

Not Sinners, Not Saints--Message for 3 October 2015

Greeting: Dear Friends—Pope Francis issued his encyclical on Our Common Home, the earth, *Laudato Si'* this past May on Pentecost, a church holiday that celebrates when the Spirit of God was quickened in human hearts. In it is this prayer:

God of love, show us our place in this world
As channels of your love
For all the creatures of this earth,
For not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
That they may avoid the sin of indifference,
That they may love the common good,
Advance the weak
And care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
Help us to protect all life,
To prepare for a better future,
For the coming of your Kingdom
Of justice, peace, love, and beauty.
Praise be to you! Amen.

1st Hymn, no. 331 in green book “Blest be the Tie that Binds”

Our first reading today comes from **John 15:9-17**, just after Jesus has spoken of being the vine with us as the branches: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than

this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.”

From **July 1985 Epistle of 300 Young Friends** who were gathered in North Carolina by the Friends World Committee for Consultation from 34 countries and 57 yearly meetings to envisage the future of the Religious Society of Friends: “We have wondered whether there is anything Quakers today can say as one. After much struggle we have discovered that we can proclaim this: there is a living God at the center of all, who is available to each of us as a present teacher at the very heart of our lives. We seek as people of God to be worthy vessels to deliver the Lord's transforming word, to be prophets of joy who know from experience and can testify to the world, as George Fox did, ‘that the Lord is at work in this thick night’ ...Our peace testimony inspires us, yet we move beyond it to challenge our world with the call for justice. We are called to be peacemakers, not protestors. It is our desire to work co-operatively on unifying these points. The challenges of this time are almost too great to be faced, but we must let our lives mirror what is written on our hearts—to be so full of God's love that we can do no other than live out our corporate testimonies to the world of honesty, simplicity, equality, and peace, whatever the consequences.”

2nd hymn “Rooted and Grounded in Love” no. 216 in the green book.

Joys and Concerns

Dear Friends—A second prayer from *Laudato Si'*—
All-powerful God,
You are present in the whole universe
And in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
That we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live
As brothers and sisters, harming no one.
O God of the poor,
Help us to rescue the abandoned
And forgotten of this earth,
So precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives,
That we may protect the world and not prey on it,
That we may sow beauty,
Not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
Of those who look only for gain
At the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the world of each thing,
To be filled with awe and contemplation,
To recognize that we are profoundly united
With every creature
As we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
For justice, love, and peace. Amen.

Our third hymn, appropriate to this week, is “Joy is Like the Rain”, number 236 in the green book.

Children are free to head downstairs in community of youth.

Message:

Dear Friends—I have titled my message today, “Not Sinners, Not Saints” because, with that of God in everyone, we are all Friends and we must seek that friendship, that grounding of relationship that we heard Pope Francis speaking about during his sojourn in the US. He noted to Congress: “there is another temptation which we must especially guard against: the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners”. During his life, so much of what is described in the Bible about Christ is the ways he contended with folks who were so sure they were right. Meanwhile, Jesus concerned himself, and spent most of his time with, the poor and despised. He states clearly in John 15 that he is not our leader, but our friend, and early Quakers took that deeply to heart. We are on equal footing in this world, we have equal spiritual access, that love can bring forth, despite tremendous physical and circumstantial unjust inequality. When we stop judging and start loving, we can find the solidarity that is essential to our mutual survival and thriving. One of the central messages of this Pope, who took the name of the saint who so closely embodies his message, is that the broad society of all people is intimately a part of nature and the earth, and that we must act accordingly, urgently and profoundly. Francis’ message is so similar to the central teachings of many indigenous people with whom he clashed during his US visit, as he raised a saint whose sins we know.

But when we focus on the solidarity, what we have in common with all on this earth, as Naomi Klein observes in the title of her recent book, now a film, “This Changes Everything”. We must bless the ties that bind our hearts and encourage each

other to stay rooted and grounded in love. Doing so allows us to transcend the difficulties we might see ahead, and to be the prophets of joy the young Friends in North Carolina were determined to be. As Jesus said in the reading from John, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” For joy is not mere happiness, nor is it giddy silliness, it is a deeper sense, one that can rest deeper, can fill up, can persevere, can be like the rain, can resist the storm and come out of the storm a more abundant resource.

Pope Francis also said to Congress: “We must move forward together, as one, in a renewed spirit of fraternity and solidarity, cooperating generously for the common good. The challenges facing us today call for a renewal of that spirit of cooperation, which has accomplished so much good throughout the history of the United States. The complexity, the gravity, and the urgency of these challenges demand that we pool our resources and talents, and resolve to support one another, with respect for our differences and our convictions of conscience. In this land, the various religious denominations have greatly contributed to building and strengthening society. It is important that today, as in the past, the voice of faith continue to be heard, for it is a voice of fraternity and love, which tries to bring out the best in each person and in each society...Politics is...an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build as one the greatest common good: that of a community which sacrifices particular interests in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life. I do not underestimate the difficulty that this involves, but I encourage you in this effort.” To be a society, even a society of Friends, we must give up particular, individual interests!

The message of young friends in North Carolina thirty years ago is a very similar one, that, even then was noting and looking at the same challenges. Worldwide, Quakers are quite different from each other, with different visions of Christ and the Bible, and different ways of worshiping and roots in varied cultures. Those young friends found that hard. They, like us too often, started off looking for the saints and sinners, the righteous and the unjust. They stated, “We have been challenged, shaken up, at times even enraged, intimidated, and offended by these differences in each other”, but the atmosphere at that gathering turned, and they began looking for friends.

Sometimes the Religious Society of Friends is noted by historians and theologians as the most extreme version of Protestantism—even getting rid of the church building itself and the clergy. And yet, how often in my life have I found myself beside Catholics in testimonies of peace and social justice. In communities around the world, as was true in Kenya, where I lived for a number of years, both Friends and Catholics, more than most others, operate schools and hospitals and publicly serve and testify. In some ways, though not all, we even find a friend in the Pope of Rome. In these times, we need all the friends we can get. Some have called it the great turning. So many now may have been following false profits (spelled f-i-t)—it is always time for prophecy.

Worship

Last Hymn: no. 215 “The Great Storm is Over” also in the green

Closing: Dear Friends—The clouds shall lift, but even before then, stay rooted and grounded in love, as we have been commanded. We do have each other, as we are. Friends.