

Invocation

First Hymn #2 All Creatures of Our God and King

First Reading

43You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ⁱ **44**But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.^j **45**that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **46**If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even tax collectors do the same? **47**And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even Gentiles do the same?

Matthew 5:43-47

Second Reading:

“On the Sunday following the end of the Gulf War, I attended a Quaker Meeting. You may be aware that at a Quaker meeting there is typically no formal spoken liturgy. People enter in silence and speak when moved by the Spirit. Of all the comments made that day, the one I remember was by a man who was about my age: ‘I know how to protest war,’ he said, ‘but I don’t know how to make peace.’ It seems that man speaks for most of the world.”

Arthur Caliandro, Senior Minister, Marblegate Collegiate Church

Second Hymn #216 Rooted and Grounded in Love

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Pastoral Prayer

Third Hymn, #266 This Little Light of Mine

In holding the question of what I should bring as the message today, I kept getting a sense to share about how I feel called to respond to the political and social upheaval that has been going on since the last election, one year ago this coming week. The short answer to that question is Love, and the call to Love. Those of you who know my politics, and the vehemence with which I disagree with the policies advanced by the current administration may be astonished by this. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll start with a story which I believe I have shared at least in part here in vocal ministry.

It happened at an American Friends Service Committee corporation board meeting this same weekend, in 2002. As you may remember, that was also a time of great social and political upheaval. The terror attack of 9/11 was fresh in everyone's minds. We had invaded Afganistan. The Bush administration was actively promoting an environment of fear, was demonizing Iraq, and moving us toward that war. Congress had passed the Patriot Act, giving away many of our political freedoms in exchange for the hope of controlling terrorism. Orange Alerts were an almost daily occurrence, and the first wave of tax cuts transferring wealth from the poor to the rich had just been passed. As a Quaker organization promoting peace, we had our work cut out for us. I was sitting in business with over one hundred other Friends from around the country. One moment, I was sitting in my chair, somewhat tired and disengaged, and the next moment I was above the earth, looking down on the North American continent at twilight. Across the northern Midwestern states of Northern Yearly Meeting, which was then my spiritual home, I could see points of light illuminating the darkness. It was made clear to me, over and over again, with great clarity and force, that what connected these points of light was much, much stronger than the shadow spreading itself across our land. Then, I found myself back in my seat, surrounded by other Friends, and I spent time writing down what I had witnessed on the back of the manila envelope holding our packet of papers for the day's business.

I have long sought to understand the nature of that power, the power connecting up those points of light, how to align myself with it, and how to help others to do so, as well. I am clear that that power is the same spiritual force named differently by many who have encountered it: *Satyagraha*, or clinging to Truth, by Gandhi, *Agape*, the Greek word for dispassionate love, by Martin Luther King, *Inner Truth* by the I Ching, the 4000 year old Chinese Book of Changes, and what George Fox referred to over and over again in his journal as "the Power of the Lord was over all." This power,

which I know to be Love, which is Truth, which is God, is the very fabric and structure of the Universe. This Love, from which we all sprang, and in which we “live, move, and have our being,” is not something saccharin or sentimental. It is a fierce power. Gandhi claimed that we had only glimpsed a fraction of its potential.

I have long resonated with the statement that God is love, and more recently, the perception that love is the very physical structure of the universe. But only now is it coming into focus for me that love is not just the fabric of the universe, it is the force and power which started at the Big Bang, and which continues to animate and sustain it.

We can witness this power at work, not only in interpersonal interactions, but in large political and social movements. I cannot understand the falling of the Berlin Wall or the uprising of Arab Spring outside of a framework of this powerful love overcoming seemingly intractable repression.

The first generations of Friends also faced a time of political and social upheaval. Their response to their time was to seek to align themselves with the power of Truth, the power of God, which they knew as the Light, the Seed, the Inner Christ, that which was before time, and which dwells within each of us, acting upon our conscience. And they refused to obey social norms which violated this spiritual compass. They sought a transformation of English society, and saw this as a spiritual battle first, and a political one, second. Quaker historian Doug Gwyn states that

The central focus of their political struggle was to discredit and disestablish the Church of England. They also wrote strongly on behalf of the poor, against corrupt merchants, magistrates, and lawyers, for legal reform, and for religious liberty. But they viewed the state-enforced Church as the key element for reform. So long as human consciences were deformed through forced Church attendance, through listening to university-trained preaching, and through coerced tithe-payments, other social ills would remain largely unquestioned.

Friends did not believe that they could change the rest of English society as long as that spiritual ill was in place. They understood themselves to be fighting what they called “The Lamb’s War,” in which they saw their task to embody the spirit of Christ not only personally, but communally, through the practice of following their individual consciences, and also striving to come to, and live by, a collective sense of conscience.

