it

to be a masterpiece of connection, the way

the button

on his coat will leave the imprint of

a planet in my cheek

when I walk away.

When I try to find some place

to go back to."

… the way

the button

on his coat will leave the imprint of

a planet in my cheek

when I walk away.

When I try to find some place

to go back to.

So I'm not suggesting that this poem is helpful in answering the question of what it means to follow Jesus because it gives us "literal and explicit directions about what we're supposed to do anytime a stranger comes up to us and asks us if he can have a hug"… But I find it's helpful in speaking about what it means to be a Christian because it reveals what one of my pastor friends calls the "Christian exercise routine" of "Bending low, letting go, and reaching wide"… a kind of "Christian calisthenics"… a kind of "practiced way" of responding to whatever comes our way in this life… a way of responding that has a certain shape to it… a shape you may recognize in the three-fold process of "bending low, letting go, and reaching wide." +

"Bending low" in the sense of going down into the ordinary, down-to-earth, tangible, messy, unkempt things and moments of this life… like the moment when you're hugging a friend while listening to a poem in a city neighborhood somewhere, and all of a sudden you're asked to "bend low" from that place of security and "known entities" into the unknown ambiguities of a hug, a coat, a man, a need, a leaning in with blood and bones and arms and heart…

"Letting go" in the sense of "losing one's self"… in the sense of losing in the bending low all sense of where your own arms stop and his begin… losing all sense of your friend (is he still there?), the woman reciting the poem, the houses… what about the houses?... "Letting go" in the sense of not knowing just where you'll go back to after this hug, when you try to find someplace to go back to…

And “reaching wide” in the sense of making a “masterpiece of connection” with someone on the other side of a perceived divide… a connection so true and authentic and real it leaves an imprint on your cheek, your life, your heart, your soul…

I think when Jesus speaks about following him in terms of “picking up our cross” I think he’s speaking of this “bending low, letting go and reaching wide” as a three-fold pattern to follow in **our everyday lives**… Despite the temptation to imagine that “picking up one’s cross” has to do with some dramatic, “noble,” and “sacrificial” gesture on behalf of “others” that will change history and go down in the annals of “greatest deeds ever”… which in the end, if you haven’t noticed, makes the one who’s “picked up their cross” the subject of the sentence every time…

Reminding me of Mother Theresa’s response to someone who was extolling her for all her “great deeds”… Mother Theresa saying in response to this accolade, “There are no great deeds… There are only small deeds done with great love…”

Reminding me also of a small piece of wisdom I once heard from an old Lutheran pastor, who said to me one day when I was trying to figure out what to “do” in the face of the world’s extensive suffering, “Elaine, maybe what matters is what comes to your door.”

I find both of these pieces of wisdom to be very helpful as many of us at St. Brendan and in the wider expression of the Church are trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus in these days when the Coronavirus and the Black Lives Matter Movement and natural disasters are exposing the devastating disparities in our country caused by long-standing policies of racial and economic injustice… in these days when we are trying to figure out how to be an “alternative voice” to those who would entice us to live out of fear, narrow-mindedness and small-heartedness…

I find both Mother Theresa’s insight and the wisdom of the old Lutheran pastor helpful because they speak of “bending low, letting go, and reaching wide” not so much in response to forces beyond our power to change, but in response to those things that come to our door… and even then, not through the “doing” of “great and noble deeds,” but through small deeds done with great love…

Like the hug the woman in Tess Gallagher’s poem gave to the homeless man who asked if he could “have one of those”… a response which certainly didn’t address the pressing and overwhelming issue of homelessness, but which, in the moment, provided a “masterpiece of connection” between two people on other sides of a great divide, leaving an imprint of each on the cheek and the heart of the other…

Or like the Croatian farmer I read about recently, who, during the war between the Serbs and the Croats in the 1990’s, provided milk for a Serbian baby whose family lived close-by… For an entire year… Milk, every day… A small act that certainly didn’t address the pressing

and overwhelming issues of war and genocide, but provided a “masterpiece of connection” between people on other sides of a great divide, leaving an imprint of each on the cheek and the heart of the other…

