

Greeting: "True simplicity consists not in the use of particular forms, but in foregoing overindulgence, in maintaining humility of spirit and in keeping the material surroundings of our lives directly serviceable to necessary ends, even though those surroundings may be characterized by grace, symmetry and beauty. " New York Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*

Our first hymn is #202 from the Green book, "Blessed Quietness"

Our first reading is from William Penn, who wrote in 1693: "It would go a long way to caution and direct people in their use of the world, that they were better studied and knowing in the Creation of it. For how could they find the confidence to abuse it, while they should see the great Creator stare them in the face, in all and every part of it?"

The second reading is from II Timothy 1:6-7. "6 For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline."

Finally, a reading from the Advices of the New England Yearly Meeting: "The power of God is not used to compel us to Truth; therefore let us renounce for ourselves the power of any person over any other and, compelling no one, let us seek to lead others to Truth through love. Let us teach by being ourselves teachable. Friends are advised to witness to the power of Truth and justice and to foster growth of the divine community at home and abroad. While remaining faithful to our Quaker insights, and ready to share them with others, let us seek to understand the contributions made by the people of God everywhere. Whenever possible, let us seek to enter into prayer and work with the wider community of faith."

Our second hymn is no. 140 in the Green book “In Solitude I Come to God in Prayer”.

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Let us know the comfort of God’s presence in prayer, in the Blessed Quietness that calms and heals. Even in our concerns and sorrows, God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and of a sound mind. Let us be witnesses within and to our lives and to each other, not seeing ourselves as advisors or directors or teachers, but as faithful sharers of this time and place in love. Let our joys spill over in this world, and let this world itself be our joy. Let time, in its steadfast and eternal passing, be our friend as we cultivate a society of Friends with all whom we encounter. We pray that a deeper vision, a more comprehensive and compassionate view transcends the complexity of contemporary experience and leads us forward, leads us inward, and out into the world with a sense of common purpose, a clarity of vision, a heart of love. Amen.

Our next hymn is “Lord Whose Love in Humble Service” on the handout to the tune of Beach Spring.

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

Message:

A couple of weeks ago, Andy Simkin shared a message about the Quaker testimony of simplicity and today I’d like to talk about the simplicity of testimony. In our readings today, the message is somewhat about not overcomplicating our encounters with Spirit, not over interpreting or trying to turn things into arguments or proofs. As William Penn writes in the first reading today, we have

creation looking at us, in essence the face of God, the physical manifestation of the Creator if we but look up and consider. We are experiencing another spring in 2017 and what must we do to complicate our lives and distract ourselves not to see it? If we quiet ourselves and look, how could we ever act in defiance of it?

The reading in Timothy emphasizes that the gift of God is within you. You do not have to study or do research or be trained in theology, but simply let love overcome your fear or timidity, let the Spirit rest in your sensible mind, in your full understanding and share it. Lay your hands on it and on each other, embrace it. Look for the messages in others, listen to the actions all across the world. Profound things are often stated most simply. The reading from the New England Yearly Meeting Advices states: “While remaining faithful to our Quaker insights, and ready to share them with others, let us seek to understand the contributions made by the people of God everywhere. Whenever possible, let us seek to enter into prayer and work with the wider community of faith.”

In this holy month of Ramadhan, Craig and I had the opportunity to attend an Iftar dinner this past week, the daily breaking of the fast, and it was stunningly beautiful and meaningful. The next day I spoke with one of my Muslim friends who had presented to us that night and was himself very moved by it. When it was first planned, as part of a national conference, he had his doubts, thinking that it would be more of a demonstration or example rather than a real celebration. But those sharing their childhood and other memories of Ramadhan spoke from their hearts, and in their stories we got the closer direct meaning. It was not a seminar on Iftar or Ramadhan, but a human sharing of how the month and fasting brings one closer to God, more mindful in family and community. And in that time and place we also heard the call to prayer, we prayed, and then we broke fast. It followed the injunction in today’s reading, “Let us teach by being ourselves teachable...let us seek to lead others to Truth through love.”

What a gift, and at a conference that in this action did not just accommodate those who are fasting, but made space for them to connect with one another and to share that connection with those of us who wished to join them. The nature of a national conference also meant that the practice was being shared by Muslims of many ethnic backgrounds and traditions, which also was very meaningful to them, and to us. I am used to providing students and others with late meals and being courteous and aware about those who are fasting, but I had never fully participated.

It is not just the fasting on an individual level that pulls one closer to God during Ramadhan, but the fasting in community and knowing there are those all over the world doing so. Our own practice of silence might be regarded as a method of fasting in worship, a type of fasting in community, to get closer to the sacred.

What can we do to hold God, the sacred, the essential, constantly close to us? How do we stay mindful? All of our hymns today have to do with making that space in our lives. I appreciate that the New York Yearly Meeting statement on simplicity with which we opened today notes that the simple can be characterized by grace, symmetry and beauty. Simplicity does not mean a lack of enjoyment or delight in form or function. Emphasizing humility and avoiding overindulgence helps us see that testimony need not be austere. It is rather that the Truth is not embellished. We need not puzzle over finding Truth in every case, we need just seek to place ourselves always close to truth.

Quakers have many texts. Because ours is an experiential religion we seek to share experiences, to compare notes on each of our own encounters with Light, with our notes of where we see Light shine. These descriptions of spiritual journeys, of meetings, and of life and light experience have great value. The many words seek to approximate aspects of the inexpressible wholeness of the real and gathered sense of God. Recording them and reading them helps

establish the eternity of truth, helps to defy the time and place, even as each particular experience is of one time and place. By defying time, I mean that the same essential experience is being described over and over again, eternally, in us. Many words from a silent people. The irony is that the deep personal experience of the inner light cannot be kept within. It's very nature is something to share even when it is so difficult to describe or pin down as to what exactly is being shared. Just as Friends have written a lot to each other, Friends also have always visited each other a great deal, from meeting to meeting, from quarter, to yearly, to moving around the world. It is a constant conversation with the sacred, simple and direct. Love can be described at a distance, but cannot be truly felt at a distance.

I think that is perhaps the main point in speaking of the simplicity of testimony. It is the day to day and person to person and waking to the natural world in wonder. The inner light is so close to all of us, spoken or unspoken. We need only pay attention. Perhaps that is the fundamental principle of Quaker practices, that they are all methods and ways of paying attention, of avoiding distraction.

So, these two are bound up in each other, simplicity and testimony. We need not make it elaborate or difficult. God is near to us. There are many ways to keep love and light close by, to be reminded that they are always there. Know that they are there. Be always refreshed. Don't make it complicated or get caught up in critique and over-precision. Say what is in your heart, feel it truly, and we will all be closer to the One.

Our closing hymn is number 126 in the Green book, "The Lord Into His Garden Comes" with the second and third verses printed on the handout.

Closing: May the peace that passes understanding keep your hearts and minds in light and love and life, all life.

Thank-yous /Introductions/Remembrances/
Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude