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*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn on the Day of Pentecost, June 5, 2022*

*Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-27*

Today is Pentecost. On this day the church remembers and celebrates the Holy Spirit falling on the disciples and empowering them to speak in other languages. This experience could only be compared to a powerful wind or many sparks from a great fire. In the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, the word Spirit also means breath and wind. The Spirit was what gave birth to creation at the beginning of time, when She hovered over the face of the deep in an intimate and tender caress like a mother hovering over her child. And that very power of creation, the Spirit whose first child was light, came upon the disciples in that upper room. Of all the ways they could have responded to the Holy Spirit, what happened was that they started speaking in different languages with power and uncontrollable joy. These were not private spiritual languages for their own comfort but languages of people in their city. The scripture says they were speaking about God's deeds of power. That might have been stories from their scriptures or stories of their own lives, but either way I imagine they were speaking of the sudden and vivid recognition of God in ways they hadn't seen before. What we do know is that suddenly, they went from a small group of grieving and fearful disciples to a vast explosive movement that was both incredibly diverse and deeply united. Later in the same chapter it says that they even shared everything they had; that no one was in need.

Some people refer to this powerful day as the birthday of the church, although I doubt the disciples that day were trying to start a new religion. They were just caught up into the current of God's Spirit into a movement that was something powerful and life-giving, creative and beautiful.

One can't help but see parallels between the church of today and the small group of grieving and fearful disciples at the beginning of the Pentecost story. It's no secret that churches all over the country have been experiencing decline for decades. Those who remain who know how beautiful church can be—a place of healing and transformation, compassion and sharing and love—may be discouraged and mystified by those who have left. One prominent Christian author Brian McLaren has written about these things for decades. In his latest book called *Do I Stay Christian?* he explores reasons to leave Christianity, and reasons to stay. Among the reasons to leave would be the church's complicity in the many forms of imperial dominance and violence including racism, exploitation of the earth, genocide, persecution of LGBTQ persons, and so many other things. He also describes how the church's paradigms and language have sometimes struggled to keep up with our evolving understanding of reality itself. Here's how McLaren describes his own shift in understanding the world in his lifetime:

I used to think that things were real, and change was something that happened to them over time. Now I think that change is real, and that things are events that happen over time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McLaren, *Do I Stay Christian?*, page 57.

Into this universe of constant process and change, can the Christian religion also intentionally evolve and change in ways that are faithful to the original Jesus? Can we really reclaim the truth of the God whose name Yahweh means not only “I am that I am,” but also “I will become what I will become”?

McLaren says this:

More than ever before, the world needs religions that teach us to value and love the planet, to see its inherent value and sacredness apart from the human economy. The world needs religions that teach us to love our neighbor as ourselves, remembering that our neighbor includes the refugee, the sick, the poor, the outsider, the outcast, the other, and even the enemy. The world needs religions that teach us to transform our swords into plowshares.. that value love and interdependence, not money and competition; that are anti-racist, anti-authoritarian, gender-equal, and characterized by compassion and wisdom rather than greed, arrogance, and dogmatism.

Christianity could be such a religion. In fact the original Jesus and the best parts of our scripture speak of exactly these themes. Into this room, in this place in history, on this day, I do feel the wind of the Holy Spirit blowing new language and new hope in us here at St. John's. One way is through the beautiful “stories of God's presence and power” that your fellow St. John's parishioners have written, that are being published one at a time in each week's Thursday e-news. The first was this past

Thursday written by Dick Howard, a powerful and moving story I commend to you.

The Holy Spirit also seems to be giving us new language through the work of your vestry. In a recent retreat, the vestry met to pray, reflect on scripture, and try to describe the “why” of St. John’s. Why, really, are we here? What almost gave me goosebumps is that at the end, when we asked each vestry member to write in one sentence all that was stirring in their souls about why we come, the same themes repeated over and over again. There was not a cacophony of different ideas that made no sense together, but clear values that emerged. I believe the Spirit is empowering us to express these themes, and that they will continue to evolve as we listen, practice, reflect and adjust; but I’d like to share them with you in draft form. These values are: sacredness; relationship; authenticity; healing; courage; flow; learning; and wonder. Let me explain in more detail.

First: **Sacredness.** We believe God created all life in goodness. No person, plant or animal exists primarily for the pleasure or use of others, but because they are sacred and shimmering with God’s presence. Therefore, we seek to walk lightly on the earth, to look for and invite the best in one another, and to create just systems that honor the sacredness of all beings.

**Second: Relationship.** Because we truly are all so very interrelated, we seek to follow Jesus’ instruction to “love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves.” Therefore we prioritize relationship with God, ourselves and neighbors over transactions, ideologies, or plans. We experience Christ

inviting us to the Communion table exactly as we are, for community with God and one another.

**Third: Authenticity.** We are a warm, informal community who deeply values honesty, integrity, appropriate vulnerability and the capacity to listen to differing opinions.

**Fourth: Healing.** Jesus' mission was to heal, liberate, and proclaim God's love. We believe God seeks to heal and make whole all that exists, including reconciliation and reparation of breaches in the fabric of our systems and communities.

**Fifth: Courage.** St. John's has long had the willingness to engage difficult subjects and take risks to follow Jesus' Way of Love, including in ministry with people in recovery, those living with AIDS, welcoming the leadership and inclusion of women and LGBTQ persons, and centering the work of racial justice and healing. We seek to continue to have courage to follow where the Spirit leads.

**Sixth: Flow.** We seek to allow all actions in ministry, justice, and relationships to flow naturally from who we are at the core: sacred beings in need of healing, followers of Jesus' Way of Love who care deeply for the sacredness of all others and of all life. When we get the important things right at the center, everything else flows from there.

**Seventh: Learning.** We value inquiry, discernment, practice, openness, experimentation, listening, diversity, and change.

**And finally, eighth: Wonder.** We are amazed by the beauty of life. We seek to cultivate curiosity and open-heartedness rather than judgment.

These are the themes that arose out of the vestry retreat as I saw them. These are ways that the Holy Spirit is calling us to have lives centered on Jesus' commandment to love.