15th Sunday after Pentecost

Gen. 50:15-21 Rom.14:1-12 Matt.18:21-35

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 9-13-20

Whenever I find myself wrestling with a particular word in our Sunday morning texts in an effort to plumb its deepest and truest meaning, I often turn to a small book by J. Ruth Gendler entitled "The Book of Qualities", a book in which the author takes complex words like "doubt, faith, truth, joy, despair" and speaks of them in ways that break the words open and make them real…

Like for instance the word "Courage," about which J. Ruth Gendler writes, *"Courage has roots. She sleeps on a futon on the floor and lives close to the ground. Courage looks at you straight in the eye. She is not impressed with powertrippers and she knows first aid. Courage is not afraid to weep and she is not afraid to pray, even when she is not sure who she is praying to."*

When speaking about the qualities of "Faith," J. Ruth Gendler says that Faith lives in the same apartment building as Doubt, and that when Faith was out of town visiting her uncle in the hospital, Doubt fed the cat and watered the asparagus fern. She says that Doubt and Faith grew up together, and that their mothers are cousins."

So you might see **why** I turn to J. Ruth Gendler's little "Book of Qualities" when I'm trying to break open a word in order to plumb the depths of its meaning, and **why,** now and then, when the deepest meaning of a word really evades me, I even try to write my own little "J. Ruth Gendler take" on the "qualities" of that particular word…

Which is what I did in preparation for this morning when I knew it would be necessary for me to say something about one of the most challenging words in our Holy Scriptures…one of the most challenging words in our faith tradition… that word being "forgiveness"…

My "J. Ruth Gendler" take on the word going like this….

Forgiveness is quiet, and never forceful in her approach. She loves to color, but seldom stays inside the lines. Forgiveness wears mismatched clothes from Goodwill on which she embroiders stars and moons, earthworms and aardvarks. She practices her cello every morning, and begins by listening to Bach or Jellyroll Morton or anything that hints at improvisation.

Forgiveness travels the world looking for places to make herself known. She isn't always noticed or invited in, but she is infinitely patient and not frightened by either anger or tears. She

understands Emily Dickenson's wisdom to "tell it slant," and often goes to work at the edges of things, moving slowly and carefully over time…

Forgiveness isn't ***quantitative*** *in the way of "how many?" or* ***trans-active*** *in the way of "tit-for-tat," but is generative in the way of* ***"supper is ready"*** *and imaginative in the way of* ***"just suppose,"*** *both of which are lovely and welcoming invitations, but neither of which allow anyone to stay just the way they are…*

What Forgiveness loves to do most of all is to leave postcards inside library books, under pillows, on top of gravestones, and between cereal boxes in the grocery store… Postcards on which she has drawn a picture of a rose growing from an old stump on one side, and on the other side has written the words, "It's possible."

Forgiveness would like you to know that she's as close to you as the air you breathe. And even now is inviting you… in…

The truth is, this entire summer those of us who have come to worship have been dealing with the word "forgiveness" and wrestling with its meaning… We have heard and studied the story of Jacob and Esau and have followed their relationship as brothers, fraught as it was with deceit, discord, hatred, mistrust, fear… And we have heard how, eventually, that relationship was changed by a gesture of connection, a movement toward forgiveness… a possibility of reconciliation…

We have heard the story of Joseph and his brothers, all of them Jacob's sons, somehow caught in the same dysfunctional and divisive family system; their all-consuming envy leading to Joseph's near death at the bottom of a pit… Our first lesson for this morning capturing that moment when, after years of separation and exile, the brothers begged Joseph for mercy, and Joseph, breathing in the presence of forgiveness (as close to him as the air he breathed), extended to them both care and goodwill….

Over the weeks of early summer, a sizeable group of us at St. Brendan studied Martha Nussbaum's book "Anger and **Forgiveness.**"

Mid-summer a number of us marveled at the capacity of civil rights leader and mystic Howard Thurman to **forgive** his white aggressors as we read his book "Jesus and the Disinherited."

And many of us have wondered together what meaning the word "f**orgiveness**" might have in the context of our country's present turmoil with its political animosities, hate-filled rhetoric, community divisions, systemic racial inequalities, economic injustices, etc., etc., etc… Not to mention the question of what meaning "forgiveness" might have in the context of our own circle of family and friends… and in the context of St. Brendan Episcopal Church….

All of these conversations related to the word "forgiveness" suggesting that perhaps by now, after so much reading and discussing, so much studying and sermonizing, I, the preacher for this morning, must certainly have something clear and helpful, edifying and instructive to say about this word so central to our faith… A little "how-to" manual to hand out perhaps before you leave.

But I don't… have… any of the above… Which is why I'm so grateful for the Gospel text appointed for this morning, as we overhear Peter's question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

And then Jesus' response, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Followed by a parable so extreme in its presentation it would have felt to Peter as if he'd just left Kansas and woken up in Oz… That ten-thousand-talent debt of the first slave, **forgiven**… one talent being equivalent to a year's wages for a laborer in that day…

Ten thousand years of wages forgiven… Really, the story could have ended there and still had the same effect upon its listeners… Because they would have known there and there that what Jesus intended to do in his response to Peter was to remove the word "forgiveness" from any associations with "**quantitative mastery"** or "**trans-active reciprocity**," and to situate it instead in the realm of **"mystery"**…. (Peter's quantitative question of "how many times?" in the midst of Jesus' invitation into the mystery of forgiveness being somewhat like all the summer days when Michael, my husband says to me, "Elaine, the wind is blowing… Do you want to go sailing?" And I, not a sailor, say, "How long do we have to be out there?")

