17th Sunday after Pentecost

Philippians 2:1-13 Matthew 21:23-32

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 9-27-20

I know a number of people, including myself, who, in an attempt to discover a bit more about what shaped their lives and made them who they are, have written their own versions of a poem originally written by George Ella Lyon… George Ella Lyon's poem entitled "Where I'm From," one of my favorites, and one I share now and then, going in part, like this…

I am from clothespins,

from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.

I am from the dirt under the back porch.

(Black, glistening

it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush,

the Dutch elm

whose long limbs I remember

as if they were my own.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses,

from Imogene and Alafair.

I'm from the know-it-alls

and the pass-it-ons,

from perk up and pipe down.

I'm from He restoreth my soul

with cottonball lamb

and ten verses I can say myself…

Once, when I tried to write the "Elaine Hewes" version of George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From," some of the lines in my poem went like this…

I am from Swedish coffee bread baked every Saturday morning,

From Church every Sunday morning,

And from practicing the violin every day.

I am from homemade clothes,

From carpenter grandfathers with sawdust in their hair,

From corn fields stretching in every direction,

And from coffee made with water from the house yard spring.

I am from "Stand up straight, act like a lady,

Make your own Christmas gifts,

The hard way is the best way,

Send thank-you notes for everything,

And always go to the funeral."

Any of us could write a thousand lines in our own versions of the poem "Where I'm From." And any of us, in our adult lives, could speak to how some of those lines are still reflected in the ways we see the world and in the ways we live our lives whether we like it or not… Like they are for me for instance, those sayings from my mother about "the hard way being the best way" and "sending thank you notes" and "always going to the funeral" still guiding my life and offering me a kind of "lens" through which I look as I move through my days… connecting me always to the place and the people from where and from whom I've come…

When Matthew told the story about Jesus' contentious encounter with the religious authorities in the temple as recorded in our Gospel text for this morning, I think he was challenging his early Christian community in the last decades of the first century to write their own "**community version**" of George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From" in an effort to get them thinking about how well (or not) their lives reflected the one **from whom they professed to come** and in whom they professed to put their hope and trust…

And Matthew did so by telling a story about the religious authorities of Jesus' day and their total **disconnect** from where they'd supposedly come, namely YHWH, the God who from

the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures was known through the identity markers of justice, mercy, righteousness, and fierce and tender love…

The religious authorities, as Matthew portrayed them in his Gospel, giving lovely "lip service" to YHWH as they observed the letter of the law, worshipped in the Temple, and tried their best to keep everyone else in the Jewish community "in line" with the expectations of both law and tradition… The religious leaders giving lovely "lip service" to the ways of YHWH, while all along their "faith **talk**" and their "faith **walk**" were totally disconnected… making them really good at **impersonating** the ways of YHWH but not very good at **imitating** the ways of YHWH, all because they'd forgotten from where and from whom they'd come…

It was in hopes of reminding his early Christian community **from where and from whom they'd come** that Matthew told this morning's Gospel story, holding up this sparring match between Jesus and the religious leaders as those leaders accosted him with the quintessential question of identity, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Or, in keeping with the poem from George Ella Lyon, "**Who** do you think you are, and **from where have you come** with all your unauthorized, uncertified, and 'unpasteurized' ways of living into and out of the faith of our ancestors, Abraham, Jacob and Isaac?"

The thing is, the religious leaders had had it with Jesus by this point in Matthew's Gospel… Not only had he eaten with sinners, healed on the Sabbath, touched the lepers, challenged the status quo, told puzzling and frustrating stories, and amassed a large number of followers… But, just prior to his entrance into the Temple in our Gospel text for this morning, he'd also overturned the moneychangers' tables in the temple courtyard, totally disparaging the financial system by which the temple benefitted, primarily at the expense of the poor…

The religious leaders had had with Jesus. And so their questions, "By what authority? Who do you think you are? From where have you come?" And Jesus' response,

I am from the One to whom John the Baptist pointed… Do you remember him?... John the Baptist? The one out on the margins of the wilderness, as far from the Temple establishment as possible… The one who wore clothes from the Salvation Army and ate at the soup kitchen… the one who played the saxophone alongside the Jordan River, reaching into a place within himself so raw and rich and deep and true, the sound of it awakened something inside those who gathered on the banks of the river, lifting their heads and hopes from the places of loss and grief and shame and despair in which they found themselves…

That sound… the sound of John the Baptist's saxophone filling the dessert air with music from the heart of YHWH, from the heart of God… a music from the beginning of time, rising with such excruciating beauty, such wrenching sorrow, such aching joy, it made people weep and laugh and know themselves beloved, come from a grace and mercy and love that was theirs forever no matter where they'd been or what they'd done…

That music, said Jesus, inviting them into the water of the Jordan, so they might be immersed in its presence, cleansed by its power, killed by its beauty, and raised to a life in which ***both their talk and their walk*** *might* ***imitate*** *the One from whom they suddenly knew they had come…*

I come from the One to whom John the Baptist pointed," Jesus said to the religious leaders… "Tell me, do you think the baptism into which he invited people was of Divine or human origin? And while you're pondering that question, let me tell you a story about two brothers… One who told his father he would practice his saxophone, but who chose to do other things instead, and the other brother, who said he had other things to do, but ended up practicing his saxophone far into the night, reaching for that music deep inside himself that has sounded from the heart of God since the beginning of time…

"Listen, I'll tell the story to you and let you decide which son did the will of his father… Listen, and then let's talk for a bit about the meaning of the word "hypocrisy."

