5th Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Cor. 9:16-23  Mark 1:29-39

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church  February 7, 2021

I think it would be accurate to say that many of us currently have a rather uncomfortable relationship with the word **"evangelical,"** mostly because in the day and the culture in which we live, the word is often associated with words like "judgmental," "strident," "exclusive" and "self-righteous."

Which is actually a shame, as the word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, which mean "good news"… the very thing that lives and moves and has its being at the heart of the Christian faith… the "pearl of great price" intended to free the world God so loves from all that seeks to hold the world in bondage… those principalities and powers that can so easily hold us in the clutches of fear, shame, small-heartedness, narrow-mindedness and despair… not to mention the cultural and institutional "isms" of classism, sexism, racism, cynicism, etc. etc. etc…

It is into a world caught in the clutches of such things that the *euangelion* of the Christian story intends to sing its "good news" of liberation, calling churches and Christians alike to be **"evangelical"** in all they say and do… "Evangelical" not in the way the word is most often understood these days, but in the way it was intended from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when, as Mark says in the first chapter of his Gospel, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the "good news" of God…

The "original" meaning of the word being clearly and beautifully articulated this morning in both our Gospel text from Mark and our reading from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians as both Jesus and Paul leave the enclaves of their own known religious, ethnic, and cultural worlds and cross over into territories unknown to share the message with which they were on fire.

Jesus, as depicted in our Gospel lesson for this morning, crossing over into the places where people were sick, demon-possessed… reaching out for them, taking them by the hand, lifting them up, skin to skin, bone to bone, heart to heart… *going* to meet people in the places of their deepest brokenness and greatest need even when such meeting and relating and touching went against the cleanliness codes of Levitical Law.

And Paul, *going* from the privileged stature he had known as a Pharisee, **out** of the freedom he had come to know as a Christian, **crossing over** into the unknown territory of

servanthood for the sake of the Gospel; that "going" sounding like this according to Eugene Peterson's translation of this morning's reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul writing…

*Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized – whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings on Christ – but I entered their world, and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't want to just talk about it; I wanted to be in on it.*

"In other words," said St. Paul, "My life is now about *going* into servitude for the sake of love, *going* into the walking-shoes of the "other"… crossing over into their worlds, their landscapes, their language, their hopes and sorrows, their limitations, in order to get close enough to speak the good news of God's transforming, healing, wild and windy love so they can hear it and take it in."

This is no easy task. Just as my daughter Emily, whose story I recall every time I read this text from Corinthians… The story about the day a number of Christmases ago when I was frazzled by the holiday frenzy of both home and church, and needful of a way to get out of my own way. My brain was tired of thinking and I desperately needed a task to do with my hands; something I could begin, and within ten minutes or so see some signs of success.

So I asked Emily to help me learn to knit. We sat down on our living room couch with yarn and needles. Emily cast on, and then before handing the needles to me, she went through the knitting process a few times, very slowly so I could see each step. Then she put the yarn and needles in my hand, and said it was my turn.

But for some reason I just couldn't do it. I went in the wrong way, out the wrong way, up and down the wrong way. Things slipped and slid, let go and unraveled…

"No, Mom," Emily said. "It's like this." She'd show me and I'd try again. Still no good. Then she tried holding my hands in hers, thinking if my hands went in the same direction as hers, they would get used to it, and after a little bit be able to go in the same way on their own. But four hands and two knitting needles pose problems you'd never imagine if you haven't tried it.

It was not a happy scene. We just sat there in silence for a minute. And then my dear Emily, who really does not have all that much appreciation for the Church or for churchy language, said to her totally-churchy-pastor-mom, "OK Mom. It's like this…" And then taking the needles and the yarn in her hands she showed me how to knit in slow motion once again, saying as she went step by step…

"First you take the sinner and go around to the back door of the church because going in the front door is just way too scary. You go in the back door, and once you're inside, you make the sign of the cross. You talk about God's love and mercy, and let the sin go. Then you go get another sinner and bring him back around to the back door and start all over again."

