Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Jer. 23:1-6 Ps. 23 Eph. 2:11-22 Mark 6:30-56

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church July 21, 2024

When Michael and I were in Berlin in May, we attended Sunday worship on the morning when the Evangelical Church of Germany (which is historically Lutheran), was commemorating the Barmen Declaration, which, as you may know, was a document written by a group of Church leaders in Germany in 1934 to help Christians withstand the challenges of the so-called "German Christians," a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideas of Hitler's National Socialism.

The Barmen Declaration, written primarily by Karl Barth, but with contributions from others in what became known as the "Confessing Church", was cast in the classical form of the great confessions of faith, affirming major Biblical teachings and condemning those who were attempting to accommodate Christianity to the ideals, the aspirations and the goals of the Third Reich.

The Sunday Michael and I attended worship in Berlin was the 90th anniversary of the Barmen Declaration, and so the Bishop of the Evangelical Church in Berlin, Bishop Christian Staeblein gave the sermon… in German, of course… which means neither Michael or I could understand a word of what he said…

But we listened anyway… and as Bishop Staeblein's sermon went on, I kept hearing something that sounded to my ears very much like the English phrase, "mind the gap," which is the phrase used in the UK

to warn rail passengers to take caution while crossing the spatial gap between the train doorway and the station platform edge. "Mind the gap," the recorded message declares every time the train doors open… Cautioning people to be mindful… to pay attention… to see the gap before them…

Again and again in Bishop Staeblein's sermon I kept hearing what sounded like "mind the gap," and so, when worship was over, I asked my German Lutheran pastor friend Christiane, who was with us that morning, what the German word was that the bishop kept using in his sermon that sounded like the English phrase, "mind the gap," and she laughed, and said it wasn't a German word at all, but was exactly what I thought I had heard, in English…

"A warning," my friend said, issued by Bishop Christian Staeblein in this day, to those of us who profess to be Christian, to "mind the gap" between the faith we profess and the allegiances and the decisions we make… Recalling the way the "German Christians" in the 1930's so easily accommodated their faith to Hitler's agenda, my friend continued, Bishop Staeblein was cautioning all those in worship that morning, some 90 years later, to be mindful of the gap that can so easily form between the faith we claim to be central to our lives and the accommodations we make to the cultural and political forces around us… Sometimes even using the images, language and teachings of our faith tradition to further the cause of those same cultural and political forces…

As my friend explained to us after worship, Bishop Staeblein was indeed using the English phrase, "mind the gap" to caution all of us that morning to pay attention, "because," as he warned, "we have seen what can happen when we don't."

While Bishop Staeblein's warning to his fellow Christians to "mind the gap" that morning was related in part to a growing political movement in Germany that espouses some of the views of the Third Reich, particularly its adherence to the "inferiority" of those not of "Aryian" descent, I share his "mind the gap" image with you this morning, not only because I think it's an important image for us to consider in the cultural and political climate in which we find ourselves, but also because it just so happens that all our texts this morning caution their readers to "mind the gap" between the faith they profess and the decisions and allegiances they make in their everyday lives…

Our text from Jeremiah, for example, is a condemnation in the 6th century BCE of four Judean kings in particular and of corrupt monarchs, chosen to lead the People of Israel, in general… The prophet in essence crying out against these power-hungry, self-aggrandizing, arrogant and greedy rulers, "Mind the gap between the God in whose name you profess to rule… the God of justice and righteousness… the God whose compassion for God's people is intended to set the standard for all those called to shepherd the flock… Mind the gap between the God in whose name you profess to rule and the way you actually do so…"

And our text from Ephesians, written to early Christian faith communities in the last third of the first century still struggling with the question of how to include Gentiles into a story and a community rooted in Judaism, declares to those who have historically been at odds with one another, "Mind the gap you may be tempted to create between the God whose dream it is to make all things one, and those who are different from you…the God in whom are things are reconciled through the cross, breaking down all dividing walls and gathering those

both near and far into one body…. Mind the gap you may be tempted to make between the God of reconciliation and those you consider to be 'outside' the reach of God's steadfast love and mercy."

And in our Gospel text from Mark, (especially with the addition of the story of the feeding of the 5,000), in which we see the disciples eager to celebrate Jesus' miraculous deeds of compassion and healing, but less eager to invest themselves in such endeavors… (A tendency we see in the disciples when Jesus tells **them** to feed the hungry crowd, and the disciples say in essence, "Who, us? However are we supposed to do that? How about you work a miracle and do it instead?")