Matthew told this story to his early Christian community so they would sit down together and write a community version of George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From," and by so doing consider the question of how well (or not) their lives reflected the one from whom they professed to come and in whom they professed to hope and trust, not only in their **talk,** but also in their **walk**…

And the truth is, Matthew poses the same question to us this morning as well… This question of whether we are just **impersonating** the ways of Jesus, or whether we are **imitating** the ways of Jesus, whose life **was** the music rising from the heart of God…

And while it is always tempting to critique the religious leaders of Jesus' day for the ways in which their faith **talk** and their faith **walk** did not cohere, I am reminded of something Mohandas Gandhi said to a group of Christians during the struggle for justice in India… He said, "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." As I am remembering that old question that often lingers at the edges of my mind… This one… "If being a Christian was a capital offense, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

I will tell you right now dear friends, there would not be enough evidence to convict me…

As our Bishops Michael Curry and Elizabeth Eaton are saying, along with other religious leaders in the Christian Church today, "It is time for us to ask how well our faith **talk** and our faith **walk** are cohering… It is time for us to remember the One from whom we have come, and to allow that One to guide our lives…

So… what to do… How to align our faith **talk** with our faith **walk** in keeping with the God **from whom we profess to come** and in whom we profess to hope and trust… **This is the question Matthew lays bare for us today**… And while I feel like I am ill equipped to offer any wisdom in response to the question, three voices are rising rather "saxophone-like" in my heart in this moment even as I struggle with their implications for my life…

The first voice being that of Bishop Curry, who, in the challenging and beautiful address he gave to all of us in the Episcopal Church this week (an address you will find in last Friday's issue of the "Navigator")… Bishop Michael Curry said, "When trying to figure out how to live as a Christian in our world today, put aside the popular question, 'What Would Jesus Do?' and simply ask yourself, 'What **did** Jesus do?' And then go to the four Gospels in our Scriptures that tell the story of Jesus, see what he did, and then… do the same…

We know what those things are… They are the very same things that always drive political and religious leaders mad… things that have to do with welcoming the stranger, dismantling the walls of division, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoner, overturning the systems of oppression that benefit the rich at the expense of the poor, looking to the interests of others over our own, loving the enemy…

"When trying to figure out how to live as a Christian in our world," says Bishop Curry, "read the stories that speak of what Jesus **did** and do the same"…

Secondly there is the voice of Father Brent Was from St. Francis Episcopal Church in Blue Hill who said in his very first sermon delivered to his new community last March, "In living the Christian life we must **follow** our prayers to where they lead us."

I had never heard that before…

I had never heard the challenge to actually **follow** our prayers to where they lead us… Meaning there is more to praying for the hungry, the sick, the poor, the oppressed, the despairing, the "other", the enemy… there is more than just the praying… there is the **staying** with the prayer until we have followed it to the situations and the circumstances and the people for whom we have prayed, and when we arrive, there is the "staying **with**" in the way of Jesus… connecting the **praying** and the **staying** in the same way we are called to connect the **talk** with the **walk** of faith…

On any given Sunday morning, as we pray the Prayers of the People (if we were to accept Father Waas' challenge), what would it mean for us to pray for those on this island who are hungry? For those who are suffering from mental illness or drug addiction or despair? What would it mean for us to pray for those people on our prayer list or for those on the other side of the political divide? What would it mean for us to pray for our creation, suffering to the point of no return from the effects of climate change and greed? What would it mean for us to **stay** with the prayer, following it to where it leads us? What would it mean for the coherence of our faith **talk** and our faith **walk**?

And lastly, always and forever there is the voice of my dear friend Charlie… My unchurched, anti-churched, no-churched friend, who just a few days before she died of breast cancer at the age of 43, told me she had had a vision in which she was out amongst the stars of heaven, and there, felt herself held in a love so real and deep and true and unconditional, she suddenly knew it to be the love from which she had come and the love to which she would return…

Saying in so many words, even as her husband stacked wood for the stove, and her young sons played in the side yard, and the autumn sun slipped behind the Orland hills, and the place where her breasts used to be bore the scars of impending death… Charlie saying to me, even then, in the way of George Ella Lyon,

I am from a love from which I will never be separated…

I am from a love in which I will forever be held…

I am from a love bright as stars in a midnight sky…

*I am from a love from which we have **all** come and to which we **all** will return…*

And what I want to say is that as I wrestle with the question of how to live as a Christian in these times in which we live, I will hold Bishop Curry's voice in my heart, and I will hold Father Waas's voice in my heart… But I will listen day in and day out, from the deepest part of my being, to hear the voice of my dear friend Charlie…

Because she is the one who helps me to remember "where I'm from"… "Where we're from." She is the one whose voice sounds in the desert of my life, rising saxophone-like into the darkness of every midnight sky with a music wrung from the heart of God… a music from the beginning of time, rising with such excruciating beauty, such wrenching sorrow, such aching joy, such fierce and tender love, it actually has a chance of raising me from the dead and getting my whole being, both the **talking** and the **walking**, aligned with the one who **is** the music…

The One who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of human likeness, so that in the darkest of times and places we might know the love from which we've come and the love to which we will return…

The love that even now longs for us to make it known in our beautiful, suffering world, following the one who is the music… Where else can we start our walk as Christians dear friends? Where else but with the love from whom we have come? Where else but here? +