

Seventh Sunday after Easter

Acts 1:6-14 Ps.68 1 Pet. John 17:1-11

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church May 17, 2026

I'm so glad that we chose today as the day to officially receive new sisters and brothers into the St. Brendan community through the affirmation of Baptism... this being the very Sunday we celebrate the Feast of St. Brendan, the 5th century Irish monk for whom our congregation is named.

And I say so because the story of St. Brendan (the monk) is a story of a life's journey shaped by water and wind, by storms and peril, by the unknown and the uncharted, the sun and the stars, and above all, by the Spirit of God...

That life's journey being what historian Christine Valters Paintner calls a "Pilgrimage of Resurrection"... a pilgrimage in which St. Brendan and his fellow monks would each set sail in a small boat called a coracle, without oar or rudder, and let the winds and current of divine love carry them to a place of rest they would not necessarily have chosen for themselves.

"The impulse for the journey," writes Christine Valters Paintner, "was always love. It was a practice of profound trust in the One who guides and shepherds us to the place of new life... A practice rooted in a willingness to yield to holy direction... An invitation into letting go of our own agendas and discovering where God is leading."

“It was,” as Christine Valters Paintner continues, “the profound practice of peregrinatio, in which God becomes both destination and way, companion and guiding force. God in the call to the journey, in the unfolding of the journey, and the one who greets pilgrims at the end of the journey.”

So what I’d like to suggest this morning as we affirm our baptisms, is that baptism is the initiating event that **begins our journey** as Christians and the event that **continues to shape our journey** all our lives long, as we, like St. Brendan make our pilgrimage to the place of our resurrection...

Not only in terms of that resurrection at the end of time when, as our faith assures us, all things will be gathered up in the fullness and completeness of God’s love...

But also in terms of the many resurrections that come our way in this life if we allow the Spirit of God to guide us through storms and peril, through the unknown and the uncharted, through all the forces both external and internal that threaten to hold us captive to fear and shame and regret... to smallness of heart and narrowness of vision...

Baptism, in this way of understanding, being not an insurance policy that guarantees our entrance into heaven when we die, **but rather the beginning of a way of life, here, now, in this messy, earthy, painful, beautiful, fragile world in which live...** an initiation into a life created by love, inspired by love, sustained by love, challenged by love for the sake of love, and received fully into the arms of love at our ending...

As a **rite of initiation**, then, baptism is an event, a sacred experience, that gives us what we need for living the kind of life to which it calls us... a life that is not easy in the storms and the perils of this world... but which, oddly enough, promises in the mix and the midst and the mess of everything... joy...

And what better day to consider what those gifts of initiation might be than on the day when we affirm our baptisms and by so doing join St. Brendan on the “pilgrimage of resurrection?”

So, the first gift of baptism of which I will speak may not seem very “gift-like” at all if what we want is easy sailing... Because truth be told, the first gift of baptism is death... Death to the old for the sake of the new... death to what holds us in bondage and closed-in-on-ourselves for the sake of openness of heart and freedom to live in full relationship with God and others...

No wonder some of the first baptismal fonts in the earliest Christian churches were actually pools built into the floor in the shape of a cross... Pools with stairs at both ends of the vertical piece of the cross, into which the baptismal candidate would descend with the priest at one end, receive the gift of baptism through full immersion, and then ascend the stairs at the other end, leaving behind the parts of himself or herself (metaphorically) that needed to “die” in order that he or she might be “born” into new life as Christ’s own beloved son or daughter...

The first gift of baptism is the gift of death... the gift of relinquishment... the gift of transformation that comes only by way of dislocation... the gift that never comes easy to us as human beings,

which is why God's Spirit has to do all the hard work... Not only on the day of our baptisms when the Spirit comes in water to wash away the things that hold us captive... But every day thereafter... Every day, as the Spirit of God's love "threatens us with resurrection" and invites us one more time to let go of the things that hold us in bondage...

As the Spirit did for me a week ago when I went into the Tire Warehouse in Ellsworth to have a flat tire repaired... I, having been there before, already knowing the dinginess of the place, with its two hard black plastic chairs in the not-so-clean waiting room... And I, being in no mood for chit-chatting with the guy behind the counter, soon realizing the guy behind the counter wanted to do nothing more than chit-chat... That guy, in his endless list of questions to me, upon hearing that I was a pastor, whipping his Bucksport Calvary Chapel hat out from behind the counter, putting it on his head, and then proceeding to tell me how Jesus had saved his life, and how he'd been sober for four months, and how his wife was in rehab, and how he was a whole new person now...

And really, if the guy who had been working on my tire hadn't come into the waiting room to tell me my tire was fixed when he did, I think the guy behind the counter might have asked me to get down on my knees and pray with him...

When I asked him how much I owed for the repair, he said "nothing" ...I owed nothing... So, I thanked him profusely, and said I would pay his kindness forward somehow, and he said that would be a really good idea... And I told him I'd tell all the Episcopalians in the Episcopal Diocese about the Tire Warehouse in Ellsworth, and he said that would be a really good idea too...

