

***Order of Service – August 14, 2016
Jesus and The God of Possibility***

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- James Douglass and Thomas Merton quotes

1st Hymn: Be Thou Our Vision, Green 154

Reading -- “Blessings,” by Ron Wallace, Matthew 19:26

2nd Hymn: Simple Gifts, Green, 271 and sheet

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer --

3rd Hymn: He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands, Blue 41

Pastoral reflection or message

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Let There Be Peace On Earth, Blue 18

Benediction “Mary Oliver” The Fist

Thank yous/ Introductions / Remembrances/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting: Good morning, Friends. I’d like to begin by sharing a quote from theologian and Catholic Worker James W. Douglass that I clipped from a magazine, and have carried in my wallet now for fifteen years now. He wrote:

Einstein discovered a law of physical change: the way to convert a single particle of matter into enormous physical energy. Might there not also be, as Gandhi

suggested, an equally incredible and (as Yet) undiscovered law of spiritual change, whereby a single person or small community of persons could be converted into an enormous spiritual energy capable of transforming a society and a world? I believe that there is, that there must be a spiritual equivalent to $E=mc^2$

He goes on to say that in his estimation humanity is doomed to extinction without this as yet undiscovered capacity for spiritual transformation. And I confess that this summer the news has sometimes seemed that bad. Like we are on a precipice as a planet and a species.

But then, someone will hold a door open for me, or one of my boys will do something genuinely kind after fighting his brother all day, and I think, for a flash of a second, that it **could** be -- it could yet be -- that we're not on a precipice, but on the cusp. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton once said:

At the center of our being is a point ... of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point ... is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak [God's] name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship [and daughtership], our kinship with Christ. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely

It is in everybody, If we could only see it. Let's try. Let's sing together our first hymn, Be Thou Our Vision, Green 154

Readings:

Matthew 19:26

And looking at them Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Blessings, by Ron Wallace

*Occur. Some days I find myself putting my foot in the same stream twice;
leading a horse to water and making him drink.*

I have a clue. I can see the forest for the trees.

*All around me people are making silk purses out of sows' ears,
getting blood from turnips, building Rome in a day.*

*There's a business like show business. There's something new
under the sun. Some days misery no longer loves company;
it puts itself out of its. There's rest for the weary. There's turning back.*

There are guarantees. I can be serious. I can mean that.

You can quite put your finger on it. Some days I know

I am long for this world. I can go home again.

And when I go I can take it with me.

Second Hymn: Simple Gifts, Green 271, also sheet

Prayer

*Oh Name That is Written on Every Heart, write miracles upon ours. Author of all
that is possible, help us to write a new story, be the music in our mouths and the
words upon our tongues, let what comes astonish us. Let our faith be in the
unfinished story, the plot twist, the miracle. Be Thou Our Vision. Heart of our
own hearts, let it be that everything is not lost. Let it be that peace is possible. Let
the gateway to heaven be everywhere, and salvation here.*

Benediction

Mary Oliver, The Fist: an Adaptation

There are days when the sun goes down like a fist, though of course

*if you see anything in the heavens in this way you had better get
your eyes checked or, better, still, your diminished spirit.*

*The heavens have no fist, or wouldn't they have been shaking it
for a thousand years now, and even longer than that,
at the dull, brutish ways of mankind—
heaven's own creation?*

Instead: such patience! Such willingness to let us continue!

*To hear, little by little, the voices—
only, so far, in pockets of the world—*

Suggesting the possibilities of peace.

*Keep looking, Friends. Expect miracles. Behold, how the fist opens
with invitation.*

Message: Jesus and the God of Possibility

When I was accepted into the Masters of Divinity program at Colgate Rochester Crozer, a good friend of mine, who is deeply spiritual but very skeptical about religion in general and suspicious of Christianity in particular, gave me this refrigerator magnet. There's a man standing at a bus stop, wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Let's Talk About Jesus.' And he's saying to the man standing next to him, "It guarantees me a seat all to myself."

I have family members who, while they don't wear t-shirts that invite a conversation about Jesus, infuse family gatherings with the foreboding sense that they're always looking for an opening, a segue to turn the conversation to Jesus. And the Jesus that they want to talk about demands compliance with a whole theology, a whole way of looking at the world, and of understanding our place in it. So having a talk about Jesus means stepping into that theology, it means opening a doorway to a world that is specifically constructed from foundational assumptions that not all of us take as a given, or as THE given, THE ultimate, only Way That Things Are. With these members of my family, talking about Jesus means hearing about a whole way of constructing meaning, where one assumption builds on another, where the foundation is unquestionable beliefs upon which the whole edifice is erected. Those foundational assumptions are often not at all what my foundational assumptions are.

Being enrolled in Divinity school is fantastic because I get to study assumptions of belief and to deconstruct them. I get to ask why we assume what we do about how the world is, about why the mysteries of the universe unfold the way they do, and why the stories and hypotheses we propose to explain those unexplainable mysteries, or to shape the way we think about them and relate to them, do or do not make sense to us. And then, the next step is asking what are the implications of our stories, our hypotheses, our core understandings. What consequences follow from our unseen constructions, here in this world of conflicting assumptions, here where faith meets practice, where spirit meets matter.

And so, when my parents rent a beautiful and secluded cabin in the Adirondacks every summer, and my siblings and I and our families converge for a week

together, I feel very aware of how all of our various invisible assumptions and stories bump up against one another. Sometimes what it feels like is that we actually live in different worlds. We move through this world we share inhabiting personal worlds that are insulated from each other until we are forced to rub shoulders with each other's unseen theological and cosmological constructions. Some of us come to this week together wearing figurative "Let's Talk About Jesus" t-shirts, but some of us come wearing ones that say "Let's Talk About Anything Other Than Jesus."