Forgiveness, dear friends, is a mystery… an invitation to those of us who imagine our fruit choices limited to either apples or oranges, when all along there are kumquats, mangos, papaya, and passion fruit to be had… **"The kingdom of heaven is like this,"** Jesus says to Peter as he begins telling the parable about the servant who was forgiven his ten thousand talent debt… Jesus saying in so many words, "Peter, the wind is blowing…. Do you want to go sailing?"

There is no instruction manual I can give you for living into this mystery we call forgiveness… Nor is there something clear and helpful, edifying and instructive for me to say, because I, like Peter, and perhaps like you, am still a beginner… Still apt to ask questions like, "How many times?" Still feeling the contours of the word "forgiveness" with my fingertips as any of us would feel the contours of a dark room to find our way…

Which is just what I did this past week in my wrestling with this morning's texts… Grateful on one of those days to come upon a story told long ago by Lutheran pastor Walter Wangerin… A small story… a seemingly inconsequential story about two brothers in the Midwest somewhere who had been estranged from one another for years and years much to the sadness of their sister Flo, who yearned deeply for their reconciliation… She'd tried now and then to get one or other of the brothers to reach out to the other. But to no avail.

And so, as Walter Wangerin tells the story, one day Aunt Flo (which is what everyone called her), unbeknownst to either brother, invited both brothers to come to her house for supper… Which both did, quickly realizing the untenable situation in which they found themselves, and taking their places across the table from one another in stony silence, trying to out-do one another in the length of their silent table graces… Neither brother lifting their head from that "place of stubborn prayer"… neither saying anything as Aunt Flo brought the supper things to the table…

Not until that is, as the story goes… not until Aunt Flo put the gravy on the table… That gravy bringing to mind for each brother the memory of their mother's gravy… The smell of that gravy and the memory of their mother lifting each brother's head, ever so slightly, but enough for them to see one another, to look at one another, and to offer a glimpse of something ***possible*****… something with a future not bound by animosities or divisions of the past…**

What I love about the way Walter Wangerin tells the story is that it offers a hint of a possibility without providing any "measures of success" or any happy Hallmark endings… What I love about it is that it removes the word "forgiveness" from any associations with "**quantitative mastery"** as in "how many times?" or "**trans-active reciprocity**" as in "tit-for-tat," and situates it instead in the realm of **mystery,** the portal to which is plain old ordinary gravy and the memory of a mother who had so many times called to both of her beloved sons, "Supper is ready."…

What I love about the way Walter Wangerin tells the story is how forgiveness goes to work at the edges things, moving slowly and carefully, coming into the dining room that day "slant" instead of "full on."

What I love about the story is that it confirms what Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde said in her commentary on our Gospel text for this morning when she wrote, "What forgiveness requires is not effort, but openness… It feels like letting go, relinquishing control, and letting God in."

As Jesus invites Peter into the mystery of forgiveness in our Gospel text for this morning, so too he invites us, making it quite clear actually that one of the identity markers at the heart of the Christian life is living into and out of forgiveness's presence, as close to us as the air we breathe…

Which means we are called to be open to the ways forgiveness longs to be made real and tangible and incarnate **for** us and **in** us and **through** us…

The truth is, sometimes we **may** be the ones who bring the gravy, or the rose, or the word, or the **possibility** to the table where people long-entrenched in animosity sit across from one another in stony silence…

And sometimes we **may** be the ones who sit in stony silence, invited by some gesture of grace or love or possibility to lift our heads….

Sometimes we **may** be the ones able to sense the way Forgiveness colors outside the lines, and the way she moves quietly at the margins of things playing Bach or Jelly Roll Morton on her cello, inviting us to improvise… And we may be the ones who hold in our hands the little postcard that Forgiveness gave us with a picture of a rose growing out of an old tree stump on one side and the words "it's possible" on the other… and we may be so filled with the presence and power of Forgiveness, that we lift our head and look the person across from us straight in the eye, and we extend ourselves in a gesture of possibility, only to see them turn their backs and walk away…

Sometimes we may be the ones who think we are extending ourselves in the name and the spirit of Forgiveness, only to discover on closer inspection that we're gritting our teeth and asking under our breath, "How many times do I have to do this?"

Sometimes we may be the ones in whom the wound cuts so deep and the animosity looms so large we can't drag ourselves to the table, and all we want to do is to send Forgiveness and her invitation into the mystery packing… even as we recognize the toll both bitterness and anger can take on our lives…

The truth is, sometimes it's any of the above. In the context of this cultural moment in which we find ourselves. In the context of our circle of family and friends. In the context of this community of faith called St. Brendan Episcopal Church… Sometimes it's any of the above. And much of the time we don't know how to integrate or incarnate the presence and the power of Forgiveness into our lives…

I know this is true for me more often than I would want to admit… But even as I recognize my on-going struggle to make the word "forgiveness" real in my life, our faith story assures me of this…

It assures me that practicing the ways of Forgiveness can open us to the mystery of its presence…

It assures me that when I can't muster enough energy or resolve to practice the ways of Forgiveness, then one of you in the community of faith will encourage me or inspire me or practice the way of forgiveness **for me** until I am able to try again…

It assures me that what Forgiveness loves to do most of all is to leave postcards under pillows and on top of gravestones and between cereal boxes in the grocery store… postcards on which she has drawn a picture of a rose rising from the stump of an old tree on one side, and on the other side has written the words, "It's possible…"

It assures me that Forgiveness is a mystery, as close to us as the air we breathe, even in the most Godforsaken of + times and places imaginable… and even now, by the power of love, is inviting us… in…