

Prepared Message—Herb Lape

Community Worship, July 25 Summer Sessions 2015

Yearly Meeting is a wonderful time to come together as a community and be nourished by our faith and fellowship in a setting that testifies to the beauty and goodness of God's creation.

Renewed, we now gather one more time for worship before returning home to the joys and cares of our everyday lives. It is there that we put our faith into action. And what a faith it is.

As Don Badgley testified to on Tuesday night, we boldly and joyfully assert that God is alive and actively communicating to each of us in order that we might come to know our gifts and come to use these to build a joyful, loving, redemptive community. But our faith is not just a personal connection in the present. Our faith is imbedded in an exciting adventure story that stretches back to the beginning of time and forward to a promised Peaceable Kingdom of mercy, justice, and peace. We are called to play our part in this ongoing adventure.

When our movement began, George Fox and others described their task as simply turning people to this Inward Teacher and leaving them there in order to experience the truth of that New Covenant that the prophet Jeremiah had predicted and Jesus had come to embody:

“The day is coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the people. . . . “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

With the Bible readily accessible, early Friends saw what the prophets of old had always seen and railed against, namely, that humanity's need and desire for certainty had tempted time and again to embrace legalistic dogma that denied the freedom and power of direct Divine guidance. Today we call this distortion of faith “fundamentalism” and can see its tremendous power to seduce many with simple certainty and a simple narrative that divides the world into good and evil.

Many were drawn to this message of liberty: However, Fox soon discovered that narrow legalism was not the only tempting detour in the faith journey. People needed help in discerning the still small voice of calm amidst the earthquake, wind, and fire of human desire. This human temptation on the other side of fundamentalism was given the name Ranterism and described well by Robert Barclay in his pamphlet entitled *Anarchy of Ranters*: “Some are so great pretenders to inward motions and revelations . . . that there are no extravagancies so wild, which they will not cloak with it.”

To counter this danger within the Quaker movement, an effort was made to establish what early Friends called “gospel order.” Our first Faith and Practice, then called the Book of Discipline, was written; monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings were established, with elders and recognized ministers. Discipline was embraced as well as nurture. All of this was not done without conflict and controversy and accusations by some that Fox and others were betraying the original message and setting up the very legalistic structures that he had originally condemned. However, lives were changed for the good and we became a people known for integrity, honesty,

service, humility, justice, simplicity, and peace. When persecution came with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, we had communal structures to survive and even flourish amidst persecution while individualistic Ranterism withered in the heat with no deep roots to sustain it.

In his *Journal*, Fox characteristically describes this leading to set up gospel order as a simple, direct command from the Spirit. He was fond of saying, “And then the Lord led me to do such and such.” While no doubt true, it negates the critical role of tradition, his familiarity with the “cloud of witnesses” who had gone before him. Surely the example of the Apostle Paul in dealing with a similar situation in the church of Galatia helped him discern this living word from God.

Paul today would have been called a fundamentalist until he had a direct experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and came to see him as the messianic figure who had come to establish the covenant of grace predicted by Jeremiah. He was particularly successful at reaching out to gentiles with this message of grace that made unnecessary circumcision, kosher dietary regulations, and other elements of the 613 Mosaic commands. Like today, however, there were other Jesus followers who insisted on complete adherence to the law. Like Fox, Paul battled this fundamentalist threat and implored the Galatian church with these words: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. . . . For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

And then in the next sentence, Paul echo’s Fox’s concern about Ranterism: “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”

Our faith in the direct leading of God’s spirit is this middle path of ordered freedom between slavery to the law and slavery to human impulse.

How do we discern this middle path and walk together in it? Do we still have the communal structures to settle conflicts and help individuals become “patterns and examples answering that of God in others?” Do we have the foundation to withstand the earthquakes, the roots to withstand the occasional droughts, or the anchor to hold the ship steady in the storms?

We know that our present community of faith is critical in helping us gain clearness on how we should live our lives, but our faith community is potentially so much richer and deeper than the Friends that bodily surround us. If we are open, we can discover that we are surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses” that extends back to the beginning of time—individuals who have testified with their lives that they lived in that life and power.

One such witness in my life is the Quaker poet Whittier, particularly this verse: “Breathe through the heats of our desire, thy coolness and thy balm, let sense be numb, let flesh retire, breath through the earthquake, wind, and fire, thy still small voice of calm.”

I know the “flesh” is a difficult term for folks to hear, but I trust that we all know experientially that powerful human emotions like anger, pride, envy, sexual desire, etc. also speak loudly within. They can become the inner earthquake, wind, and fire, and often seek to disguise themselves in a Divine cloak. They can easily overwhelm the truly divine voice of calm. I also trust that others are uneasy with powerful commercial forces now free in our capitalist society to appeal to the flesh to capture our attention and eventually our dollars. This I know experientially. I certainly have known the seduction of ranterism in my own life and witnessed its negative fruit.

Finally, this verse is made more powerful if you know something of the story that it references. Elijah was a prophet who spoke truth to power. He challenged the religious practices introduced by King Ahab's Phoenician wife that focused on what we today would call a gospel of wealth, the worship of outward success— money, fame, power, and sex. It was a time of prosperity for Israel but like our own time, the benefits went primarily to connected elites, and economic injustice flourished. Elijah rallied the people to challenge this idolatry and its unjust fruit. He made enemies at court and understandably lost faith and courage, fearing for his life. He went into the desert to Mt. Sinai, the obvious place to receive a reassuring word from God. Deep in prayer he awaits and feels a powerful earthquake. Surely this demonstration of awesome power is the Word of God, but it was just an earthquake. Next he experiences powerful winds but alas God was not in the wind. Then a fire. Surely this is God just as he had appeared to Moses. But no—God was not in the fire either. Only then did he hear a still small voice speak. And what was its gentle message? Basically, suck it up, quit whining, and gird up your loins. You are not alone. You are not the only witness alive. Return to the work and God will be present to continue the great saga of redeeming and restoring this broken world to health. You have only to play your part.

If you are like me you often feel like Elijah in the face of powerful forces that keep this world in bondage, but we are not alone. We have a living God, we have each other, and we have a living cloud of witnesses whose example inspires and instructs us to be a community of redemptive healing and peace. We are on a great journey that stretches from creation to the promised Peaceable Kingdom. How long will it take us? In the words of another great witness, Martin Luther King Jr., "Not long, for the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. How long, not long for truth forever on the scaffold and wrong forever on the throne, yet that scaffold sways the future. Amen."