

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Ex. 20 Ps. 19 Philip.3:4b-14 Matt. 21:33-46

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 10-4-26

Our Gospel text for this morning invites us to consider the metaphor of a “cornerstone” as a way of speaking of Jesus’s presence in our lives; a cornerstone being defined as *“The first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, placed at the corner of a building where two walls meet, with all other stones being set in reference to it, the cornerstone fixing the position and stability of the entire structure.”*

Jesus uses this metaphor in our Gospel text for this morning to critique the religious leaders and temple elites of his day for the “cornerstones” upon which they had built their lives, made up primarily of self-aggrandizement, religious trappings, power mongering, and greed... (In true Jesus style, he uses this metaphor of the cornerstone just after trapping the religious leaders in a parable by which they came to see themselves as the ones indicted... Jesus making it clear that they and the religious elites before them were the ones in the vineyard of God’s kingdom who had marginalized, silenced and killed all the prophets who had come bearing the fruits of God’s creating, liberating, justice-making love, including the prophet who came bearing God’s own incarnate presence...)

Jesus thereby challenging the religious leaders and temple elites of his day to recognize that the cornerstones upon which they had built their lives were not only hollow and self-serving but also counter to the

God made known in the stories, the poetry, the laws and the lessons that made up the Hebrew Scriptures... The very Scriptures upon which they professed to have built their lives...

It's yet another Gospel story that tempts us to make fun of and find fault with the Pharisees, the Scribes and the Temple big-wigs of Jesus' day.... The thing is though, if we understand the Bible to be a "living word," then we must also recognize that in this Gospel text we too are being addressed... we too are being asked to look at the cornerstone upon which we are building our lives, and to ask ourselves what the nature of that cornerstone might be...

And, I think, if we say "Jesus," as most Christians would, then we must ask ourselves what this means... What it means for our lives to say that Jesus is our cornerstone, with all other stones being set in reference to it...

There are many ways to speak of what it might mean to set the building stones of our lives in reference to the cornerstone that is Jesus... But this morning, I would like to suggest that there are three qualities of a "Jesus-as- cornerstone-life" that would always hold true no matter what language or images or actions we might choose to use in aligning ourselves with the One whose essence and presence is most deeply and profoundly known in this symbol +...

The first being the **downward** nature of it all... And what better Sunday to speak of the downward nature of it all than on the Feast of St. Francis, the 12th century Italian mystic, poet and Catholic friar who, at a time when the Church of the day was so heavenly-minded it was no earthly good, insisted that the Spirit of God was deeply woven into

every fiber of creation... even the most humble and oft-times
unappreciated of earth's features and creatures...

The downward, earth-bound movement of God's love and God's
spirit, as taught by St. Francis, opening the eyes and hearts of Christians
down through the centuries to see that there is no between between
God and the creation God so loves... No between between the sacred
and the ordinary...No between between heaven and earth...

Leading one theologian to say we often miss seeing God because
we don't look low enough, and another to say about the teachings of
the Church (echoing what Dizzie Gillespie once said about jazz)... "If
there's no dirt in there somewhere it isn't Christianity..."

And inspiring 20th century poet Galway Kinnell to write a poem
called "Saint Francis and the Sow"... A poem in which he suggests that
Saint Francis, in an attempt to instill in a sow the truth of her loveliness
(for fear she had forgotten), did this...

... as Saint Francis

Put his hand on the creased forehead

of the sow, and told her in words and in touch

blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow

began remembering all down her thick length,

from the earthen snout all the way

through the fodder and slops to the

spiritual curl of the tail,

from the hard spininess spiked out

*from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess
spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen
mouths sucking and blowing
beneath them...*

(The sow remembering)

The long, perfect loveliness of sow.

The Jesus story we know tells us he was born in the place where the sow suckled her piglets and the cow dung steamed in the midnight air... It tells us he spent his life in low-down places touching dis-spirited faces so to remind every living being of their loveliness and their belovedness... It tells us that he died in a place so low down it was God-forsaken, and even there declared Love's fierce determination to rise... (because, as the Jesus story tells us, once love has gone so low for the sake of the beloved, nothing in the world has any power over it)...

To say that Jesus is our cornerstone is to live in a downward motion, close to the earth, down there in the dirt, along with St. Francis, trusting that God's spirit is in every fiber of creation, and being about the work of reminding all of God's creatures of their loveliness and their belovedness...

If Jesus-as-cornerstone means life lived in a **downward motion**, it also means life lived in an **outward motion**, with arms and heart stretched to capacity bearing the fruits of the kingdom... Fruits, as St. Paul named them, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...

All of those fruits finding their deepest meaning in the word “compassion”... Which, as Martin Luther King was known to say, might also be called, “dangerous unselfishness,” which, as he said further, is the essence of love...

The kind of compassion MLK spoke of the night before his assassination when he was in Nashville to support the sanitation workers. During his speech that evening he reflected on the story Jesus told about the Good Samaritan, Martin Luther King reminding his listeners of the two religious leaders who chose to walk by a mortally wounded man, in contrast to the man of a despised race, the Samaritan, who stopped to help...