And that's what it feels like in our country right now. Like our beliefs, our unseen worldviews, and our figurative t-shirts act as shields, as confrontational dares, as ploys to just get a seat all to ourselves, sneering in one way or another, go ahead, I dare you to sit beside me on this journey we happen to be taking together. It feels like our theological, cosmological, political and ideological constructions are arguing all the time, and we do not have consensus about the meaning of even basic foundational terms. We do not share core assumptions. What one person means by freedom, another person sees as restriction and subjection. What one person means by peace, another person experiences as an endless threat of violence. What one person thinks of when he hears the word Jesus is the exact opposite of what another person thinks.

I recently watched a video compilation of footage from political rallies of Donald Trump. It showed a selective, to be sure, but nevertheless deeply disturbing picture of what I judged to be overt racism, xenophobia, violence, triumphalism, outright repetition of lies, a frenzied encouragement of mob mentality, of us against them, of us against those who are not like us, and fear-mongering. I saw people -- my compatriots, would-be seatmates on the bus journey of life, brothers and sisters of this my home, who live in a different world than the one I live in, whose land is not my land but a topsy-turvy opposite land, where up is down and down is up. I felt imperiled by the prospect of a shared world in which their understandings hold sway and I could sense that they would feel exactly the same about a shared world shaped by my understandings. I felt a yawning sense of hopelessness that we could ever possibly cross the chasm that divides us, learn to speak the same language, mean the same things when we say words like freedom, like Jesus. Whatever happens in the next 3 months, whatever happens on

November 8, the country we live in is home to people who experience the same events and circumstances and situations in profoundly different ways, and tell profoundly different stories about them. This is likely to remain true regardless of who wins the presidency.

Unless.... Unless what? Unless something really changes. Unless something transforms the situation in an unforeseen way. Unless there is a *transformation*. That's all. Our country and our world -- we only need a total, beyond what-we-can-imagine-is-possible transformation. No biggie. All we need is to see what is already so: the name of God written in everyone, a point like a diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven, billions of points of light coming together, a spiritual awakening to transform and transmute all the darkness and cruelty of life. It could happen. Did Jesus not say "All these and greater things you shall also do?" For people, sure, it's impossible, but for people centered in God? All things are possible.

The thing is, unexpected things have happened before. On a grand scale. Improbably, billions of years ago, just the right chemical compounds came together in just the right way, and *life* happened. Evolutionary biologist (and famous atheist) Richard Dawkins conceded in 2010 that It was a staggeringly good stroke of luck that we are here. Every animal owes its existence to an astonishing list of contingencies that might just as easily not have happened. And 4.5 billion years of evolution -- an improbably, impossibly long time -- has produced this moment, this time, us: a big brained primate capable of self-reflection, of contemplating what the process that created us means. Deep Ecologists say that we are that part of Creation **recently emerged into thinking**, into the capacity to tell stories about the mystery and the confounding unlikelihood of our own existence, our belonging in this vast universe. And in the tiny blink of an eye that we big brained primates have ruled this corner of the cosmos, we have sometimes reached for something out beyond the limits of the yet possible. Faith in the not yet possible was what urged Quakers to radical imaginings -- like the audacity to envision an economy and society not built on exploitation and slavery, just as one example. Sometimes, Friends, the impossible happens.

I don't assume that Friends share my political leanings but I do know that we are an historic peace church, and we have been on the side of history that speaks truth to power at crucial moments when imagination is precisely what is required of us. We have been so called forth in the past because regardless of theological and social diversity in Quaker faith and practice, we try to adhere to and to set our lives behind That of God, what Thomas Merton described as that center of our being, that spark that belongs entirely to God, in whom ALL THINGS are POSSIBLE. It is still a radical call, to envision a way of Being Alive whose purpose is to seek and find and to try to stand inside the sacred center, The One Who Dwells In All Things, The One of immeasurable worth, beyond appropriation, beyond commodification, beyond proprietorship, equally the birthright of everyone on Earth, including the Earth itself. We don't have to sync our vocabulary with everyone with whom we have disagreement to believe and to act like we believe that this world is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, and therefore there is always hope, there is always the possibility for transformation.

And our time is now. As a line in Carrie Newcomer's "If Not Now" says, "Miracles do happen every shining now and then / If not now, if not now, tell me when..."

and so for us this faith in the potential for the unexpected, the yet-possible, the miraculous must come with the practice of two steadfast commitments. It must mean the courage to embody the kind of belief that uplifts the kinship with Christ that is equally true for all people, and to speak up in opposition when voices that degrade and fail to honor That of God are amplified. And that will lead us right into the second commitment required of us, the holy work of answering and honoring That of God in those we are in opposition to, in those whose worldviews and commitments and stories seem to directly oppose our own. It will lead us to insist on possibility and miracle, that there is more that all of us are capable of than that of which we are currently aware.

Which brings us back to Jesus. It is a very difficult thing to actively oppose and actively love at the same time. But I think it might be our best hope for the thing out beyond our sight, out beyond what we can imagine. I think it might be the way of holding a space in our hearts that is open to the possibility of transformation. I think it might be the way of the faith of early Friends. And I think it might be the

way of Jesus. because Jesus embodied the Way we are still, 2000 years later, trying also to embody. A way of active opposition and active love, an audacious faith in the possibility of transformation, a belief that blessings occur, that there is something new under the sun and there is rest for the weary. That there is a shining center in all of us, a many-faceted diamond, God's name written in all hearts, everywhere. That we can go home again, and when we do we can take it with us. That with God, all things are possible.