Pentecost 2024

Acts 2:1-21 Ps. 104 Rom. 8:22-27 Jn. 15:26-27

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church May 19, 2024

A few weeks ago the priests and deacons of the Maine Diocese met at the Schoodic Institute in Winter Harbor for the annual Diocesan clergy conference. Besides being immersed in the beauty of Schoodic Point we were also blessed to have as our speaker Dr. Patricia Lyons, who serves Virginia Theological Seminary as both a faculty member and as the Director of Evangelism. It is this topic of evangelism that she spoke about in her lectures over the course of the three days…

The word "evangelism" and its partner word "evangelical" don't have such a good reputation these days, bringing to mind for many people the part of Christianity that smacks of judgment and narrow mindedness, among other things… But the root word in Greek for both the words "evangelism" and "evangelical" is *euongelion,* which means "good news"… Which from the beginning of the Christian movement, has been associated with proclaiming the good news of the inbreaking of God's kingdom in the person of Jesus, liberating people by love, through love, for the sake of love…

In other words, since the beginning of the Christian movement, the "good news" of Jesus has been associated with the deep heart-felt, gut-felt, bone-felt knowledge of a love that is…

- so authentic, so real, so true, so extravagant, so incarnational, so visceral, so unconditional, so fierce and tender and terrifying beautiful,

- so immersed in the dream of justice and well-being for all of creation,
- so willing to go into suffering and sin and death with the beloved,
- so on fire with such passion for all of the above,

it undermines anything and everything that resists such Love, insisting on transformation and liberation from the things that diminish, demean and constrict, all for the sake of Love's intended purpose, which can only be described as "joy"…

The kind of joy best rendered by the Greek word "Zoe," which also means "fullness of life," "extravagance of spirit," "wholeness of heart"…. The kind of joy that (oddly enough) is not dependent upon one's circumstances, but only upon the hearing, the receiving and the taking into one's self the deep knowledge of such love in such a way that nothing will ever be the same again…

Like the joy my friend Charlie came to know perhaps, when, just before dying of breast cancer said she realized that it was from love that she had come, and to love she would return…

Or like the joy Trappist monk Thomas Merton experienced perhaps, when, one day on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the Lexington, Kentucky shopping district, he was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that he loved all the people he saw in his midst, recognizing that they were his and he was theirs, that they could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers….

That realization, he said, giving him a sense of liberation and immense joy, knowing that all people are members of a race in which God Himself became incarnate… all of them, everyone, whether they

know it or not, walking around shining like the sun."

Or like the joy any of us may feel perhaps during a time of deep grief and anguish, when everything is falling apart, and suddenly a small gesture of kindness is extended to us, or when, well before the first light of morning we hear the song of the first bird…

Certainly it is something like this that must have happened in those first days of the Christian movement as the disciples, ablaze with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the good news of the Gospel in such a way that people stopped dead in their tracks, lifted their heads to listen, and then turned to go a totally different direction than they had previously been going…

Read the first eleven chapters in Acts, (starting with our Gospel text for this morning), and you will see how, in Luke's telling of the story, the Holy Spirit opened speakers and hearers alike to the *"euongelion"* of God in such a way that barriers of language and ethnicity and gender and religion and guilt and shame and fear were swept away, and people of every stripe and shape and color and background were transformed… their old selves "put to death" so their true new most authentic selves could rise from the dead… their faces shining just like Moses' as he came down from the mountain that day after having been in the presence of God…

So during our three days at the diocesan clergy conference, Dr. Patricia Lyons invited us clergy to ponder the question of how well the Church down through the centuries has proclaimed this *"euongelion"* of God's love made known in Jesus… As well as how well the Church is proclaiming that good news in our day…

Citing statistics such as this… “Every five days an Episcopal church in the United States closes,” (which is true I am sure of Lutheran churches as well), Dr. Lyons challenged us to put away the old image of the Church as an institution tasked with the job of passing the baton of the tradition down from one generation to another… “Because,” as she said, “a baton never changes. It just stays the same old baton…

