14th Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 6:10-20

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church August 25, 2024

What a joy it is for us to be baptizing Henry Leander Michael Cornelius Brokordt this morning, for any number of reasons… Firstly, given the age of most of us at St. Brendan, we don't have the opportunity to witness many infant baptisms… Matter of fact, the last baptism we celebrated was just over five years ago, which happened to be the first worship service Henry's mother Chelsea attended at St. Brendan… Her experience with us that Sunday being the beginning of a relationship that has continued, as Chelsea has worshipped with us whenever she has ventured from her home in the Cincinnati area to our neck of the woods for a little "Maine fix"…

Of course it's also a blessing for us to consider again what our baptisms mean for our own lives… Especially because those of us who grew up in the church decades ago were mostly led to see this sacrament through a "doctrinal" lens… a "must-do" for salvation that didn't have much to do with our lives in the here and now…

Which is why it's been my practice over the years, on baptism Sundays, to do two things… One, is to open the possibility of our seeing baptism in a less "dogmatic" way than we are accustomed to seeing it… And the other is to give the newly baptized child a few gifts that speak to the meaning of baptism for the child's life in all the days and months and years to come… And so helping us as well to consider what it means to live as baptized people in the times and places in which we live…

So first, a little different way of seeing baptism, using a prose/poem that seeks to speak from inside the water itself…

Baptism has had a very hard time her entire life getting people to understand who she truly is. Most people want to restrict her to small, cold, metal bowls and stick her in fonts in dark corners of churches where they put her for safe-keeping, only to bring her out for what tradition has said is her one and only reason for being, which (as tradition says) is for the purpose of making sure people go to heaven when they die.

This grieves baptism deeply. Because in truth she knows herself to be as breath-takingly beautiful as a young girl brushing her hair in the light of a summer morning, and as terrifyingly breath-taking as the first warm wind of Spring come sweeping across a North Dakota farm….

Baptism wears stars in her hair,

and sings duets with whales.

She skinny dips on warm summer nights,

and in the winter she ice skates under

the crescent moon,

the blades of her skates leaving looping

letters on the frosty ice,

where later, when only the stars are looking, those letters make words and poems that speak of love.

Baptism is partial to buckets used for Spring

cleaning.

She looks everywhere she goes

for bowlfuls of prodigal peonies

floating fulsome

on kitchen tables,

and for puddles on sidewalks reflecting

rainbows after rain.

She is known to visit sickbeds in

blue plastic hospital cups,

and is not afraid of being

reduced to tears.

Baptism knows no boundaries,

and the hem of her dress laps on every shore.

Sometimes when people are so sad they

hardly know what to do,

Baptism sings sustaining songs.

Sometimes when people are angry

and mean,

she knits them a new pair

of handmade socks,

deep blue angora, soft as down,

speckled with the

golden phosphorescence

of a midnight sea.

And sometimes, when people are hard of heart

and narrow of vision,

she takes out her saxophone and plays

a little Thelonious Monk, bringing folks

to the edges, "where things spill into

each other, and become

their opposites"….

Where they learn how to look at

things inside and out,

and to ask questions of

"time, depth, and balance,

Instead of looking for answers."

This is her hardest and most important work.

Which is why Baptism

sometimes comes accompanied by

wind and fire….

Why she sometimes burns,

like fire burns the jack-pine seed

coated with resin,

to break him open

and send him greening and

careening from his tomb,

and why she is so grieved when people

reduce her location to small metal bowls

and her vocation to making sure people

go to heaven when they die…

Because of course, she knows the

movement of love from the inside

of things,

and how even now Easter threatens to

come sweeping across a North Dakota

farm…

And which is why, despite all efforts

to send her back to baptismal fonts

in dark church corners,

she is getting out her saxophone and

getting ready to raise,

right here,

right now…

getting ready to raise

a little…

heaven…

I am indebted to a poet named Ruth J. Gendler for a few lines in this baptismal prose-poem, although she wrote them not to speak about baptism, but about wisdom… specifically the lines about things *"spilling into each other and becoming their opposites,"* and "*looking at things inside and out," and "asking questions of time, depth, and balance, instead of looking for answers."*

The thing is, despite what we may have learned about baptism in Sunday School, this sacrament at the heart of our faith was never intended to be an insurance policy for getting into heaven when we die, but rather an invitation to live a certain kind of life… here, now… and in every here and now in which we find ourselves, **trusting that the love of God in which we were baptized holds us and keeps us here and now and forever more…**

At the heart of it, baptism prepares us to live a certain kind of life. And in order for me to speak of what kind of life this is… what kind of life little Henry is being baptized into this morning, I will go by way of three gifts I am giving him on behalf of the St. Brendan community, using this morning's text from Ephesians as a guide, particularly the author's use of the "whole armor of God" as he seeks to equip folks in first century Christian communities to withstand the wiles of the devil and the spiritual forces of evil in their own day… (Strong, strange language you will recognize in the baptismal liturgy in just a few moments)…

Just as the writer of Ephesians fashions certain articles of clothing for Christians to wear as they live out their faith in the world, so too will I give Henry three things to wear as he "puts on the love of God in Christ Jesus" in his baptism…

