

Worship and Action for Peace
July 17, 2006

Dear Friends,

During last summer's annual sessions at Silver Bay, New York Yearly Meeting Friends labored with the concern of discrimination on the basis of sexual preference. In reports on Friends United Meeting's Triennial meeting, we learned that FUM's then general secretary, Retha McCutchen, had acknowledged the complexity of divisive issues, such as FUM's sexual ethics policy. We heard and responded to the message from the Junior Yearly Meeting's senior high school group attesting to their upholding of the testimony of equality: "Despite all differences, including but not limited to differences in belief systems, gender, physical attributes, or sexual orientation, everyone has the same Light Within and so deserves the same rights and respect. Our concern is that each person be recognized for their Inner Light." Ultimately, we remained, for the time being, in a place of discomfort. (NYYM 2005 Annual Meeting, Minutes 22 & 75, July 26 & 29, 2005; <http://www.nyym.org/pubs/ym2005min.shtml>.)

NYYM Friends are being invited to continue to worship over issues of sexual preference and gender identity at this summer's sessions on July 23–29. In preparation, Friends may find rewarding a rich reflection by Herb Lape of Westbury Monthly Meeting. He reminds us that always "love is the first motion." We are pleased to be able to share Herb's reflection with you below.

In the Fellowship of Peace,

Linda Chidsey, Fred Dettmer & Lu Harper for the
Worship & Action for Peace Working Group

Venturing Out from Safe Harbor

I remember our lengthy struggles over *Faith and Practice* revision, especially the issues of marriage, family life, and homosexuality. A double rainbow appeared over Lake George when we finally approved a revision.

Later, I helped form a working group under the care of the Coordinating Committee on Ministry and Counsel with a gay Friend because we both realized that the work of discerning God's will on sexual issues in general and same-gender issues in particular had really only begun. We sponsored a Powell House gathering and spoke to several monthly meetings on recovering a framework for peaceful resolution. The working group was then laid down, in part because we realized that NYYM Friends needed calm to heal from the turbulence of the revision process before sailing into additional storms.

Friends have experienced much healing and even renewal since those challenging days, but two years ago at the summer sessions closing meeting for worship, I felt a new

question: Did our healing rest on a firm foundation of faith and practice or did it rest on the fact that we were carefully avoiding difficult issues? I was moved to offer a message that evoked the challenge and thrill of sailing in strong winds. I have faith that my skill as a sailor enables me to handle strong winds, or at least to carefully retreat to safe harbor if the winds blow beyond my practice and produce fear. Our efforts to revise *Faith and Practice* had produced very strong winds that overwhelmed our ability to discern together. We worried whether God was at the tiller. Wisely we retreated into the safe harbor of Silver Bay and skirted some difficult and emotional topics.

As we prepare to continue our engagement with issues of sexual preference and gender identity, I sense a readiness to sail before strong winds again. Our experience tells us that our collective vessel may be rocked by these winds, tempting us to respond in fear rather than faith. How then, in the midst of renewed challenge, can we hear that “still small voice of calm” that will lead us forward to do justice with a spirit of mercy and reconciliation that does not divide and cast out?

When we worked to revise *Faith and Practice*, I found inspiration in the Biblical story of Elijah. Elijah lived in a time of religious tumult: Ahab, king of Israel, and his wife, Jezebel, had introduced new religious practices that appeared to bolster the rich and the powerful and undercut belief in the Abrahamic God of justice and mercy. In fear of King Ahab, Elijah fled to Mount Sinai hoping to be reassured by a comforting word from God. His hopes were stirred when he felt a “great and strong wind rent the mountains,” but, alas, “the Lord was not in the wind.” Then came an earthquake, but still no word from God. And then a fire. But God was not in any of these demonstrations of power and might. It was only then that Elijah heard God speak in a “still small voice of calm.” (I Kings 19:11–12, KJV)

The Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier takes these outward events and applies them to our interior seeking for God’s word within the heart and mind:

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

This is my prayer for the Yearly Meeting as we take up again the difficult matters of sexual preference and gender identity. I pray that we will have the faith and practice to be able to name the “earthquake, wind, and fire” as important but ultimately human voices, and to discern the “still small voice of calm,” the living word of God within.

What does the still small voice of calm reveal on these difficult issues? This passage from Jeremiah (Jer. 6:16, NIV) has spoken to me:

Stand at the crossroads and look;
ask for the ancient paths,

ask where the good way is, and walk in it,
and you will find rest for your souls.

I believe this ancient path is God's calmed voice, the middle path of humility that stands between the "earthquake, wind, and fire" of mistaken human certainty. The ancient path reminds us that God has always cried out for social justice for the orphan, the widow, the poor; God abhors the sin of casting out those who do not fit comfortably into our social circles and calls us to act. This ancient testimony also challenges us to avoid the temptation to play the victim and blame misfortunes on the OTHER; and to remember God's corresponding message of personal responsibility and righteousness.

When engaged in community discernment on issues of social justice and personal responsibility, I think it important to remind myself of the Jewish teacher Gamaliel's wise advice to the Jewish council to still their passionate desire to persecute and stamp out the new Jesus movement in their midst (Acts 5:35–39, NIV):

“Leave these men alone! Let them go!
For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.
But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men;
you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

I also seek to remember Paul's advice to the fledgling Roman Christian community (Rom. 14:13–17):

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit

Words about humility and patience may seem to ring hollow when we are under the weight of the crying need for social justice (“Justice delayed is justice denied!”). Yet it was humble persistence toward justice that enabled Quakers to change their testimony on slavery without producing a schism into Northern and Southern factions. Friends heard and obeyed the middle path of the “still small voice” and avoided the “earthquake, wind, and fire” of human certainty and ideology.

I believe Scripture and our own Faith and Practice revision story can teach us to be careful in our discernment of the Inward Light of Christ. Ascribing God's will to one's loudest, most insistent inward voice - one's “earthquake, wind, and fire” - may be tempting and even comforting. This I know experientially from my efforts to witness on Faith and Practice revision years ago! There were many times when I mistook my own

strong emotions for a “prophetic” word from God. I also know from this experience that harkening to these shrill voices can overwhelm the ability to hear God’s “still small voice”.

Finally, I know another story of a storm-tossed boat that can speak to our condition as we grapple with issues of social justice at Silver Bay (Matthew 8:23-26, NIV):

Then he got into the boat, and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!"

He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm.

I always find comfort in the humanity of the disciples. Before this storm scene, they had witnessed the height of Jesus’ ministry. He was doing miracles right and left, and thousands were following him. Yet despite these demonstrations of power, when the storm rose, they could not trust that his calmly sleeping presence in the bow was evidence that they were secure. Their “little faith” reminds me that we shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves when we panic and grasp on to our fears.

I hope and pray that, as we worship and share our concerns about the issues of sexual preference and gender identity, we will look to our calm inward Captain for assurance and guidance if we sail our collective vessel into rough seas. If He’s calmly at the tiller, we can joyfully steady the boat in the wind; we can trust that even those with whom we disagree are part of the one collective body discerning the path of social justice and personal responsibility. In doing this, we can experience the positive fruit of attending to the “still small voice.” And if the winds appear to be beyond our faith and practice, we can call on this inward Captain to rebuke and calm our inward storm, and to guide us temporarily to safe harbor to sail forth again another day together.

Herb Lape