And in this effort, they put most of their focus on confronting, or letting the Light illuminate, places where they were not in alignment with their own conscience, where they were not living in the Truth. Quaker historian Hugh Barbour states that “By ‘the Lamb’s War,’ Friends meant “the struggle to conquer evil within and without, led by the Spirit of Christ... It was in essence an inward struggle, not an outward one.”

And what, you might ask, does all this have to do with our situation today, a year after the last election? A lot, I believe. Tragically, we face a similar situation now as we did in 2002. The poisons of fear, hatred, bigotry, and willful disregard for truth are actively being promoted across our land. We as a nation are facing the grim reality of being singularly responsible for irreparable damage to this planet we call home. And there is active talk by our nation’s leaders of what has heretofore seemed unthinkable: the growing likelihood of nuclear war. As in 2002, we face a situation which is not only a clash of different political ideologies, but the spread of a spiritual cancer which threatens to do great damage to our nation and our planet. And a spiritual disease requires a spiritual response, not just a political one.

Noted Quaker Thomas Kelly wrote this in the fall of 1938, during the rise of Hitler and the Nazis:

“The times are severe, the need is great, and we must hasten: we all agree. But whither shall we hasten? Two directions we must hasten, in order to plumb the depths and scale the heights of life. We must hasten unto God; and we must hasten in to the world. But the first is the prime need; though the world be aflame by its own blindness and hate and narrow ideals. We must first hasten unto God. (We) whose heads have not rested in the bosom of God are not yet ready to be saviors of the world...”

Most of us have a pretty good sense of what it means to hasten into the world. But what does it mean to “hasten unto God?” A friend of mine for whose spiritual walk I have great respect said to me before the election, “If Trump wins, I’m taking that as a call for me to up my spiritual game.” I think for each of us, “hastening unto God,” or “upping our spiritual game,” is a little different. But at its core, I believe it must be the same, aligning ourselves with love, opening our hearts tenderly and fiercely.

I do not do this well. Faced with a barrage of news on the latest tweet by our President, news of yet more corruption, the destruction of our

nation's social fabric, assaults on science, facts, truth, and the validity of the press, news of efforts to redistribute wealth and resources from the poorest to the most wealthy, or disastrous foreign policy decisions, I have often taken refuge in judgement, anger, and a snarky cynicism born of a sense of powerlessness, rather than keeping my heart open to the pain of where we are as a nation, as a people. I have been up many nights between 3:00-5:00 AM, awash in fear, anger, and a sense of impotent rage. I have also simply stayed away from the news for days and even weeks at a time, just so I could sleep well at night.

Keeping our hearts open is indeed the hardest path. Wendell Berry wrote:

We are called to love the world as God loves the world. Loving this deeply, this openly, will break our hearts. When our hearts are broken wide-open, if we are willing to remain anchored in love, we find our capacity to love magnified. It is a cycle of life and brokenness and life renewed perpetually. Our calling is nothing less than this.

So while I am doing a miserable job of keeping my heart open, it is affording me lots of opportunities for spiritual practice. A lot of what I am doing to "hasten unto God" has been engaging in a practice which is teaching me to be mindful of my emotional state and aware of when I shut down my heart in judgement, fear, self-pity, or shame, and then regain balance and open again to love. I have also become much more faithful in my daily practice of prayer and meditation. And, contrary to well established patterns, I have been diligent about getting enough rest and taking care of myself physically. If I don't do that, the other practices don't have much life in them.

"Hastening unto God," and "upping our spiritual game" is our chapter in this spiritual struggle, our generation's Lambs War, which must first be an inward one, before it becomes an outward one. Yet, if you're like me, it's far, far easier to judge those we disagree with, condemn them, and set to fighting them. While I find this emotionally satisfying, I don't think it works. It fortifies resistance in those I would hope to change. Buddhist teacher Ayya Khema wrote:

"If we divide into camps--even into violent and the nonviolent--and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence within ourselves. We must work on ourselves and also with those we condemn if we want to have a real impact."

- Ayya Khema, "Be An Island"

So I grieve, and I work with my judgement, and I pray, and I try to keep my heart open and connected to God. And, day by day, I choose.

I choose to remember the power that animates the universe, the power of Love, and its potential to create change.

I choose to live a life grounded in that power.

I choose to confront in myself those places which are out of alignment with that power, and to choose Love instead.

I choose to not take refuge in judgement, anger and fear, but to live with the pain of a heart open to what seems to me to be a growing spiritual madness.

I choose to remember that I am opposing spiritual forces which grip my opponents, and to meet them with love rather than demonization.

I choose love over fear, hatred, and division.

What do you choose?

Fourth Hymn: Holy Love, #188

Benediction

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world,

answering that of God in everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing,
and make the witness of God in them to bless you.