Easter 5

Psalm 31 1 Pet.2:2-10 John 14:1-14

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 5-10-20

So I will begin with a rather unusual premise for a Sunday morning sermon, which I will flesh out as I go along… That premise being this… "Jesus is to God what tying flies is to fly fishing."

And I will start that "fleshing out" by admitting that occasionally, when the first seven verses of our Gospel text for this morning have been chosen as the Gospel reading at funeral services, I, the pastor, have read the first 3 verses of the text and stopped there… Meaning I have shared Jesus' beautiful words of comfort, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled,"* and his assurance that he goes to prepare a place for us in his "Father's house" so that even after death, wherever Jesus is, there we will also be. I have shared these words, and gladly so…

But I have at times left off the verses which include Thomas' question, "Lord, how can we know the way?" And Jesus' response, "I am the way, the truth, and the life… **No one comes to the Father except through me.** If you know me, you will know my Father also."

I have sometimes left those verses unread because I know how those words will sound to many of the people who have come to the funeral, most of whom have no connection to the Church or organized religion and no understanding whatsoever of Christianity, except the warning they've heard again and again about how the only way to get to heaven when they die is to believe in Jesus before death comes…

And so I skip those words about Jesus being the **only way** to the Father, and I try as hard as I can, in as many ways as I can, to suggest (through-out the funeral service) that Christianity isn't as much about "believing" in Jesus as it is about "beholding" God's love and God's presence in the ordinary, down-to-earth, sometimes suffering, often times beautiful moments of our everyday lives… even the kind of grief-stricken moments experienced in the loss of a loved one… (And I try to speak about how that Divine presence, even in the darkest moments of human life, is made profoundly and deeply known in the suffering, accompanying love of Jesus)…

So that is what I have sometimes done at funerals… (Don't tell the Bishop). But so often what I've really wished I could do is read all seven of the verses from John 14, **including the verse in which Jesus says that no one comes to the Father except through him**…

And then, after reading all seven verses, to say to those in attendance, "If those words sound a bit exclusionary to you, let me tell you that they sounded that way to me too until I

went fly-fishing with a Maine Guide one summer day for the very first time, and **after** catching a 22 inch small mouth bass, **after** doing just what the guide told me to do (which involved kissing the fish, looking him in the eye, and gently placing him back in the water), and **after** my saying to the Maine guide, "well, I guess I know about fly-fishing," he said to me, **"Elaine, the only way to really know what there is to know about fly-fishing is by tying your own flies."**

The Maine guide then proceeding to tell me all about tying flies… like about how in order to make your own flies you have to study and study and study the patterns and the habits of fish until you can practically know what the fish are thinking… Until you know the way they respond to the light on the water and something moving on the surface...

He told me about how you have to look at every curve on the wing of any given insect until you can duplicate that curve on the fly you're trying to make so the fish actually believe it to be the real thing… He told me about how in the process of making your own flies you almost become the fish, the fly, the Maine woods because you love it all so much and spend so much time studying the intricacies and mystery of every minute thing… He told me that when you are in that deepest place of oneness with the fish and the fly and the water and the woods it is like you are one with creation…

It was such an extraordinary conversation. And afterwards, in a bit of email correspondence about my experience that day in particular and about fly-fishing in general, what I understood the Maine Guide to say was that you **can most certainly enjoy** fly-fishing without tying your own flies… **You can most certainly** know the wonder of being out on a lake in Maine, casting your line into the sun-lit water, feeling the tug of the fish, the satisfaction of the catch, the joy of the experience…

But you can't really **know** the **depth** of fly fishing… the **heart** of it, the **root** of it, without getting inside the fish to know what it sees, what it feels… without knowing its heart beat as your own…

All of these gifts coming by way of tying your own flies … **Tying flies being the "tap root" of fly fishing according to the Maine Guide …** the tangible, visceral, incarnational, get-down, hands-on, inside way into the mystery of it all, leaving you wondering where you stop and the fish begins… where you stop and the sun-lit water begins… where you stop and the rest of creation begins…

"And that," I would tell the people gathered for the funeral, (after reading all seven verses of the 14th chapter of John's Gospel)… "That is what the writer of John's Gospel is trying to say about Jesus being the "way" to the "Father"… **He's not saying that you can't experience the Divine presence without going through Jesus…** He's just saying that if you want to **know** the **particular** God made known in our Holy Scriptures; the God who is known through acts of creation, **incarnation**, liberation, **incarnation,** transformation, **incarnation**, reconciliation, **incarnation,** compassion, justice, mercy, love, and oh, did I say **incarnation**….