In this text, were we to probe deep enough, we might hear Mark say to his readers, whether they be in the first or the 21st century, "Mind the gap between the Jesus you profess to worship and the Jesus you tend to follow… Mind the gap so easily erected between loving Jesus and loving those whom Jesus loves…"

Truly, in keeping with the message that runs through all of our lessons for this morning, we might call this "Mind the Gap Sunday." Which in print and in theory has a kind of "can-do" "up-beat" feel to it…

But really, were we (or, speaking for myself), was I to truthfully be mindful of the gap between the faith I profess and the allegiances and decisions I make on a daily basis, that gap would more aptly be called a "chasm"… And if I was to truthfully mind the gap between the way I claim to love Jesus and the way I love those whom Jesus loves… Well, there wouldn't be much of a "can-do" "up-beat" sense about it at all…

Both Bishop Christian Staeblein and our texts for this morning call us to “mind the gap” between the faith we profess and the allegiances and decisions we make in our daily lives…

Okay… So, let’s say we do it… And let’s say we are actually as honest as we can possibly be about the gaps (or the chasms) we see…

What I want to know, is now what? How do we tend to those gaps? How do we narrow the distance between them so that the faith we profess is in keeping with and reflective of the God of creation, liberation, justice, mercy, compassion and love… the God made known most profoundly and most fully in Jesus?

This is perhaps, a question for a lifetime. And I will tell you that I have no easy or definitive answers… But, oddly and wonderfully enough, I think our Psalm for this morning offers two very helpful insights… And in order for me to say how this is, I will go by way of a story…

It’s a story about a party that took place long ago in a big English country house. After dinner everyone at the party met in the drawing room to give recitations, sing, and use whatever talent they had to entertain one another. One of the guests was a famous actor, and when it was his turn to perform, he recited the 23rd Psalm…

His rendition was magnificent, and there was much applause. At the end of the evening someone noticed a little old great aunt dozing in the corner. She was deaf as a post and had missed most of what was going on, but she was urged to get up and recite something. In those days people used to memorize a lot of poetry. So she stood up, and in her quavery old voice she started, “The Lord is my shepherd,” and went on to the end of the psalm. When she finished there were tears in many eyes.

Later one of the guests approached the famous actor. "You recited the psalm absolutely superbly," the man said to the actor. "It was incomparable. So why were we so moved by that funny, little old lady?"

And the actor replied, "I know the Psalm. She knows the shepherd."

The truth is, there is very little chance that we can follow in the way of Jesus without coming to know him… And by that, I mean coming to know how he extends the love and mercy of God across the chasms and gaps and wounds and screw-ups and regrets and messes we've made of our lives…

How he comes, as a shepherd, crossing the divides we have made between ourselves and the sacred presence we know as God, and there, in the gap, in the chasm, with infinite care and compassion, he gives himself, placing into our hands the bread of heaven, the cup of salvation, saying, "Take and eat. Take and drink. This is my incarnate, fleshy, earthy, crucified and risen presence, given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

How can we come to know the love of God Jesus bears to the world and to each of us if we don't spend time opening ourselves to his presence? No wonder Jesus spent so much time going off by himself in prayer… Just as he tried to do in our Gospel text for this morning… Not only modeling for us perhaps, the practice that lives at the heart of our faith, but acknowledging that he too needed to remember the Love from which he had come and the Love to which he would return… Because in the animosity and violence and vitriol of this world, it is so easy to forget…

The Lord is **my** shepherd… Perhaps when trying to "mind the gap" between the faith we profess and the allegiances and decisions we make, this is the place to begin… with the assurance of a relationship already given, a hand already extended, a love already having crossed the great divide… a love present in every here and every now, waiting for us to sense it, to know it, to take it in, and to let it shape our lives…

And then there is also this to remember about the 23rd Psalm… While it has primarily been used as a Psalm of comfort over the centuries (as it most certainly was for my mother when she was dying of ALS), it was written, at least in part, to impart a political message in the face of the empire of the day… This message, "The LORD is my shepherd… The creator, liberator, redeemer Lord… Not Pharoah, not Nebuchadnezzar, not Caesar, not George Washington, not Adolph Hitler, not Barak Obama, not Donald Trump, not Joe Biden…

"But the Lord… the God of steadfast love and mercy… the God whose passion for justice and equality and inclusion and life-abundant is intended for all of God's children and all of creation… The God whose kingdom is not the 'empire of the day'… not Egypt, not Rome, not Great Britain, not even the United States of America… but the kind-dom of God, where the clearest identity marker of its presence is known in compassion and reconciliation, inclusion, justice for all, and accompanying suffering love...

