

Greeting: Hugh Prather wrote in "Spiritual Notes to Myself": "It's not that there is never a mistake or an evil motivation, but that there is something else as well. Forgiveness is the door to experiencing that something else. Forgiveness doesn't excuse behavior; it looks past it to a greater truth. There is no reward in the world for our spiritual efforts. There isn't even a connection. The payoff for turning to God is more God, not more world." As George Fox wrote: "Mind that which is pure in you to guide you to God."

Our first hymn is from the red book number 259, "Sing We of the Modern City" where our era of global information allows the same sentiment of urban life to reach Poplar Ridge.

Today I have three readings from 17th century Friends. From Francis Howgill, who wrote in 1656:

"If you build upon anything or have confidence in anything which stands in time and is on this side eternity and Being of beings, your foundation will be swept away, and night will come upon you, and all your gathered-in things and taken-on and imitated will all fail you....Why gad you abroad? Why trim you yourselves with the saints' words, when you are ignorant of the life? Return, return to Him that is the first Love, and the first-born of every creature, who is the Light of the world... Return home to within, sweep your houses all, the groat is there, the little leaven is there, the grain of mustard-seed you will see, which the Kingdom of God is like; ...and here you will see your Teacher not removed into a corner, but present when you are upon your beds and about your labour, convincing, instructing, leading, correcting, judging and giving peace to all

that love and follow Him.”

Isaac Pennington wrote similarly in 1661:

“Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion.”

Finally, a 1694 reading from William Penn

“If you would know God and worship and serve God as you should do, you must come to the means he has ordained and given for that purpose. Some seek it in books, some in learned men, but what they look for is in themselves, yet they overlook it. The voice is too still, the Seed too small and the Light shineth in darkness. They are abroad and so cannot divide the spoil; but the woman that lost her silver found it at home after she had lighted her candle and swept her house. Do you so too and you shall find what Pilate wanted to know, viz., Truth. The Light of Christ within, who is the Light of the world and so a light to you that tells you the truth of your condition, leads all that take heed unto it out of darkness into God’s marvelous light; for light grows upon the obedient. It is shown for the righteous and their way is a shining light that shines forth more and more to the perfect day.”

Our second hymn builds on finding the sacred in the everyday and in the world in the people around us, and in ourselves: No. 184 in the green book “What Wondrous Love is This”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Blessings on all joys and sorrows in the wondrous Love that grows from small seeds, that is found at home, that matters in the bustle of the everyday, that sings on throughout eternity. Help us to know the Light of redemption even as we are honest about our doubts and shortcomings. Keep us mindful of the strength in each other that connects to the divine power that links us to those who came before, and that inspires and sustains us now. The Light of day is growing in the season, though winter keeps us inward, but we still can answer that of God in all around, and stay mindful of that of God within. Let us not be overwhelmed. Let us learn from life and from experience, from the inside, and continue to move forward, upward, outward, and not be mired in regret. Let us be enough for ourselves and for each other. Amen

Our third hymn is “Every Time I Feel the Spirit” no. 147 in the green.

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other, to nurture each other in lessons and play in community.

Message:

Dear Friends—It’s a joyous hymn that we just sang, in terms of expressing a bright confidence in connection to Spirit no matter what the circumstance. The hymn we sang before it, “Wondrous Love”, expresses the same confidence, but with an amazed sureness, a solid repetition that brings the eternal down to the self. And then there was the opening hymn, which brings the reminder of the constancy of spirit and human connection to the busier modern context, where we can sometimes feel separated from the Spirit in the crowd, lost or

overwhelmed, where too much can make any one seem not as important and the Inner Light in each not as apparent. One can get lost in a crowd, one can get lost in the world, and, in fact, as George Fox often observed, one can get lost in oneself. The readings today from early Friends all note how outer worldly distractions can become inner distractions.