Or like my daughter Emily, who lives in Bangor, and who was asked last week if she could make supper for 30 migrant workers who came to Maine to rake blueberries, but instead found themselves in a hotel for two weeks after testing positive for the Coronavirus… Unable to work… unable to make the money upon which their families depend… Unable to leave the hotel or get groceries or cook… Most of these migrant workers unable to speak English, as they are from Central America…

And so Emily, who lived in Nicaragua for ten years and who is married to a Nicaraguan man, made a Central American dinner of beans and rice and chicken for the 30 people in the motel… a dinner that would taste to them like home… a response which certainly didn’t address the pressing and overwhelming issues of immigration and poverty and displacement, but which, in the moment, provided a “masterpiece of connection” between people often on opposite sides of a great divide, leaving an imprint of each on the cheek and the heart of the other…

Each of these “small acts” of great love lived in the cruciform shape of “bending low, letting go and reaching wide”… none of them “grandiose” in the sense of being “world-changing,” but all of them being I think, small examples of what Jesus was getting at when he was talking about “losing our lives for love’s sake”… that is, in the bending low, the letting go and the reaching wide of love, losing all sense of where our own arms stop, where our own hearts and lives stop and where the arms and hearts and lives of the “other” begins… that is, in the sense of not knowing just where we’ll go back to after the imprint of love has been left on our cheeks, and the hug, the gesture, the masterpiece of connection is over…

(And lest you imagine these “small acts of love” are easy to do, that they cost nothing, that they are not cruciform in shape, let me tell you that after twenty years I still deeply regret refusing my father’s invitation to me to dance with him at a family wedding… Did you know that sometimes what comes to our door can be an invitation from someone in our own family?

Can you imagine a sweet supportive father extending his hand to his daughter in hopes that she’ll dance with him… and that daughter, so wrapped up in her own stuff…in her own fear of looking foolish on the dance floor…in her own insecurities about being second fiddle to her darling sister…Can you imagine the daughter refusing her father’s beautiful invitation because she just couldn’t bring herself to bend low from her protective perch of isolation, to let go and reach wide into his arms?

Do you know how deeply she wishes she had say said yes… How deeply she wishes she had the imprint of the button on her father’s coat on her cheek even now?.... If so, then you will sense what Jesus was talking about when he talked about losing our lives for the sake of finding them… You will know how hard it is even in the everyday ordinary moments of our lives to say “yes” to that kind of losing and finding…).

It's always hard. Which is why we have to practice the Christian exercise routine of bending low, letting go, and reaching wide… Because this way of being in the world doesn't come naturally… We have to practice in response to what comes to our door in the everyday ordinary moments of our lives, remembering that there are no great deeds… there are just small deeds done with great love… Practicing in small increments of love just like Yo-yo Ma said he practiced the Bach Cello Suites two measures at a time…

The thing is, some of the things that "come to our door" will invite us to participate in movements and efforts playing out on the national and global stage around issues of homelessness and economic disparity and racial injustice and immigration and war and violence and environmental degradation…

And when those things come to our door, each of us will have the opportunity to decide if and how we might respond… There is not just one answer here…

But what I'm trying to say this morning in the midst of so much suffering and in light of our texts, which call on us to think about what it means to follow Jesus… What I'm trying to say is while we struggle to figure out how to respond as Christians to the difficult and overwhelming issues of our time, there is the present moment and the question of who is at our door…

And there is the call to practice the shape of Christian love in response to whomever and whatever comes our way… Knowing that even when we fail… even when the fears and complications and anxieties of life keep us bound so tightly we can't begin to bend low, let go, or reach wide…

Even then we can know that the Sacred presence we call God has already taken on this shape before us in a masterpiece of connection… imprinting the sign of love + upon our foreheads and hearts and lives… in the same way a button leaves an imprint of a planet on our cheek after a hug is over, when we try to find some place to go back to…

Even then we can trust that the Sacred Presence we call God is inviting us to live into the image in which our lives are both lost and found… that masterpiece of connection in which we can't quite tell where we stop and God starts, where I stop and you start, where we stop and the "other" starts… all of us held in the embrace that invites us to reach out and to give the same….

In the name of the one who stands at our door in this present moment, waiting always to teach us how… + amen…