"The way to **this** God," says our Gospel text for this morning, "is by way of Jesus"… **Because Jesus is the "tap-root" of this "sacred" presence that is nothing like anything anyone would expect a "god" to be**… (Gods, by their very nature being thought of as "outside" kinds of beings… outside and removed, high and mighty, strong and invincible, successful and respectable, holier-than-thou…) Jesus, in contrast, being the incarnate presence of the creating, liberating, **get-down, earth-bound, love-found** God of our Holy Scriptures… Jesus (in contrast to the gods human beings so like to make for themselves) being more in keeping with the image presented in the poem by Muslim mystic Rumi entitled "The Lame Goat," who writes…

You've seen a heard of goats

going down to the water.

The lame and dreamy goat

brings up the rear.

There are worried faces about that one,

but now they're laughing,

because look, as they return,

that goat is leading!

There are many different kinds of knowing.

The lame goat's kind is a branch

that traces back to the roots of presence.

Learn from the lame goat,

and lead the herd home.

There are many different kinds of knowing.

The lame goat's kind is a branch

that traces back to the roots of presence.

Learn from the lame goat

and lead the herd home…

What we learn from the "get-down, earth-bound, love-found, lame goat that is Jesus," whose branch of knowing traces back to the roots of presence, **is that at the root of that Presence is a God, a heart, that bears the wounds of love… Because any love that is real and true accompanies the beloved in his or her suffering, and leaves the lover limping…**

What we learn from the "lame goat who is Jesus" is that to follow him is to study and study and study the patterns and the habits of God's incarnate "lavish, limitless, limping love" until we can sense the way that love would respond to the light on the water and something moving on the surface...

until we can sense the way that love would respond to a world of both intense beauty and untold suffering…

until we can sense the way that love would respond to injustice, violence, war, poverty, pandemics…

Until we can sense the way that love would respond to us, whatever wounds we may bear or may have inflicted upon others…

Until we can sense that the way of that love is always **downward**, into the tangible, visceral, incarnational, get-down, hands-on, mess and mystery of the world God so loves, and **outward** in a reach so wide it leaves us wondering where we stop and the love begins… where we stop and the sun-lit water begins… where we stop and the rest of creation begins… where we stop and God begins…

All of which helps me to understand what the young woman who was dying of cancer was trying to tell her pastor when the pastor called to see if she could come for a visit, and the young woman dying of cancer said, "Yes, you can come. But please don't come and tell me about Jesus. Rather, come and **show** me Jesus… Come and **be** Jesus for me."

I think she was saying (to put it in fly fishing terms), "please don't come just to talk about fly fishing. **Come to show me what you have come to know when tying flies**… Come to show me how at the heart of it, at the root of it**,** you begin to sense what the fish sees, what it feels… how its heart beats in rhythm with your own…

"Come to show me how in the process of making your own flies, when you are in that deepest place of oneness with the fish and the fly and the water and the woods, you come to know your oneness with all of creation…"

I think when the young woman dying of cancer said to her pastor, "Don't just come to **tell** me about Jesus. Come to **show** me Jesus… Come to **be** Jesus for me," she was saying, "Come to show me what you have come to know about God from the lame goat, whose branch traces back to the root of presence, **all the way back to God's lavish, limitless, limping love… Show me this… incarnate me this…** because there are many different kinds of knowing, **and I want to know this kind…"**

And while I'm not sure if the pastor was able to **show** the young woman dying of cancer what the young woman asked to know that day, I can tell you that the pastor hopes so…

I can tell you that what that same pastor hopes was true on that day is the same thing she hopes is true whenever grieving people gather to mourn their loves ones at funerals, or when "socially distanced" people gather remotely from their own homes during a world-wide pandemic as everything around them seems like it's falling apart…

She hopes that everyone gathered (including herself) will hear in those words of Jesus from the 14th chapter of John, "No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also…" She hopes that everyone gathered will hear in those words not something "exclusionary," but something invitational…

Something that says, "**Look, there are many different kinds of knowing…** But come and see and **know** what it means to tie flies in the kingdom of God… Come and see and **know** what it means to follow the lame goat home… the lame goat, whose branch traces back to the root of presence, where at the heart of it all is a love so **downward and so outward it leaves us wondering** where we stop and the love begins… where we stop and the sun-lit water begins… where we stop and the rest of creation begins… where we stop and God begins…

The pastor hopes that when people hear Jesus say, "I am the way and the truth and the life," they hear him say **"There are many different kinds of knowing… But the knowing that comes through me speaks of a God who is nothing like anything anyone would expect a 'god' to be… But rather a God whose incarnate presence can be known most deeply and profoundly by following the lame goat home… all the way to the heart that bears the wounds of love…"**

This is the God, dear friends, who invites us even now (in these fearful, uncertain and tenuous days) to follow Jesus to the root of presence, where we come to know the God who limps with us in our grief and sorrow, our lost-ness and longing…

This is the God who invites us into **this kind of knowing,** and calls us to share God's lavish, limitless, limping love with the world…

This is the God who invites us to follow Jesus to the root of presence, where the knowing is deep, and the water is wide, and the love is true, and the fish are rising in the morning sun. Amen.