13th Sunday after Pentecost

Deut. 30:15-20 Ps. 1 Phil. 1-21 Luke 14:25-33

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 9-8-19

When one of my dear friends, Dr. Pamela Shellberg, introduces the letters of Paul in her New Testament classes, she always begins by inviting her students to read a book by author and illustrator Nick Bantock entitled “Griffin and Sabine: An Extraordinary Correspondence.” The book is actually the first in a series of three made up exclusively of fanciful postcards and letters exchanged between two fictional characters; one, a man named Griffin Moss who lives in London, and the other, a woman named Sabine Strohem who lives in the small town of Katie located somewhere in the Sicum Islands in the South Pacific. Both characters are artists. Griffin designs postcards. Sabine designs stamps.

The three books that chronicle their correspondence are beguiling and evocative, in part because they give the reader the delightful and forbidden sensation of reading someone else’s mail…. And in part because each piece of correspondence includes either a fantastically decorated postcard or a letter in an envelope that the reader has the joy of removing in order to read…. And in part because from the very first piece of correspondence you know that Griffin, the recipient of that first postcard, will be invited into a world he has never before imagined….

In this case a world brought about by the revelation that Sabine, whom Griffin has never met, and who lives thousands of miles from him, has for years been able to see what he draws and paints *while* he is doing it. In other words, as she tells him in their third piece of correspondence, “I share your sight.”

Imagine being Griffin for a moment, and in the seclusion of your own art studio in London creating a postcard with a picture of a fish and a cup, and then deciding to erase that cup and replace it with a sketch of an exploding wine glass….. Only to receive in the mail a few days later, from a strange woman named Sabine, who lives thousands of miles away, a postcard that says, *“Griffin Moss, It’s good to get it touch with you at last. Could I have one of those fish postcards? I think you were right – the wine glass has more impact than the cup. Sabine Strohem P.O. Box 1 Katie, Sicmon Islands. South Pacific.”*

So begins an extraordinary correspondence that invites Griffin into a whole new world, and along with him, the reader, who, while reading the mail he receives and the mail he writes, is drawn into a love story, a mystery, a possibility that what is seen on the surface of things is not all there is to see….

Which is exactly why Dr. Pam Shellberg uses the books about Griffin and Sabine to introduce the letters of Paul. “Because,” as she tells her students, “when we read Paul’s letters we are doing the same thing…. We are reading someone else’s mail; mail that tells a love story, a tale of mystery; mail that invites us, along with the recipients of Paul’s letters, to enter a world that is not all that meets the eye.”

Whoever knew Paul’s letters could be anything but boring and didactic? Who knew they could be evocative, interesting, compelling, mysterious, inviting, leading readers of the first century and those like us, who centuries later find ourselves reading someone else’s mail, into a world beyond all imagining?

Like a certain letter Paul wrote while imprisoned for his work on behalf of the Gospel…. A letter written to Philemon, a relatively well-to-do convert of Paul’s who, it seems, had had a serious and irreparable altercation with his slave Onesimus….

As the story goes, Onesimus, having fled Philemon’s household after the altercation, made his way to Paul in prison, where he spent time with him, and while there converted to Christianity. And so Paul, having come to love Onesimus as a father would love a son, decided to write Philemon a letter….

Which, in keeping with Dr. Pam Shellberg’s method of engaging her students in the text, I have taken the liberty of *rewriting*, somewhat in the style of “Griffin and Sabine” with a few back-and-forths between Paul and Philemon, imagining, to begin, that Philemon is sitting one late afternoon at his kitchen table….

**Imagine**…. There are places set for others in his early Christian community, who will be arriving soon to share in prayer and scripture-reading and the breaking of bread, including the unlikely table-mates Apphia, a “sister” in the community, and Archippus, a soldier…..

The sun is setting, and the light of late afternoon is softening the edges of the room. Philemon, while aware of the cultural and political forces that are at odds with Christianity and ever-ready to flex their powerful muscles, never-the-less feels a sense of inner peace….a sense of satisfaction that he has the resources to house a Christian community…. that he has done what he can for the faith he has come to love, and at least for the moment, is keeping everything in good working order…. (“Paul would be grateful,” Philemon says to himself. “I know he would be grateful.”)

