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**With That Moon Language** (1 John 4: 7-12)

*Pentecost VIII*

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***With That Moon Language***

*Admit something:*

*Everyone you see, you say to them, 'Love me'.*

*Of course you do not do this out loud; otherwise  
someone would call the cops.*

*Still, though, think about this, this great pull in us  
to connect.*

*Why not become the one who lives with a full moon  
in each eye that is always saying,*

*with that sweet moon language,*

*what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?*

*Hafiz (trans. Daniel Ladinsky)*

Tonight we begin our four-week series – *Poetica Divina: Poems to Redeem a Prose World*. The series title is a play on the notion of 'lectio divina' or 'holy reading', which as many of you know refers to the contemplative reading of Scripture. As a practice, lectio involves slow receptivity – not rushing through the biblical text to find out what happens or grasping impatiently at its meaning, but allowing *it* to speak to us. We wait on the Spirit to touch us in and through the written word, to open insight and draw us deeper into the truth of God.

Reading poetry well involves the same kind of reverent, contemplative attention. Much of Scripture is itself poetry and all good poetry is religious, in the sense that it connects us to the depth dimension of reality. As we bring a good poem into conversation with our experience and the wisdom of our tradition, it helps us see differently; it heightens awareness and offers us new ways of relating to life and

its meaning. In other words, like Scripture, poetry is about truth and waking up to it. ‘Insofar as poetry has a social function’, wrote American poet Denise Levertov, ‘it is to awaken sleepers by means other than shock’.<sup>1</sup>

Well, if that implies we’re in danger of having nodded off in life, it seems appropriate to begin our series tonight by the light of the moon – and despite what Levertov says – by being slightly shocked awake by the Sufi poet Hafiz’s opening accusation. ‘Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, “Love me”’.

You don’t mean me, surely? Are you really saying that *I* walk around all day with a big sign on my chest saying LOVE ME?<sup>2</sup> Of course, Hafiz goes on, ‘you do not do this out loud; otherwise, someone would call the cops’. They’d think you were pathetic, needy, desperate – and that’s the last thing any of us want to appear. And that’s why we’re inclined to dismiss the poet’s peremptory assertion. Hafiz knows it. So he suggests we look again. ‘Still though, think about this, this great pull in us to connect’. This line made me think of the way little children want to give you things, show you what they’ve been up to, have it rejoiced over and know themselves affirmed, received, celebrated. Then it made me think of how that never goes away – our deep need to be seen and known, to share our very selves. ‘Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, “Love me”’.

Well, it’s a bald and rather confronting insight. And, as I’ve already suggested, a reason it’s hard to admit is that we’re culturally primed to think this a bad thing, a weakness to be overcome... . It is true there are ways of seeking love, attention, approval that aren’t ultimately good for us or anyone else. It’s true that psychological and spiritual health necessitates some degree of self-sufficiency, some level of non-attachment to what people think of us and whether they like us or want us around. But – and this may seem surprising – that’s not what Hafiz wants us to focus on. He simply takes it as given that we long and need to be loved, and he doesn’t admonish

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<sup>1</sup> From a statement on the power and responsibility of poetry written for *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Change Your Life Again and Again* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), p.108.

us to get over it, or tell us to stop hoping for it, or beware of the possible corruption of our need. Nor, though, does he offer strategies for coaxing others into giving us what we want.

Instead he invites us to consider offering to others what we and every other person on the planet hopes to receive. 'Why not become the one who lives with a full moon in each eye that is always saying, with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to hear?' Why not become the one in the light of whose soft yet full moon gaze others are gently illumined, saved from the darkness of oblivion or invisibility? And I love Hafiz's profound play on the fact that the one 'who *lives* with such a full moon in each eye' speaks 'what every other eye in this world is *dying* to hear'. Our willingness to love this way, he seems to say, simultaneously enlivens us and has the power to redeem others from a certain kind of death.

Hafiz lived in 14<sup>th</sup> century Persia, modern-day Iran, a mystical poet of Islam. Yet what he urges here is utterly consistent with our Scriptural tradition. We could pose his question in the words of Jesus: why don't we become those who love our neighbours as we love ourselves? Why not indeed?

Well, there are people we do just love, whose being delights us, who we're able to see whole. But it's not always the case – even when we think it should be. Not all parents find their children unconditionally loveable and vice versa, and that's way before we get to our bullying boss, the annoying person in the supermarket queue and the narcissistic political leaders plunging us into disaster. And we know neither Hafiz nor Jesus is talking only about loving those we naturally love. They're speaking of loving 'every other eye in this world'. How does *that* become possible?

The author of the first letter of John thinks that we can love others because God first loved us, and indeed that we must love for the same reason (1 John 4: 19). 'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another' (4: 11). But this just seems another injunction to do what we cannot do – we'd all like to love one another, to speak that sweet moon language – but we don't. The more we try,

the more we discover that out of our own resources, we can't. And this is where (though admittedly in a rather convoluted way), I think the text of 1 John does suggest a way forward.

We usually read passages like this with the following kind of logic. God loved us, so we should follow God's example; or, God loved us so much that we should be really, really grateful and do what God wants us to do. We should try harder, feel bad when we fail, and, as a last resort, fake it till we make it – hence the sense of pious exertion that pervades some of our attempts to 'love' our neighbours. But John's deep insight is that this gets the logic backwards. Dietrich Bonhoeffer insists: 'The relation between divine and human love must not be misunderstood as if the divine love ... preceded human love, but only in order to activate it as an autonomous human doing'.<sup>3</sup> No, it's that *as we're loved*, as we receive the gift of being unconditionally accepted and known, we're changed. The more we experience ourselves beloved, the more love just flows through us; the more we experience our own foibles and frailties being accepted and forgiven, the more forgiving we become of the foibles and frailties of others.

We know this from our experience of human loving. And ultimately, according to the saints and mystics, the more radically we open ourselves to the love of God – in trust and prayer, the more we experience our love participating in, sharing the character of God's love. Which is perhaps why Hafiz speaks of this love in terms of 'moon language' – after all, the only light the moon gives off is the light it reflects from the sun. The moon's light is not self-generated, and in the same way it's only the love with which God loves us that constitutes the love with which we love others. Or as John writes, 'If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us'. It's no longer about duty and trying hard. Our loving one another is itself the sign that God dwells in us and is transforming us. Which is why John goes on to say that 'Those who say, "I love God", and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars' (4: 30) –

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, ed. Clifford J. Green, Trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p.337.

their lack of love for others is the sign that they are estranged from God who just *is* love.

Hafiz asks: 'Why not become the one who is always saying what every other eye in the world is dying to hear?' How do we become this one? We let ourselves be loved, we receive the life God longs to bestow on us. And perhaps the way to begin to receive this gift is to admit before God what we sometimes find so hard to acknowledge: the great pull in us to connect, the silent cry of our hearts: 'Love me'.