First of all, I'm giving Henry the "Helmet of Wholly-ness" (from the world "whole"… w-h-o-l-e), as in "expansive, inclusive" *(I hold up a child's sun-hat)*… A "helmet" of many colors and shapes to affirm that the love of God in which he is baptized this morning is a love that was, from the beginning, intended for all of creation, as God breathed God's very spirit, God's very breath, into the chaos and nothingness to bring life from death and light from darkness, and calling God's children to bear God's creating, liberating, saving spirit into all the world… no exceptions…

Despite what we may have learned in Sunday School, baptism doesn't declare us more "holy", as in "holier than thou," or "more beloved than the rest," but rather "loved so wholly and completely we can dare to live wholly and completely from that love in the ordinary moments of our own lives, trusting that the hem of God's presence laps on every shore, even in places where "things spill into each other and become their opposites," and in places as unlikely as wash buckets, plastic hospital cups, puddles, and tears…

We give Henry the "helmet of wholly-ness" to remind him that his baptism equips him to live a life in that same expansive and unboundaried spirit of love…

Secondly, we give him the "breastplate of belonging"… (in this case a bib, with the words, "Henry, child of God" hand-stitched in a heart and surrounded by stars, moon, flora, fauna and the mighty waters of the river of life)…

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor says it best perhaps when she says that the life of faith isn't about "believing" certain credal formulations, but about "belonging"… about knowing ourselves as

“belonging” **to** Christ, “belonging” **inside** the embrace of God’s unconditional grace and love…

Truly, what could provide a greater sense of connectedness to the heart and presence of God than the proclamation the congregation will speak right after Henry is baptized this morning as the community declares to Henry, still dripping with water from the river of life, “You **belong** to Christ, in whom you have been baptized.”

Of course, this “belonging” in the embrace of God’s love is not dependent upon baptism… No one is excluded from this “belonging” unless they choose to be excluded… (And even then I’m not so sure that this love doesn’t knit such people a new pair of handmade socks, deep blue angora, soft as down, speckled with the golden phosphorescence of a midnight sea, in hopes that they might put them on and come to know their belovedness in the eyes and in the heart of God)…

Belonging in the embrace of God’s love is not dependent upon baptism… It’s just that baptism declares the truth of this belonging so the child can hear it spoken aloud and “put it on”… Sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked by the cross of Christ forever…

The adults in the child’s life then promising to remind the child of his or her “belonging” by raising the child in the stories, the liturgies and the practices of the faith… Because, of course, without reminders of the love in which we are held, it is so easy to forget… (Matter of fact, as one theologian is fond of saying, the Devil’s single most important job is to get us to forget the love which knit us together in our mother’s womb… the love from which we have come, and the love to which we will return)…

And thirdly, I'm giving Henry the shoes of "shake it all up"… Because most times, before you raise a little heaven, you have to raise a little hell… And before the dream of God takes root and blossoms into the kingdom of justice and peace and well-being God intends for all of creation, the principalities and powers of this world, bent on greed and fear-mongering, violence and vitriol, need to be exposed and undermined and sent packing… If the life and witness of Jesus bear witness to anything it is this…

Which is why baptism sometimes takes out her saxophone and plays a little Thelonious Monk… and why she also comes accompanied by wind and fire to burn open the jack-pine seed of our hearts, coated with resin, and to send us greening and careening from our tombs ablaze with passion for the odd, up-side-down, counter-cultural kingdom (or kin-dom) of God…. Because left to our own devices, and to the inclinations of our own hearts, who would ever choose such a thing?

Baptism does not prepare us for a nice quiet little life… But rather for the kind of life Henry glimpsed in the very first moment of his arrival into this world, as his mother Chelsea, weary from hours of hard labor, and still in the throws of trying to give birth, asked to listen to Dvorak's "New World Symphony"….

So Michael, her husband, using Spotify or some other streaming service, answered her request, making it possible for Chelsea to listen to all four movements of that glorious piece of music as she continued her labor… Coming finally to the fourth movement as little Henry came closer to being born… that fourth movement leading to a climactic moment at the very end in which all the instruments of the orchestra break forth into beauteous heavenly light… that very moment at the

very end of “The New World Symphony” being the very moment when Henry entered the world…

And as if that wasn’t enough, the recording Michael had chosen for Chelsea to hear was a recording of a live performance… so as the music came to its last climactic moment, just as Henry came into the world, the audience broke into thunderous applause…

“Welcome to the world,” the cosmos sang to little Henry at his birth…

“Welcome to the world,” the cosmos will sing once again this morning as Henry is baptized into the love of God through water and Sprit, claimed and named as God’s beloved child, marked by the cross of Christ forever, and clothed with the helmet of wholly-ness, the breastplate of belonging, and the shoes of ‘shake it all up’…

“And welcome to the kingdom of God, the world that shimmers and sings and burns inside this one… the world inside this one where we come to know the movement of love from the inside of things, and where we come to trust that even now Easter is getting out her saxophone and getting ready to raise a little… heaven…

“Welcome, little Henry… beloved child of God… Welcome to the world God so loves, God crosses + every divide to tell us so. You are in for such an adventure…. Come, let us put this love on you in the waters of baptism, so you will know you are wholly God’s own, belonging to Christ, and set free to “shake it all up” in the name and in the spirit of Jesus…