And then there is a knock on the door, and in comes one of Paul’s co-workers, carrying a postcard from Paul, sent from prison. On one side is the oddest drawing of Philemon in a small dark room…. high up on one of the walls of the room is a tiny little sliver of a window, letting in just a single ray of light which is resting just perfectly on the top of Philemon’s head. On the other side of the postcard, in Paul’s handwriting is this message:

*To Philemon my friend,*

*My love I send,*

*longing to see*

*That you are set free.*

*Your brother in Christ,*

*Paul*

Philemon is taken back. It’s Paul who’s in prison; not him…. Whatever could Paul mean, “longing to see that you are set free?” And so, taking out a piece of his best stationery, Philemon draws a picture of himself sitting at the table waiting for the rest of the community to arrive. He is careful to draw the place-cards he has set around the table, with everyone’s name included. He even makes a few blank place-cards to show that he is open to new and unexpected arrivals… On the other side of the paper he writes,

*“But I am not bound,*

*My world is quite sound.*

*I’m keeping things running*

*Till the day of your coming…*

*Are you sure that it’s me*

*Who needs to be freed?*

*Your brother in Christ,*

*Philemon*

A week later, still wondering what Paul meant in that first postcard, Philemon is sitting in a chair, lost in thought, when a second piece of correspondence from Paul arrives. This time it’s a letter. On the outside of the envelope is a sketch of a single piece of barbed wire. A flower seems to push up through the wire in one place, breaking it open…. On the paper are written these words:

*The walls of your heart*

*Are the chains that must part.*

*Gates open wide,*

*Onesimus….. inside,*

*No longer the “other,”*

*But rather, your brother….*

Philemon, using the hard dark strokes of pen on paper, furiously interposes images one upon another that have no normal, sensible spaces in common, all of those images helter-skelter upon the page until they are almost indiscernible…. Heaven and hell, enemy and friend, hurt and heart, wound and blessing, Jew and Gentile, slave and slave owner, other and brother….

And then in the midst of all these chaotic images he scrawls these words across the page,

*This is Eden you’re asking,*

*An impossible tasking*

*To take what is “other”*

*And name him “my brother”….*

*How could it be*

*That you’re asking of me*

*To make in the not, in the knot*

*Of the burl,*

*An impossible rising*

*Into a new world?*

*This is Eden you’re asking,*

*An impossible tasking…*

*I am spent. In distress.*

*With no way to say “yes.”*

Day fades into night. It is late. Philemon is lying in his bed. Everything is dark. Pitch dark…. And then he sees slowly spread across his bed letters, written in moonlight. He sits up and reads,

*Already Eden,*

*Already “brother,”*

*Already Love has made of the other*

*A oneness in Christ, in the waters of grace,*

*Divisions disbanded, and left in their place*

*The image of God on everyone’s face.*

*So take heart, my dear friend,*

*For the not in the knot*

*of the cold hardened burl*

*Is already Eastered*

*Into a new world.*

*So you, my dear friend,*

*May arise with the blessing*

*Already spent*

*in Love’s Prodigal “yessing.”*

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

I’m not totally certain Paul would appreciate my re-write of his letter to Philemon. I think Dr. Pamela Shellberg would. (I know Dr. Suess would). Nor do I know what Philemon’s response would be in the end, as we don’t know from Paul’s letter if Philemon ever received Onesimus back into the household; into the community of faith, no longer as a slave, but as a brother…. I don’t know if he “*arose with the blessing already spent in Love’s Prodigal ‘yessing,’”….* into that strange new world he had never before imagined, where one’s place in the community is determined not by race or class or gender or strength, but by love’s infinite measure.

I don’t know if Philemon was freed from his bondage to “what was” in order to live into “what could be” by the power of love…. But I do know that as one who has read the correspondence between Paul and Philemon; as one who has entered that strange world through those first lines of Paul’s letter, written by the one in prison and sent to the one sitting at his kitchen table, saying, *“I am longing to see that you are set free”…..*

As one who has read that one lineI am faced with the same unsettling assessment of my own situation while sitting at my own kitchen table…. And with it the same choice as Philemon…. to enter a world that beckons me beyond the limitations of my own heart, my own imagination, my own narrow definitions of who is “other” and who is “brother”…. I am faced with the same decision to rise *with the blessing already spent in Love’s Prodigal “yessing”…. Or not….*

“Postcards from Paul” we might call them…. Collected in our Holy Scriptures so we might read “other people’s mail,” and by so doing choose to enter into a story of love, a tale of mystery that opens us into a new world, a new kingdom, where “what could be” by the power of Love’s **already is**….

*A oneness in Christ, in the waters of grace, divisions disbanded, and left in their place the image of God’s on everyone’s face….*

I received a similar “postcard” once…. Not so different from the ones Paul sent to Philemon or Sabine sent to Griffin…. A piece of correspondence that asked me to make a choice between staying in the hard cold burl of the not, of the knot, or rising into love’s infinite measure.

I always remember this postcard this time of year as Summer fades into Autumn, and we catch the last blush of blossoms on the bush. It was an afternoon late in an Illinois September. I had had an irreparable break in a relationship with a very dear friend. We had hurt one another deeply, and I had formed around my heart one of those hard cold burls of a knot so I could not let her in, ever again….

