

NYYM Bible Study

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Conflict, Shadow and Unity

Shadow and Community

Revelation 21:1-5, 21:22-25, 22:1-5

We're going to look at the book of Revelation today.

Read:

Revelation 21:1-5, 21:22-25, 22:1-5

Isn't that amazing? There's more, as the prophecy here describes – it's a glorious city, a shining city opulent with precious metals with an abundance of all good things for all who are there. And there is the River of Life flowing through it, providing sustenance and healing.

This beautiful vision comes in the last two chapters of Revelation. It is preceded by twenty – *twenty* – chapters of bloodshed, terror, and upheaval of all sorts. Now there are many ways to interpret the Book of Revelation. For our purposes today, I want to notice that this glorious City of God emerges from these terrifying, confusing, violent shadows and massive conflict. It is messy and painful and, honestly, so very hard to read. I know that many people of this world have first hand experience of this kind of hell. Most of us sitting here, I think, probably don't. But we do have experiences that are – a shadow – of the ones depicted in Revelation. The confusion, chaos, destructiveness – these show up regularly in life. And it is from the muck of shadow and conflict that we are given the great and beautiful gift of unity. And it all happens within the context of community.

So I want us to explore just a bit the shadow of our meetings. Our group shadow... which is what I think all the "yuk" of Revelation is about – the shadow of a community. Often, it seems, bad behavior, or acting out in destructive ways – that is the uninvited shadow making itself known. Some recent evidence of corporate or communal shadows making themselves known might be the pedophile priest scandal in the Catholic church, or more recently, the American Psychological Association's connection with torture. Actually, their *endorsement* of and *collusion* with the U.S.'s torture program. The shadows of our monthly meetings, or New York Yearly Meeting, are very different from that, but there nonetheless.

Here's a small example. Let's imagine a meeting, and maybe you know one like this. We'll call it Community Harmony Monthly Meeting. They are a warm, welcoming, open-hearted and loving meeting. If there is someone new at worship, they are very good at enfolding that person into the life of the meeting. And there is a lot of harmony within the meeting. Sounds ideal, right? Well – their shadow has to do with the flip side of harmony – they don't have any conflict. Now – as

one who doesn't much care for conflict, I would want to say that seems great. However, in reality, that means there is something missing in the spiritual depth of the meeting. The bonds have not been tested enough by conflict. It is in conflict and in the shadows that we learn about who we are as individuals and as a community. It is where we find out what we are made of. So if we are all about the peace testimony and understand that to mean the avoidance of conflict, we miss out on key opportunities to grow spiritually, and to deepen in our faith and in our relationships and in community.

There are meetings who have been willing to go into the shadows and deal directly with conflict – some in this yearly meeting. There are also stories of the yearly meeting going through the shadows and emerging in a blessed unity – such as last year, which many of you experienced. We need those experiences to remind us of the treasures hidden in the shadows. To remind us that *all* of who we are can bring us into deeper relationship with God and with each other. Can bring us closer to living in the City of God, in the kin-dom of heaven here on earth.

As you think about yearly meeting and your monthly meeting, clues to the unwelcome shadow pieces can be found by asking these questions:

Where does your meeting get stuck?

What are the arguments in your meeting that you seem to have over and over again?

Are there patterns that exist that leave people feeling bad when you interact around them?

What does the meeting avoid? That is where the shadow is. So what would it mean to move toward that? Which can only happen if there are individuals who have done some of their own individual shadow work and know that it can be done and it's worth it. They can help guide the meeting in the work.

So –

Talk to the person next to you about shadow within community.

In closing, I have these exhortations:

- When I say, bring your whole self, even the parts that lurk in the shadow, that is *not* permission to act out. It just means that you have a willingness to see how the stuff in the shadows might be affecting your behavior. And then out of that, a willingness to learn how to use those shadow pieces for the upbuilding of the community.
- It can take a good dose of courage to venture into your shadow stuff, and even more so, to go into the shadows of your meeting. Here is where one of our core Quaker practices can help: our contemplative worship. When we sink into the Spirit and offer our deepest selves over to God, we become more open to seeing what's in the shadows. We might see more clearly how our shadow stuff damages us and our community. We might then also see more clearly how God can use what's in the shadows for the good of the community. Other helps include spiritual direction, spiritual friendships, and spiritual nurture groups.

- Be not afraid. This is messy work, and sometimes scary, and it can be quite painful. And we will make mistakes. You can be sure of that, we will make mistakes. But we have a Divine Guide who loves us through the mistakes. We can turn to our Guide over and over and over again – and begin again as many times as we need to. As we follow the Holy One who leads us on this path, we will surely taste of the sweet fruits in the City of God along the River of Life – the peace that passes understanding, the unity that can hold diversity and difference. So – be not afraid.

As the session comes to an end, sit in worship together.