About these contrasting responses to the man in need MLK said that evening in Nashville, *“The first question the Levite and the priest asked when they saw the wounded man was ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ The Good Samaritan reversed the question. ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’... That is the question before you tonight,” said MLK... ‘Not, ‘If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to me?’ But ‘If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?’”*

Bishop Mariann Budde, Bishop of the Diocese of Washington DC, shares these words spoken by MLK the night before he died in her book

“How we Learn to be Brave,” going on to say, “King’s question is at the heart of sacrificial love and acceptance. Compassion for another places us in service to something beyond ourselves and helps us become larger inside than the suffering we must endure or choose to endure. King believed that only love had the power to break the cycles of violence and hate, as revealed by Jesus on the cross. ‘King saw the cross,’ writes James Cone in The Cross and the Lynching Tree, ‘as a source of strength and courage, the ultimate expression of God’s love for humanity. Unlike others, he never wavered in his commitment to the way of love.’

“The rare shining examples of people like Martin Luther King Jr.” Mariann Budde writes, “remind us that only unselfish, sacrificial love has the power to heal us and change our world for the better.”

The kind of love that looks like this... (*Spread my arms wide*)...

To build our lives on the cornerstone that is Jesus is to live a life that is both downward and outward in nature. But there is a third quality about Jesus-as-cornerstone whose meaning I glimpsed this past Friday evening when my daughter Emily and I attended a concert at the Waterville Opera House featuring Cape Breton fiddlers Natalie MacMaster, her husband Donnell Leahy and three of their fiddle-playing, accordion-playing, guitar-playing, keyboard playing, Cape Breton-dancing children...

So if you know the energy of Cape Breton fiddling in general and the energy of Natalie MacMaster’s fiddling in particular, you won’t be surprise to hear me say that the Waterville Opera House almost caught fire on Friday night with the sparks that were flying from the fiddles and the feet, the strings and the bows, the rhythms and the tempos... It was

wild, and everyone in the audience was tapping their feet and clapping their hands and whooping and hollering as the jigs and reels electrified the air...

But then toward the end of the concert two things happened that were not expected... One, Natalie and Donnell's little 8-year-old daughter, who hadn't yet been on stage, came out, took a microphone in her hand, walked to the front of the stage, and said, "I'm going to sing a song Dolly Parton sang"... And she opened her mouth, and in the clearest most beautiful tones, sang, with all the complex vocal agility of Dolly Parton or Whitney Houston, "I'll Always Love You," her voice rising into the auditorium like stars... Let me tell you there wasn't a dry eye in the house...

And then her mother, Natalie MacMaster, took the mic. And she told us that a few weeks prior she had been on her way to the grocery store late one afternoon. And on her way there, she found herself mourning for the state of the world, overcome with anxiety for the future her children and all children might have to endure...

But then she said, she thought of all the ways God's love had come to her in her life... in the beauty of Cape Breton, in the gift of music, in the close relationships of friends and family... and in the recognition of such love and such beauty, she realized that all any of us can do is to share this love in all the small ways possible and in all the ways open to us...

"Like small stones of love," she said... throwing her arm toward us with her open hand, as if flinging those little stones of love out to all of us in the audience. "We can share these little bits of love," she said... "That's what we can do"... (Natalie's image of small stones bringing to

my mind the infinite number of small smooth stones on the shores of Nova Scotia, including those on the shores of Natalie's home on Cape Breton, hundreds of which I collected some years ago, before I knew you weren't supposed to do so.)

And all of a sudden, with Natalie's little stones of love metaphorically coming our way, I realized that the cornerstone that is Jesus is not a solid block of granite or a block of cement reinforced by rebar... **But rather it's a cornerstone that's intended to be broken open again and again and again... broken into little pieces of love that can be taken out into the world and shared... just like the bread we share every Sunday...**

Whoever heard of such a cornerstone? A cornerstone that has nothing to do with strength as we know it... (*show muscle power*)... but rather with this kind of strength (*show the downward and outward shape of the cross*)... As if to say, it is through the breaking open and the sharing that the cornerstone that is Jesus finds its true strength... **In its brokenness...** In the way of compassion, dangerous unselfishness, relinquishment, redemptive love... A strength made perfect through what the world would call "weakness"...

Little does the world know about the power of such love... Which is true of me as well most of the time, so difficult it is to understand... No wonder the builders rejected such a cornerstone...

I have for each of you this morning one of those small smooth stones that came years ago (unlawfully) not far from Natalie MacMaster's neck of the woods in Cape Breton... It's so small you could easily carry it in a pocket or a purse...

Or you could just hold it in your hand now and then when you need to remember what it means to say that Jesus is the cornerstone upon which you are building your life... However you choose to carry it or use it, I hope it reminds you of your “long, perfect loveliness”... just as the sow in Galway Kinnell’s poem was reminded of hers in the presence of St. Francis as he laid his tender hand upon her creased forehead...

And I hope the deep knowledge of your loveliness and your unconditional belovedness frees you to live in a downward motion (‘cause there’s gotta be some dirt in there somewhere if its’ Christianity) with your arms and your heart wide open...

And hoping the same for myself, I hope that by so doing we all come to know the unfettered joy of a life lived with such freedom... freedom from the world’s oppressive understanding of strength and human meaning...

All of us freed by love to make our lives sing just like the music of those Cape Breton fiddlers at the Waterville Opera House last Friday night as the sparks flew from their fiddles and their feet, their strings and their bows, their rhythms and their tempos...

The beauty and passion and fire of their music assuring everyone of us in the room that night that love is still on the move... and it’s rising... and nothing... nothing in this world can silence it.