But then late on this particular afternoon in September, after an early frost, there appeared on my desk what had to have been the last rose of summer. And with it a small piece of paper that simply said, “Love, Jane.”

Did you know a rose could be a postcard? A letter? Did you know such a piece of correspondence can actually force you to have to make a decision between the hard cold burl of the not, of the knot, and love’s “infinite measure? Did you know a delicate rose could back you into a corner, lift your chin, look you in the eye and say, “Well?”

Maybe that’s why one theologian has said the entire Bible is a love letter…. A collection of stories and poems and images and postcards intended to lift our chins, look us in the eye and say, “Well?” (Reminding me of the time when a parishioner, curious about which translation of the Bible we were using for our Sunday readings said to me, “Pastor Elaine, we’re using the RSVP, right?” My parishioner confusing the NRSV, which stands for the “New Revised Standard Version” with the letters often included at the end of invitations indicating the courtesy of a response… *Respondez si’l vous plait…”* Pastor Elaine, we’re using the RSVP, right?”) Well… yes…

It’s what Moses was doing in our first lesson for this morning when he set before his people the choice of living by God’s commandments or not, which Moses said was also a choice between life or death…. It’s what Jesus was doing as he turned to the crowds of people who were following him in our Gospel lesson and spoke those impossible words about hating your family, and carrying the cross, and giving up all your possessions if you want to become his disciple.... (Jesus’ call in this text not being a mandate to hate the people in one’s family or the gifts of one’s life, but rather to “hate” the way the culture had made of the family unit and the values and allegiances of everyday life a small, restrictive, judgmental set of practices whereby a few people were considered “brother” and all the rest “other;” Jesus’ call offering instead a kingdom, a “kin-dom” where walls were turned on their sides to make tables to which everyone was invited… “Hate the walls,” Jesus says, “and build the tables.”)

You know what Jesus was doing in our challenging Gospel text for this morning, don’t you? He was going person to person handing each one a postcard. On one side of that postcard was a picture of the last rose of summer… On the other side were these words from Leo Tolstoy…. *“There are many reasons for the failure to comprehend Christ’s teaching….but the chief cause which has engendered all these misconceptions is this: that Christ’s teaching is considered to be such as can be accepted, or not accepted, without changing one’s life.”*

Well? *Respondez Si’l vous plait…*

We Episcopalians and Lutherans don’t talk about “making the decision for Jesus” all that often…. Because, as we are apt to say, God in Christ Jesus has made the decision *for* us…. But all of our lessons for this morning are postcards, letters, brought to our mailboxes, left on our desks, put into our hands…. They are all of them the last rose of summer…. They are all of them drawings of each of us in small dark rooms…. high up on one of the walls of those rooms is a tiny little sliver of a window, letting in just a single ray of light which is resting just perfectly on the top of each of our heads. On the other side of the postcard, in Jesus’ handwriting is this message:

*To you my friend,*

*My love I send,*

*longing to see*

*That you are set free.*

And then it is our decision whether or not we stay bound in the hard cold burl of the knot, of the not, or if we rise into the blessing of Love’s radical “yessing.” Love’s infinite measure…. From where we see reflected in the face of Onesimus, in the face of Jane, in the face of the one sitting next to us, and in the face of the one on the other side of the border, the tracks, the aisle…the face of Christ…

Which is all well and good to consider in church on a Sunday morning, and so much harder to rise into out there on a Monday afternoon. You know… when someone has cut you off in traffic, and you can’t figure out what to make for dinner, and your grown child is crying on the telephone, and the dog has died, and the cancer is back, and it’s raining again, and you know you’re going home to your beautiful house while half the world is starving, and the president is coming up with yet one more way of demonizing immigrants….

Well?

How exactly does one *arise with the blessing already spent in Love’s Prodigal “yessing?”*  How exactly does one rise into Love’s infinite measure on Monday afternoon? How does one *respondez* in the way of Jesus*?*

I’m not sure. Except to take the letter out of the envelope again. To unfold the letter and read it again. To take the postcard and read it again. To remind yourself again and again and again that in the “extraordinary correspondence between you and God,” there is that always that little ray of light coming through the window…. There is always the flower pushing up through the barbed wire…. There is always the rose left on your desk…. The bread placed into your hand…. The water poured over your head… The cross marked upon your brow…. The hand of a friend on your shoulder…. The word of forgiveness spoken into your ear…. The clarity of stars in a September sky…. The sound of congregational singing…. The possibility of God’s kingdom come, already here…. The presence of mystery in the silence of this moment… *(long pause)*

There are always these things, every single one of them addressed to you, “Beloved Child of God,” with that beautiful word of invitation written inside,

*To you my friend,*

*My love I send,*

*longing to see*

*That you are set free.*

“Well?” *Respondez si’l vous plait…*

*Love, God*