There are many things inside our hearts, inside our souls, and they are certainly not all light. Some weigh upon us heavily, and others we simply push aside, or shove in there and don't want to think about. That place can be dusty and dark and unpleasant and more filled with more bulky old items that don't work anymore than any barn or basement. It gets so we start to avoid opening that door. But, there are times when we really have to search. To get out the broom and get into the corners. Who put all this stuff in here?

We all know the sensation of having misplaced something and looking everywhere else first, because we really don't want to have to look in that barn or basement. As our reading from William Penn this morning stated: "If you would know God and worship and serve God as you should do, you must come to the means he has ordained and given for that purpose. Some seek it in books, some in learned men, but what they look for is in themselves, yet they overlook it. The voice is too still, the Seed too small and the Light shineth in darkness. They are abroad and so cannot divide the spoil; but the woman that lost her silver found it at home after she had lighted her candle and swept her house. Do you so too and you shall find what Pilate wanted to know, viz., Truth..."

As the western Christian world heads into Ash Wednesday and Lent this week, I find Penn's reference to Pontius Pilate interesting. Penn seems to be saying that it is not about

studying and cross-examining or judging Jesus and his story as a way to Truth, but rather about going into the self, into that barn or basement, into the darkness to find that glimmer of light, that small coin, that mustard seed, the deeper meaning.

The ashes of Wednesday are meant to remind us of the dust to dust when the Garden of Eden was lost, and to send us to a place of penitence, to the forty days of wilderness. But that tradition of giving up something is not simply a practice of repenting and reminding, it is also about making room for something else, of removing a distraction, of setting up some time for the search. We must face the austerity as well as accept the joy of life if we are to grow. Fox had no illusions about sin, and we cannot look at the world realistically and assume that every seed will grow. The conquest of sin or evil is not a casual undertaking. What is important is that the Quaker method of penitence is to concentrate on the Light that is revealed in and illuminates the darkness. Friends raise a reminder to those who are so obsessed with the fallen state of humans and the world that there is redemption. To be focused on wickedness and guilt and to contemplate evil is a poor way of becoming good. It is not just balance we seek, but a tipping point towards good, which is a thing that can be very difficult to find, a thing we might have to nurture and grow to make it large enough to weigh the balance for us. Bending that arc of the universe towards justice is no quick or simple task.

Those barns and basements, those storehouses of memories and experience have some treasures in them, too. Sometimes folks die and leave them for their children to clean out, and sometimes folks move and bring with them boxes that have not been opened since the last move. I don't want to extend this metaphor too far, but for most, the best way of dealing with it all and evaluating what to retain and what has to go, or can be

let go, is to keep at it and do it steadily, a little at a time, and there is usually at least some stuff that it is easy and obvious to throw away. In doing so, there is more chance to find that seed, that coin, that light. There is less in the way. We will feel the Spirit, we will know wondrous love, we will matter.

Two queries, the name Quakers give to the questions one can ask oneself to do some of the sweeping, these from Britain yearly meeting that have something of a Lenten style theme. First: "Bring into God's light those emotions, attitudes, and prejudices in yourself which lie at the root of destructive conflict, acknowledging your need for forgiveness and grace. In what ways are you involved in the work of reconciliation between individuals, groups, and nations?" And, "Be honest with yourself. What unpalatable truths might you be evading? When you recognize your shortcomings, do not let that discourage you. In worship together we can find the assurance of God's love and the strength to go on with renewed courage."

Final hymn is number 265 "The Voice of God is Calling"

Closing: Again, Francis Howgill: "Return, return to Him that is the first Love, and the first-born of every creature, who is the Light of the world... Return home to within, sweep your houses all, the goat is there, the little leaven is there, the grain of mustard-seed you will see, which the Kingdom of God is like; ...and here you will see your Teacher not removed into a corner, but present when you are upon your beds and about your labour, convincing, instructing, leading, correcting, judging and giving peace to all that love and follow Him."

Thanks/Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude