10th Sunday after Pentecost
Jer. 23:23-29 Ps. 82 Lk. 12:49-56
A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes
St. Brendan Episcopal Church 8-17-25

In her book entitled, “Living Color: a Writer Paints Her World,” Natalie Goldberg writes about a realization she had one day while visiting Musee Matisse in Nice, France. On one wall of that museum there was a painting of a large yellow and green arm chair set against a red background. The whole chair could not fit in the picture, so Matisse had painted just part of the chair on the page, leaving the rest to be completed in the viewer’s imagination.

Natalie Goldberg said this painting, with the chair that could not be contained within the borders of a frame or the edge of the canvass, reminded her of a time when she’d been walking through a little town in Southern France and had suddenly come upon a worn-out wooden garage door with chipped turquoise paint… “I could see the orange and white of past coats underneath,” Natalie writes… The door was set in a yellow stucco wall… “This I could paint!” she thought to herself, reaching for her pad of paper and pencils…

But then, as Natalie Goldberg writes of the experience, she says she decided not to paint the door, thinking the paper was too small and the door too big, choosing instead to turn away from the door and continue her walk…

“That mistake haunted me for a long time,” Natalie writes… “That turquoise door had a life of its own and that life wanted me. When I returned to that small town in Southern France some years later, the whole garage had been remodeled. I failed that door, that moment in history. Something wanted to be painted, and I did not heed it…

“‘I could have used the paper I had with me, and done the garage door the way Matisse did the chair,’ I lamented for the

thousandth time as I stood in the Matisse museum years later. Of course I'd squished whole pink Cadillacs into pictures before, but this was not about squishing the garage door in. This was about letting it live bigger than the paper."

Personally, I think this little reflection by Natalie Goldberg should be printed as an introduction to every copy of the Bible. And then periodically throughout the Bible, whenever in our reading of the text we get bogged down in laws, or in fiery passages of judgment, or in language that smacks of Christian exclusivism, there should be little stars that point us back to this same introduction…

Because really, as hard as it is to recognize sometimes, that turquoise garage door set in the yellow stucco wall with its undercoats of orange and white, wanting to live larger than the page, is at the center of every story, every passage, and every page of the Bible. Granted, this is sometimes hard to see…

Like in our Gospel text for this morning when Jesus bursts in on the scene declaring, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!... Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division…"

It's hard to see the turquoise door that wants to live larger than life in this passage. It's hard to see anything past the images of fire and devastation and division between family members. And well we may wonder what in the world is happening… especially because in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel old Zechariah proclaims that Jesus will lead our feet into the way of peace, and in the last chapter of Luke's Gospel the risen Jesus stands before the disciples and says, "Peace be with you."

Meaning Luke's Gospel begins with promises of peace and ends with a proclamation of peace, but here we are in the middle of the Gospel hearing Jesus say he has come not to bring peace but division… Which is why I think there ought to be star at the end of this text leading us back to Natalie Goldberg's introduction

to the Bible, where we are reminded again that there really is a turquoise garage door set in a yellow stucco wall with its undercoats of orange and white, even in this impossible passage from Luke 12, wanting to live bigger than the paper. We just have to look for it…

And really, we wouldn't have to look far. We would only have to look at the numerous stories in Luke's Gospel that show us what Jesus was up against when it came to the religious and political establishments of his day… Both of them setting clear boundaries designating who was "in" and who was "out," who was "worthy" and who was not, who was allowed to benefit from the "system" and who was not, who was deserving of justice and mercy and who was not…

Both the religious and political establishments of Jesus' day intent on maintaining the status quo and keeping everything on the page, in the frame, intact and well-organized according to their specifications, often at the expense of those living on the margins of society.

While Jesus, whose passion for the kingdom or kin-dom of God burned within him, brought every color of the rainbow to the page and declared that the life of faith, rooted in the story of the creating, liberating, fierce and loving God known most deeply in the poetic and prophetic word of the Hebrew Scriptures, is not about fitting everything in the boundaries of the canvass, but about letting the Spirit of God live bigger than the page… spilling out into the world God's justice, God's steadfast love and mercy…

Meaning that when we read in our Gospel text for this morning about Jesus coming with fire, it's the fire of passion for the turquoise door set in the yellow stucco wall with its undercoats of orange and white, otherwise known as the kingdom or kin-dom of God… As it is also about Jesus' passionate intention to burn away anything that would seek to limit or control or tame the movement of that kin-dom in our world…

And if you wonder how letting the picture live larger than the page might cause trouble and divide families, remember the story

of the Prodigal Son, also told in the Gospel of Luke… Remember the total disregard the younger brother had for his father when he took his inheritance and went gallivanting off to the city… Remember how he squandered his inheritance on shameful things… Remember how he woke up one day in a pigsty and recognized the depth of his despair… Remember his return home… Remember his father's joy as he ran off the page of the story to meet his son as he came walking up the driveway… Remember what an astounding story of grace and forgiveness this is, with such prodigal amounts of mercy and love, the page can't hold it all…

And then remember the division such a prodigal amount of mercy caused between the older brother and his father; between the older brother and his younger brother, as the older brother, who had been dutiful and hardworking the whole time, insisted that the house and the farm get squished back on the page again in a way that made sense; in a way that was fair and right and true to expectations…

But the painting Luke held up for his early Christian community to see in this story… the painting Jesus was for the world to see could never hold the whole house, or the whole farm, or the whole Law or the whole religion, or the whole relationship, or the whole future, because everything Jesus painted was about love, and love always lives bigger than the page…

It's in the nature of love to do so. It's in the nature of Jesus to do so, who in turn burned with the passion of the creator, liberator, lover God, who on the first day took brush to paper, and said, "I shall paint a world born of love, which will always and forever live bigger than the page."

The late great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggmann said the church has been entrusted by the creator, redeemer, lover God with a word that looks like a turquoise garage door set in a yellow stucco wall with undercoats of orange and white that

wants to live larger than the page. (Well, he never really said it quite like that, but I think he would have liked the idea.)

Walter Brueggemann did say the church is entrusted with a word that holds the same kind of prodigal love, with undercoats of justice and mercy. It's a very tiny word. Just two letters long… But with all the power necessary to make empires and religious institutions very nervous…

It's the word "or." Actually an "alternative or," which is the very same word the prophets of the Old Testament were called to bring to the halls of power, whether they were the halls of power in Jerusalem or in Babylon. To every hall of power where those in control insisted that the world fit on the page in certain and prescribed ways that were "true to form" as defined by them and their cronies, the prophets would say "**or**"...

So if those in the halls of commerce said, "Those with the most toys win," the prophets would say, "**or** maybe there is some other standard by which to judge the value of our lives…"

If the religious establishment said, "We know who the sinners amongst us are by the friends they keep and the food they eat," the prophets would say, "**or** maybe sin has more to do with pride and arrogance than with following the letter of the law…"

If the financially solvent said, God helps those who help themselves, the prophets would say, "**Or** maybe the extension of one's self to help the orphan and the widow is the way God helps those who can't help themselves."

If the powerful oppressive empire of the day said, "Look! It's clear our gods have triumphed," the prophets would say, **"Or** maybe there is something off the page that you in your limited imaginations can't see… Look! It's a tiny green shoot, and it's coming up from an old stump right now… or is that a tomb?"

The prophets always carried the alternative little word "or" in their hearts, and got right up into the faces of those in power with that fiery little word on their lips, in their songs, and in their paintbrushes… As did Jesus… even knowing what the

consequences of bringing that word to the world would be… even knowing the division it would bring as people either insisted on keeping the picture within the borders of the page or dared imagine something that could live bigger…

As Christians, as Christ ones, we are entrusted with that little, subversive, beautiful, dangerous, bigger-than-the-page word "or." Sometimes I wish it wasn't so. Sometimes I wish Jesus would just stay within the limits of the page, because it's easier and safer that way… Sometimes I wish we could just settle for the Jesus the Church has tried to make him into over the centuries… The nice Jesus. The sweet Jesus. The one who loves us just the way we are, and lets us stay just the way we are…

Truth be told, I can't tell you how many times I've chosen that nice Jesus, putting the alternative little "or" in the back of my desk drawer, and turning my back on the turquoise door set in the yellow stucco wall with its undercoats of orange and white… the one with a life of its own, just waiting to be painted right off the borders of the canvass…

But I will also tell you that I'm wondering these days what it would look like to bring the paintbrush of God's kin-dom, God's "alternative or" to those in the halls of power in our own day… I'm wondering what it would look like to bring that fiery little word to the systems, the policies, the plots and plans that benefit the guys in power at the expense of those who live on the margins… I think Jesus is calling us to take this question seriously… daring us even, to follow him off the page…

No doubt it would be messy… No doubt there would be so much off the page we wouldn't be able to control it all…No doubt we'd look foolish and do lots of things wrong…No doubt we'd wish now and then that we'd never picked up the paintbrush… No doubt there would be no ending to the story that had anything to do with glory and triumph and success…

Because that's not where Jesus leads us. Jesus leads us to the turquoise door with its undercurrents of orange and white set

in the yellow stucco wall that wants to be bigger than the page, and says, “well?”

Sometimes we will say “no” for good reasons… Sometimes it just won’t be our door to paint. But sometimes it will be… Sometimes the door we are being called to paint will be in Augusta or Washington DC… Sometimes it will be close to home, or even in our own families as the events of life feel like they are closing in around us due to illness, death, depression, anxiety…

But the good news is that the God of prodigal love will always be opening our eyes and hearts and hands to see that there is an “alternative or” to the powers that seek to diminish, limit, prescribe, and control our days and nights… an “alternative or” that invites us into a life lived in the off-the-page-out-of-the-box kingdom of God, where all of creation is held in the spirit of shalom, justice, and peace, no exceptions…

The good news is that no matter how small and constricted the page of our lives may be in this moment, the God of prodigal love is whispering a word into each of our ears that passes all understanding, and saying…

Here is the love +
Here is the word +
Here is the paintbrush+
Here is the page *(gesture outward)*
Be not afraid…
For I am with you through it all…