13th Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 18:1-11 Ps. 139 Phil. 1-21 Luke 14:25-33

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Sept. 7, 2025

You might imagine how thrilled pastors are when the Gospel text appointed for the day is the one we just heard read from the 14th chapter of Luke's Gospel… The one in which Jesus says to the crowds who've been traveling with him, "You cannot be my disciple unless you hate your father, your mother, your spouse, your children, and oh by the way, life itself… and P.S., unless you give up all your possessions… And P.P.S unless you carry the cross and follow me."

It's such a "doozie" of a text, I still remember when I had to preach on it 15 years ago… It was the first Sunday in September, the weekend of my 60th birthday, and Michael had arranged for my father and step-mother and all three of our kids, scattered all over the world at the time, to come home and help me celebrate my big day.

I was the pastor at Redeemer Lutheran Church, and was so thrilled to think that all my family would be in church that Sunday, worshipping together, with me presiding and preaching… Until I saw that this text from Luke 14 was the text appointed for the day…

The one in which Jesus said no one could follow him without hating their mother, their father, their spouse and children… "Really," I thought at the time… "What are the chances that this would be the text

I would have to preach on as my family sat in the pews in front of me for the first time in years and years?"

Now the truth is, preachers are free to choose any of the texts appointed for a Sunday morning on which to base their sermon… Meaning I could choose any of our other three texts this morning as the focus of my sermon, as I could have done that Sunday 15 years ago… (including my very favorite passage in the entire Bible, Psalm 139… the very Psalm appointed for this morning)… But how could a pastor read today's Gospel text and not comment on it? It's just too impossible to let it be… the proverbial elephant in the room that cannot be ignored….

Which means I've probably preached on this text about 8 times in the 30 years of my pastoral ministry (as it comes around again every three years), each time trying as hard as I could to break it open in a way that might make some sense of it… And in all the wrestling I have done with this text, the one thing that has helped me most is the gradual insight that above everything else Jesus was a teacher…

Jesus was a master teacher…

Which is why I think that what Jesus was trying to say to the crowds that day in those impossible words about hating family members and life, and about carrying the cross, and giving up all of one's possessions in order to be his disciple, **was really no different** than what the writing teacher who gets up in front of a class of enthusiastic, hopeful, aspiring young poets is trying to say when she says, "If you want to be a poet, memorize the following lines of William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow," and measure every poem you write in light of it…

“There are just sixteen words in the poem… Here they are…

The Red Wheelbarrow

So much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.

Can you imagine coming into class with your new notebooks and your favorite kind of pen and all the brilliant, wonderful topics you have in your head for writing the best poems ever, and the teacher saying that your future as a poet depends upon your willingness to carry the random words “red wheelbarrow,” “rain water,” and “white chickens” around with you and to measure your beautiful, perfectly-crafted, totally-sensible, inspirational poetry in their light because somehow so much depends upon it? Can you imagine?

Here's the thing… Most of the folks journeying with Jesus had their new notebooks, their favorite kinds of pens, and the most beautiful, wonderful topics in their heads for writing the best poems ever… Like any of us might, they came knowing which words would fit together in support of the ways in which their lives were configured…

In the context of the religious and political culture at large, they carried words like…

"Almighty God," "our people," and "favorite"…

"Rich," "successful," and "blessed by God"…

"Jesus," "power" and "overthrowing the Roman Empire"…

And in the context of family and lifestyle, they carried words like…

"My family," "my well-being," "my domain"…

"My life," "my independence," "my freedom"…

"Those enemies," "those others," "unworthy"…

When Jesus addressed the crowds that day he knew that the poems they would write in their notebooks would use words that fit the systems, the protocols and the expectations they knew and upon which they had built their lives… Kind of like the words I was given to use when I was growing up, like…

"Swedish", "Lutheran", and "very nice"…

Or "Lutheran," "tuna-noodle-casserole-made-with-Campbell's Cream of Mushroom-Soup-topped with Potato-Chips," and "gourmet."

Or, “Norwegian,” “hard-headed,” and “arch enemy.”

You get the point… Jesus was a master teacher. And what he was talking about that day as he spoke of discipleship in those troubling terms of hating one’s family, hating one’s life, giving up one’s possessions and carrying the cross… **what he was talking about was letting go of the systems, the institutions, the paradigms, the expectations, the traditions, and the mindsets that kept people bound to certain known, expected, and limiting configurations of being**… (like limiting the understanding of the word “family” only to those who share your blood type, your preferences, and your affiliations…)

And in its place Jesus was extending an invitation to discipleship that dared hold together (in any single poem or any given moment), what tradition and religion and empire will never allow… Namely words like…

“neighbor,” “Samaritan” and “good”…

(Or in today’s context, *“neighbor,” “Republican” and “good”…*

Or “*neighbor,” “Democrat” and “good.”)….*

“Brother,” “sister,” and “those not necessarily related through blood, but through compassion or empathy”….