In other words, Emily entered my world. She took on the language of that world, even though it wasn't her choice of language, all for the sake of her dear old mom and her sanity. All for the sake of love. (Which by the way did work for a while. Until Emily left and the yarn did something funny which I didn't know how to correct.) But the point is, Emily became a servant that day, ***going*** from the known world in which she was comfortable, taking on the landscape, the limitations and the language of her mother's theological world so her mother could hear what she was trying to say…

This is just what St. Paul was talking about in our text from Corinthians this morning… This is just what Mark was talking about in our Gospel text for this morning… both Jesus and Paul, leaving what they knew and *going* into unknown territories on behalf of people both religious and non-religious, moral and immoral, defeated and weak, sick and demon-possessed, taking on the landscapes, the limitations, and the language of their worlds all for the sake of helping them hear the Gospel (which, as one old midwestern Lutheran pastor is known to say, should feel to anyone who hears it like the first warm wind of spring come sweeping across a North Dakota farm would feel to him)…

Making me wonder if being **evangelical** in our day doesn't have something to do with the wisdom found in a seemingly non-religious little poem that goes like this…

*It only helps right now*

*if you can speak the language*

*of "it's possible" in a thousand*

*different ways –*

*Telling a story that begins with*

*"once upon a time"*

*qualifies as such language,*

*as does an invitation*

*to go outside at midnight*

*under a sky full of stars...*

*Leaving a $20.00 tip*

*for a $2.00 donut,*

*singing a love song over the phone,*

*delivering a jar of summer-canned*

*peaches to a neighbor on a late*

*winter's afternoon…*

*Creating beautiful postcards*

*out of watercolor paper*

*and watercolor pencils ,*

*and leaving them in odd places*

*around town for people to find –*

*These are all gestures written*

*in the many languages*

*of "It's possible,"*

*and are right now*

*the only thing that can help;*

*the only thing that can lift*

*people's heads*

*and get them to wondering*

*if maybe there isn't more to the moment*

*than meets the eye.*

I think both Jesus and Paul would say that sharing the **good news,** the **euangelion,** the Gospel is, at the heart of it, about helping people to see that there's more to the moment than meets the eye… More to the moment than the tangle of yarn that seems it will never become a scarf… More to the moment than the cacophony of political voices screaming for attention, and the devastation of an endless pandemic… More to the moment than the walls that divide, the darkness that threatens, the fears that assail us at 2:00 in the morning…

"There's more to the moment than this," both Paul and Jesus said in the many languages of "it's possible" and in the name of love… leaving the enclaves of their own known religious, ethnic, and cultural worlds and crossing over into territories unknown to share the message with which they were on fire so it could be heard and known.

This is what St. Brendan Episcopal Church is doing in the language of bread-baking and soup-making, in the language of Monday-silent- meditation, kindness rocks, storytelling and so much more… But nowhere is St. Brendan being more **evangelical** in the beautiful and original sense of the word than in its decision to become the place where people caught in the bondage of addiction on our little island can come to get clean needles… Nowhere is the good news of Jesus shared in a language more real, more true, more visceral, more incarnate, more authentic to the **euangelion** of God than in the designation of St. Brendan as the home of the "Deer Isle needle exchange."

Rather like Salisbury Cathedral in Salisbury, England which locked its doors during the plague of 1627, but which today is a vaccination site where hundreds of people go daily to get their vaccinations… not in silence, but in the beauty of the majestic organ which the organist David Hall has decided to play for the sake of all the elderly people who come with some trepidation to receive their inoculations…

David Hall playing on that majestic organ, not only Handel and Bach and Mozart, but also the music he knows the elderly people would love because his mother does… tunes from "Oklahoma" and "Showboat"…. "And of course," as he says, "I play the 'White Cliffs of Dover'." Of course….

Because David Hall has put aside the privileged stature of "organ master", and living out of the freedom he knows as a Christian, has crossed over into the unknown territory of servanthood for the sake of the Gospel, substituting the glory of Bach for the grit of "Oklahoma," all because he knows his mother would love it were she at Salisbury Cathedral for her vaccination…

Never mind that regular Sunday worship is not happening there these days… never mind that the Creed is not being recited within those hallowed walls, nor the consecrated elements of bread and wine being received into open hands… Never mind… Because the good news of God's unfathomable, unboundaried, fierce and tender love is still being proclaimed in the many many languages of "it's possible"… in the many many languages the people gathered in that place can understand, opening them to the possibility of there being more to the moment than meets the eye…

Something we might call love…

The very love that has come close enough for us to hear it… to know it… even though we may be meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, defeated and demoralized… The very love that has crossed over + into our world, our landscapes, our language, our hopes and sorrows, our limitations, in order to get close enough to speak the good news of God's transforming, healing, wild and windy love so we can hear it and take it in…

And so we, using knitting needles or show tunes, midnight stars or canned peaches, lullabies or soup pots, Illuminations or colored pencils, parish halls for clean needles or

cathedrals for vaccines, might be **evangelical** in all we say and do…. Crossing over from our known and guarded places of privilege and security into the ambiguous, messy, get-down "realness" of human life…

And there, just listening… opening ourselves to the beauty and suffering of those we encounter… learning their landscapes, their language, their joys and sorrows… until, we, along with them, begin to sense something else present among us… something more to the moment than meets the eye… A possibility spoken in a thousand different languages, a million different ways of saying "love."