“All the while we are being called to start living by a whole different image of the Christian community… An image glimpsed in the earliest manifestations of the church’s existence as the message of “God’s kingdom come” in the liberating, healing, rabble-rousing Spirit of Jesus **caught people’s hearts on fire…**

- “Remember,” Dr. Lyon said, “faith isn’t so much taught, as it’s caught.”
- “Remember that it’s not about information, but about formation and transformation.”
- “And remember that Jesus didn’t tell his disciples where to fish, but how deep to fish”…

Dr. Patricia Lyons offered us clergy folks much to think about as she challenged us to re-imagine the Church as a vibrant community of creative, imaginative, supportive, engaged people of ever-exploring, ever-deepening, ever-expanding, ever-risking faith… And while I will be pondering much of what she said for a good long time, what provided me with the most food for thought was a video she showed, which I have asked George to show us now, as part of the sermon time…

As you watch the video I invite you to think of it in terms of the Church’s call to share the *euongelion* of God’s liberating and transforming love in the person of Jesus. Specifically I invite you to look

through the lens of metaphor, and to see **the music** in this video as the presence and essence of God's unconditional, prodigal Love, always moving in and through the world… And to see **the piano** as the Church, the community and the tradition called to carry the sound, the sight, the passion and fire of that love to the world… And to see what happens when **creativity and inclusivity and imagination** are allowed to flourish using the old form in new ways…

In this video you will see and hear a piece of music performed by all seven kids in the Rogers family. It's entitled "Shut up and Dance," which may be a pretty good suggestion for the Church on Pentecost Sunday anyway…

Link to the video "Rogers Family "Shut up and Dance":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zux7nLiPX2M

"So," Dr. Patrcia Lyons said after showing us the video… "If the **music** is the presence and essence of God's liberating and healing love made known in Jesus, and if the **piano** is the Church and the tradition called to carry that music to the world, what might happen if we take the top off the piano and take the piano bench away? What might happen if the Church embraced and celebrated that many many ways to make the music, and if, instead of one piano bench, with room enough for just one or two choice musicians, there was no bench at all, opening possibilities for participation by endless numbers of people?"

With all assurances to Connie that this is just a metaphor, and that we're not going to take the top off her piano or take her piano bench

away, it might be a good thing on this Pentecost Sunday to just let the power of the music and the creative movement offered to us by the Rogers family fan the embers of our hearts and see what happens…

It might be a good thing on this Pentecost Sunday to just let the power of God's Holy Spirit enter our hearts in the many ways our Christian tradition promises us it will… In silence and prayer, in bread broken and wine poured out, in the word of forgiveness and mercy offered despite our failure to love, in the mutual support and consolation shared one person with another, in the reading of Scripture, in the sharing of our resources, in the singing, in the longing expressed in the deepest parts of our beings, "*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me…"*

Perhaps on this Pentecost Sunday we might begin here… trusting that despite everything, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the living Jesus is present with us to guide us into all truth… the truth about a love from which we have come and to which we will return… the truth about a love that connects us with one another and with all of creation… the truth about a love that frees us from fear and shame and opens our ears and eyes to see God's presence in a thousand thousand small gestures of kindness, courage and caring, as well as in the song of the first bird of morning… The truth about a love whose intention for us is that we might have joy… *Zoe…* a fullness of life not dependent upon our circumstances, but dependent only upon the love that will not let us go…

What greater good news in this whole world could there be, dear friends? What greater *euongelion* could there be? And how might we be true to the message of this good news in ways that lift people's heads and catch their hearts on fire, including our own?

This is the question we are invited to ponder on this Pentecost Sunday as Jesus calls us to take the top off our pianos, to take the piano benches away, and to begin playing the music of God's liberating and saving love, even in the horrors and the darkness of the times in which we live…

Trusting that Emmanuel God with us is with us though it all, and that in the end, the music will find a way, and love will find a way, and because this is true, we can dare to find our place at the piano and, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, begin to play as if the world depended upon it. Because it does…