“enemy,” “mercy,” and “now”…

“me,” “profoundly prodigal” and “forgiven”…

“You,” “profoundly prodigal,” and “forgiven”…

Jesus was a master teacher. And what he was inviting the folks who were journeying with him to do was to write the poems of their lives with words they would never necessarily put together… like…

So much depends

upon

hands unclenched

Blessings overflowing

by way of

letting go…

Jesus wasn't telling those who were following him to hate their family members and their lives… Rather he was talking about hating hateful policies and protocols, systems and traditions that undermined relationships and the well-being of the larger community…

He was asking them to take what they had already learned from him as he had healed the sick, forgiven the sinners, loved the unlovable… and then to use those words of love and forgiveness and healing to write a poem that also included the strange unlikely words "hate" and "mother, father, spouse, sister, brother, life"…

Because he was hoping they would **work with those words, wrestle with those words until there was a spark of revelation, a new insight, something they had never before imagined as the old narrow**

understandings of "family" burst open the old configurations, and the lines of separation between "enemy" and "friend," "family" and "not-family" no longer had any meaning… (Echoing the passage in Matthew where some folks interrupt Jesus in his teaching to tell him his mother and brothers have arrived, and admonishing him to stop what he's doing and pat attention to them… Only to have Jesus gesture to those gathered around him and say, "These are my mother and my brothers.")

Got it? I don't… I don't even get why *so much depends on a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens…*

But I have a memory of something that happened at Redeemer Lutheran Church some years ago that helps me to sense what Jesus was trying to teach those who were following him that day…

It's a memory of a day when we were asked by the Wabanaki Tribal Council to host a memorial service for a young man who had grown up on Indian Island, a member of the Passamaquoddy Nation, who had been hit by a train and killed. The young man's name was Louis Bernard, and for much of his life he had been homeless, as well as battling the demons of alcohol and addiction…

For some reason his family and friends were having trouble finding a church in which to hold a service for him, and so when we were asked to host the service, we said yes… a bit reluctantly, I will admit, because we didn't really know what to expect in terms of numbers of people or "kinds" of people…

For the first time ever Redeemer Lutheran Church was full of folks who had never come through our doors before… Some lived on the very

edge of survival. Some were members of the Passamaquoddy Nation. They came early, and went through about six pots of coffee before the service even started, and then went through about six more after the service was over.

During the service those in attendance gave loving testimonies to their friend Louis; a person many of us wouldn't necessarily consider all that worthy of loving testimony… Many spoke about his honesty; about how they could leave money right out on their kitchen table when Louis visited, and no matter how desperately he may have needed it, Louis would never take what didn't belong to him…

One woman said that despite what most folks think, there is in the homeless community a strong sense of love and care amongst the folks, which Louis knew very well, and participated in…

People were honest when they spoke about Louis's struggles with alcohol and addiction. There was no sugar coating. But neither was there any judgment in their remarks; only concern and love…

At one point in the service, a tribal elder named Allen Sockabasin sang "Amazing Grace" in English and then in Passamaquoddy. And in closing, just before the Mic Mac Honor song was played on the drum, Allen Sockabasin sang an old Johnny Cash song, again singing each verse in English and then Passamaquoddy…

The song was called "Suppertime," and the refrain goes like this… *"Come home, come home, it's suppertime. The shadows lengthen so fair. Come home, come home, it's suppertime. Were going home at last."*

So let me just say that I had never in my entire life thought of writing a poem that included unlikely word partners such as these…

"Redeemer Lutheran Church," "Johnny Cash," and "Passamaquoddy"…

Or *"Redeemer Lutheran Church," "Homeless people," and "blessings without measure."*

But I will tell you that there were glimpses of connection and flashes of revelation that day I had never before seen in the sanctuary of Redeemer Lutheran Church… A sense of connection and relationship amongst all of us gathered across so many lines of demarcation and separation created by our culture…

This is what I think Jesus the master teacher was trying to get those following him to see that day when he invited them to write poems about their lives using words they never would otherwise have put together…

(And I need to tell you that when the service was over, a member of the Wabanaki Tibal Council gave me this braid of sweetgrass in gratitude for Redeemer Lutheran Church's openness to hosting the memorial service for Louis Bernard… What a perfect morning to have Rob Shetterly's portrait of Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author of "Braiding Sweetgrass," with us)….

Maybe that's what theologian Paul Claudel meant when he said, "In singing God's praise, the world ceases to be a scattered vocabulary, and becomes a poem."

The truth is, Luke 14 is a very challenging text. And we will never stop wrestling with it in our efforts to understand what Jesus was up to when he spoke those impossible words to those who were thinking they might want to be his disciples…

But I do find it helpful to remember that Jesus was a master teacher, and master teachers never let us stay just as we are, content with our new notebooks, our fancy pens and our old ideas… But rather they always ask us to enter unknown territory, and there to explore the ways unlike words and images rub together to generate revelations, to create new possibilities and to make fire…

This is what Jesus is inviting us to do in Luke 14, and indeed throughout all the Gospels… He's asking us to be poets of our lives with the courage to explore possibilities the world cannot imagine and does not appreciate… Yes, possibilities found in the odd juxtaposition of the words in Luke 14… But also possibilities found in the coming together of unlike words such as these…

"Power," "made perfect," in "weakness" + …

"Death," "relinquishment," "fullness of life"…

"Wound," "grief," "blessing"…

"Lost," "found," "me/you"

"Bread of heaven," "Infinite," "This hand, your hand"…

"enemy," "friend," "sister and brother"…

"Salvation," "all of creation," "serpent"…

"Red wheelbarrow," "rain water," "white chickens"…

What words and images are we being asked to wrestle with as we write the poems of our lives dear friends, both as individuals and as a community of faith? Perhaps this is the question of our time as Christians… And while I'm not sure just yet exactly what those words and images will be, I do know that so much depends upon our willingness to become poets of our lives in the name and in the way of Jesus… Amen.