WE KNEW IT

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given May 19, 2024
The Day of Pentecost:

I have spoken with you before about parts of my own spiritual journey, how I lost all faith in organized religion during a college foreign study trip to Israel-Palestine, where I saw people doing so much violence to each other in the name of God—and that violence reminded me of some of the violence in the theology of my church. For a long time after that I felt really stuck, spiritually speaking. I still knew there was some kind of great mystery out there and I appreciated learning about non-dualistic spiritualities, especially earth-based spiritualities. But I still didn't find anything that was inspiring enough to make a real difference in my life.

I became a lawyer and was practicing in Los Angeles, when I encountered the Sufi mystical poets Rumi and Hafiz. How many of you have heard of Rumi or Hafiz? Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, and Rumi and Hafiz were Sufi poets from the 13th and 14th centuries. In them I heard the voices of people who were utterly in love with God, broken open, joyful and humble and not trying to convert anyone—just trying to express their joy. It was contagious. Especially for me, who had been raised to think of God primarily in terms of doctrine, this was mind-blowing. I mean, listen to some of these lines:

A wine bottle fell from a wagon
And broke open in a field.
That night a hundred beetles and all their cousins gathered
And did some serious binge drinking.
They even found some seed husks nearby
And began to play them like drums and whirl.
This made God very happy.

Or this:

Don't surrender your loneliness so quickly.
Let it cut you more deep.
Let it ferment and season you as few human and even divine ingredients can.
Something missing in my heart tonight has made my eyes so soft, my voice so tender, my need for God absolutely clear.

Or this:

Gamble everything for love if you're a true human being.
If not, leave this gathering.
Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty. You set out to find God, but then you keep stopping for long periods at meanspirited roadhouses.
Don't wait any longer.
Dive in the ocean, leave and let the sea be you.
Silent, absent, walking an empty road,
All praise.

I remember reading these and feeling something in my deep spirit respond, like this was something real I had been waiting to hear my whole life, and it was splitting me open. I remember my husband coming home from work one day after I'd been reading these, and I said to him, "I wish I could just let go and fall in love with God again." And he said, "Why don't you?" And internally it felt like I fell off a cliff, and took flight.

There are times when we need to hear the deepest reality, the reality that is love, expressed in language we have never heard before, in order to recognize what's always been right in front of our face. Those Sufi poets changed me forever. I was not then a Christian. I was speaking with God in other ways and through other paths. But God was as real to me then as God is real to me today. The language of the Sufi poets, which had been utterly alien to me, is what helped me connect with God again.

Today is Pentecost. In it we celebrate the falling of the Holy Spirit on the frightened disciples and flipping them inside out, making them all poets, all mystics, all suddenly with the ability to speak truth about the love of God in language that was brand new. What's amazing is that the feast they were celebrating that day was obviously not the Christian feast of Pentecost, since they started it. They were celebrating a more ancient Jewish feast also called Pentecost, or Shavu'ot in Hebrew, which was when God gave Moses the Torah, the instructions, on Mount Sinai just a few months after the Israelites had been liberated from slavery. Think about that. After 400 years of slavery, this liberating God was helping them know how to live. I've spoken with a lot of adult children of alcoholics who say that they walk around the world feeling like everyone

else knows invisible rules they have no clue about, because their home environment was so unhealthy. I suspect the Israelites, after having been oppressed for so long, might have felt lost too. So I think God giving the Torah to the Israelites at Pentecost was compassionate, it was a way of saying, here's what healthy and happy living looks like, when you are free.

On that day, God had given the instructions to Moses alone on a mountain, and Moses had to bring them to the people. But on this Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to *all the disciples.* The insight about God and how to live came to everyone, old and young, men and women and free and slave. The Holy Spirit blew the roof off and they found themselves, spiritually speaking, under the vastness of the galaxies, the beauty of the starry sky, God communicating directly with each one of them. And this day is considered to be the birth of the church.

Our tradition began not with a long list of doctrines to memorize and subscribe to, but with the personal experience of God that was given not just to special prophets or pastors or mystics or educated people but to *everyone.* In today's reading from Acts the apostle Peter quotes an ancient Jewish scripture which said this:

> In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my
> Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall
> prophesy, and your young men shall see visions,
> and your old men shall dream dreams.

So you see, I think it wasn't just that people were saying exactly the same thing but in different languages. I think they were speaking ancient truths in brand new ways. I think they were recovering truths that had been lost.

I think through their Spirit-inspired imagination they were seeing things for the very first time. I think they were receiving visions of what their hearts had always known but they had never been able to put into words.

On Monday, many of you were able to attend John Philip Newell's talk here at St. John's. John Philip is a Celtic author of spirituality, and on Monday he spoke about the sacredness that is the shining heart of all things, which sacredness incidentally is St. John's first value. He spoke about how both the earth and the human soul are deeply sacred. He spoke about how Christ is the remembrance of that sacredness, which existed in exalted form in Jesus of Nazareth but also exists within every one of you and in the oak trees and frogs and ancient bedrock and Lake Superior. He spoke about how after one of his talks, an old woman strode up to him down the center aisle very purposefully holding one of his books in her hand, and he was afraid she was going to berate him about something. But when she reached him she opened his book and showed him what she had written in it: "I KNEW IT! I KNEW IT! I KNEW IT!!!"

It is time to reclaim Jesus in ways that our hearts can recognize. Jesus is not the condescending so-called "gift" of European people to all the nations they have colonized and oppressed. Jesus is the shining, breathtaking beauty of the divine in the heart of all things. Jesus is the love of God made manifest in this world. The Holy Spirit speaks deep in our hearts and in our imaginations and we know this is true. We knew it! God speaks to many people in many ways, and Jesus is not the only expression of God to the world. But for us in this church today, the risen Christ is present, the Holy Spirit is present, and they are deeply part of who we are.

The Sufi poets got it right. God is not a stern, disappointed parent whose main desire is to give us lists of things to do and who disapproves of many of the things that make human beings joyful and embodied. Not at all. God is the one who gets happy when beetles dance and when teenagers giggle and when newborn babies hold your gaze, in fact it is the very face of God shining up at you when you hold them, the same face of God that exists in your own face. When our baptismal covenant tells us to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," this is what it means. It means to recognize the sacredness in each other, to honor it and call it forth.

To recognize Christ in each other will inevitably call us to compassionate action, especially for our sacred kin who are suffering like the Ecuadorean families we support or our friends in Haiti who are dealing with gang violence, and those of our sacred cousins the animals and plants who are endangered and threatened in Minnesota. But we will do this not from a place of self-righteous indignation but from the heart, from a place of deep joy and humble loving service.

What is it that your heart knows that longs to come forth? What is the Spirit stirring in your imagination that is important, that would help the whole community to thrive if you could share it? How well do you listen to others, to the shining and sacred wisdom coming from them? Let us imagine that the Spirit is still speaking, Pentecost is not over, visions are still happening and we are meant to recognize and participate in God's dream to heal this world with love. Amen.