The **Lord** is my shepherd… this one + and no other…

I know there is an unwritten rule in the Church that says, "Thou shalt not speak of politics." And if that means "Thou shalt not

preference Democrats over Republicans or Red States over Blue States, I totally agree…

But if speaking truth to power is political, then Jesus was political… If advocating for the marginalized and the disenfranchised was political, then Jesus was political… If challenging the leadership in both religious and civic life was political, then Jesus was political… If insisting that all people, no matter their ethnic background, their sexual orientation, their religious beliefs, or their skin color are worthy of respect and dignity, then Jesus was political…

It's just that he wasn't partisan… He didn't hitch his star to any political party, but invited everyone to the table, and there, fed them all, and then said, "Now let me tell you about the kingdom, the kin-dom of God. Let me tell you about the dream, the vision of God…

"And then, let me tell you how you might share this dream and live this dream in a world that won't take to it kindly… Let me tell you how you might be sustained for the work that has a cruciform shape, as you go down into the complexities, the ambiguities and the animosities of the day with your hands, you eyes and your heart wide open…"

This is the invitation extended to us every day of our lives, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… in the context of our family, our community, our nation and our world… The invitation to participate in the unfolding of the kingdom of God, where a shepherd king is Lord and where compassion is at the heart of it all… "He had compassion for them," it says in our Gospel text for this morning… "Compassion"…

Just as he has for us, even as we acknowledge the gap that keeps showing up between the faith we profess and the allegiances and decisions we make in our everyday lives… Even there, in the gap, Jesus

extends the love of God, and says, “Fear not. I have called you by name. You are mine… Now follow me.”

May we do so, dear ones… Gaps and all… May we follow Jesus into the suffering, the darkness and the hatred brewing all around us in this fragile, beautiful world… and may we bear the love of God as best we can… as if the world depends upon it, because, as I so often say, it does…

The 1934 Barmen Declaration was a call to resistance against the theological claims of the Nazi state. Almost immediately after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, Protestant Christians faced pressure to "aryanize" the Church, expel Jewish Christians from the ordained ministry and adopt the Nazi "Führer Principle" as the organizing principle of church government. In general, the churches succumbed to these pressures, and many Christians embraced them willingly. The pro-Nazi "German Christian" movement became a force in the church. They glorified Adolf Hitler as a "German prophet" and preached that racial consciousness was a source of revelation alongside the Bible. But some Christians in Germany—including Lutheran and Reformed, liberal and neo-orthodox—opposed the encroachment of Nazi ideology on the Church's proclamation. At Barmen, this emerging "Confessing Church" adopted a declaration drafted by Reformed theologian Karl Barth and Lutheran theologian Hans Asmussen, which expressly repudiated the claim that other powers apart from Christ could be sources of God's revelation.

IN VIEW OF THE ERRORS of the "German Christians" and of the present Reich Church Administration, which are ravaging the Church and at the same time also shattering the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

1. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me." *John 14:6*

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved." *John 10:1,9*

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.

2. "Jesus Christ has been made wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption for us by God." *1 Cor. 1:30*

As Jesus Christ is God's comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with equal seriousness, he is also God's vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life. Through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

3. "Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together." *Eph. 4:15-16*

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.

4. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to have authority over you must be your servant." *Matt. 20:25-26*

The various offices in the Church do not provide a basis for some to exercise authority over others but for the ministry [lit., "service"] with which the whole community has been entrusted and charged to be carried out.

We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could, and could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders [*Führer*] vested with ruling authority.

5. "Fear God. Honor the Emperor." *1 Pet. 2:17*

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Dominion [*Reich*], God's commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfil the vocation of the Church as well.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State.

6. "See, I am with you always, to the end of the age." *Matt. 28:20* **"God's Word is not fettered."** *2 Tim. 2:9*

The Church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self- chosen desires, purposes and plans.

The Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a confederation of Confessing Churches. It calls upon all who can stand in solidarity with its Declaration to be mindful of these theological findings in all their decisions concerning Church and State. It appeals to all concerned to return to unity in faith, hope and love.

Verbum Dei manet in aeternum.
The Word of God will last for ever.