And truthfully, by the power of God's Spirit, I left that place feeling like I had made a new best friend. And in the process had left pieces of me on the floor of the Tire Warehouse that tend to hold me in bondage; pieces that need to die with some regularity... pieces called "judgementalism," and "elitism," and "narrow-mindedness" and "hard-heartedness"...

The Spirit of God doing for me that day what the Spirit of God does on the day of our baptism, promising to keep at it for the rest of our pilgrimage on the journey to our resurrection...

If death to all that keeps us from having open hearts, arms and minds is the first gift of baptism, then **the second is the gift of belonging**, given to us unconditionally, even, as Paul says, "when we are yet dead to sin"... Because really, what sentence in all the world is more beautiful than the one spoken after the water has been poured over the head of the one being baptized and as the sign of the cross is being traced upon his or her forehead with anointing oil... The sentence that begins by calling the baptized person by name, and then declaring, "Beloved Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and made Christ's own forever"...

Way before the life of faith is about believing, it's about belonging... about knowing deep in our bones that we have been called by name and claimed as God's beloved...

Which is why perhaps, when the great Reformed theologian Karl Barth was asked what words he would most want spoken at his graveside, he said, "Jesus loves me, this I know."

As it is why the great Civil Rights reformer Howard Thurman said that while it was God's love for all of creation that inspired him to work for racial and social justice, it was God's love for him... for Howard... that gave him the courage to keep going...

As it is why, when Church historian Karen Armstrong was speaking once about the gift of belonging that is ours through baptism, she said she came to know what that gift meant when, as a frightened young girl in a Catholic school full of stern and merciless nuns, there was one of the sisters who used to hug Karen with tenderness and care, the crucifix hanging around her neck making an imprint on Karen's cheek... An imprint Karen said she carried with her always, to remind her of the love of God in which she was held...

The second gift of baptism is the gift of belonging... But let me be clear about one thing... This doesn't mean that those who aren't baptized don't belong to God... nor does it mean they are less loved by God or that they are or will be excluded from God's love... ever... It's just that those of us who have been baptized, and who have been imprinted with the sign of God's presence even in the most God-forsaken times and places +... It means that like Karen Armstrong, we're the lucky ones, because we can feel the imprint of that love on our foreheads and on our lives and carry it with us on our journey into the unknown, however tumultuous and frightening that journey may be...

And, if we decide to, we can get up on a Sunday morning, and come to the place where can hear the three things people on a busy corner in New York City once said they most wanted to hear when a particular survey question was asked of them...

The survey question being this, “What one sentence would you most want to hear being spoken to you?” And the top three responses being these, “I love you. I forgive you. Supper is ready.”

The very sentences we hear here every Sunday morning... How lucky could we be? Not because we’re more loved by God than anyone else... But because whenever we want to, we can remember the imprint of love upon our brow +, the sound of our name being called, and the promise of belonging enfolding our fragile, tenuous, beautiful lives...

That sense of our belovedness and belonging, even when we are still far from being the people God longs for us to be, shaping our lives in the direction of love... in the direction of empathy and compassion... in the direction of resurrection... because that’s what love does... It changes us... It transforms us... It kills us and raises us from the dead... It makes us Easter people in a Good Friday world...

Making us ready then for **the third gift of baptism**... Which is a **candle**, given to the baptized person or his or her parents, along with the words, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.”

The light of Christ, given to us at our baptisms so we might have the courage to reveal those things the world would rather keep hidden in the darkness, and so we might bring light to those for whom the darkness is so deep, hope is all but gone...

As a little token of that light I have made for each of our new members (or each family) a coracle like the one St. Brendan and his

monks might have used in their pilgrimage to resurrection... You may not be able to see it from the back of the room, but there are no oars or rudders...

The mast is a candle, the light of Christ, and the sail is made from a part of the prayer of St. Brendan that includes the word “trust”... (Did you know that the word “trust” comes up three times in that prayer, the first time in the very first sentence, “Lord, I will **trust** You, help me to journey beyond the familiar into the unknown”...)

Sometimes it’s hard to trust... Sometimes the storms and the winds of life seem like they will have the last word after all... But this morning, as we remember St. Brendan... as we pray together (just before going out from this place and into the world), the prayer he prayed while his little boat caught the wind of the Spirit and went off into the unknown, we will hold onto that word “trust”... and we will hold onto the gifts of our baptism...

The gift of freedom from all that seeks to hold us in bondage... the gift of belonging; of knowing ourselves to be claimed and named by Christ forever... the gift of light to illumine the way... and the **trust** that as we journey into the unknown with St. Brendan and with one another... the **trust** that the *God of love is both destination and way, companion and guiding force. God in the call to the journey, in the unfolding of the journey, and the one who greets pilgrims at the end of the journey in our pilgrimage to resurrection... Amen...*