

As Way Opens

Message for 7th January 2018

“Do you have the patience to wait ‘til the mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving ‘til the right action arises of itself?” Lao Tsu

“And if he closes before you all the ways and passes, he will show you a hidden way which nobody knows.” Rumi

“As way opens” is a reference to the old Quaker saying that we should “Proceed as way opens” after patient, prayerful waiting for Spirit to move in the world, and open or reveal the way forward.”

Our first hymn is #241 from the Green book, “Lady of the Seasons’ Laughter”

Our first reading is from I Corinthians, Chapter 2: “ We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love God’ but God has revealed it to us by the Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among us knows the thoughts of another except the person’s spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

Our second reading is from Acts 15 about the first church council: “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that they were accepted by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as to us. God made no distinction between us and them, for God purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.’” The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: ‘Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for God. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of them may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the

Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages.’ It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

Finally, in 1660, the early Quaker Isaac Penington wrote: “Even in the apostles’ days Christians were too apt to strive after a wrong unity and uniformity in outward practices and observations, and to judge one another unrighteously in those things; and mark, it is not the different practice from one another that breaks the peace and unity, but the judging of one another because of different practices.. and oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master, to whom they are to give an account, and not to quarrel with one another about their different practices. For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him, and that he walks in his rank, in his own order, in his proper way and place of subjection to that; and this is far more pleasing to me than if he walked just in that track wherein I walk.”

Our second hymn is #68 in the Blue book “Brightest and Best”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Amid our joys and sorrows, the varied paths that lead us to be together in this place, to bring our hearts together, let us be enriched through the wide variety that also makes us one, a more capacious and inclusive one. In the turning year, the turning day, the turning earth, the turning age let us all be steadied in the Spirit while being open to ongoing change. While we experience the way that opens to each of us as personal and to our individual circumstance, let us share the common revelation of how justice

and peace enter the world and enter each of our hearts. As seekers of wisdom from beyond Bethlehem, let us resolve to continue to follow the star, to hear the angels, to offer our gifts, to live renewed. Amen.

Our next hymn is #70 in green “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear”

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear friends—Not all of us stayed up until midnight, not all of us have made resolutions, not all of us can hear the angels, not all of us gave or received gifts, not all of us share this feast of the three kings today, known by many as Epiphany. But each of us can share our part of those things, our perspective, our sense of the Spirit in these happenings, the measure of wisdom that is ours to bring as our gift. We can make the new year, the new dawn, the new day for each other. It is our listening that makes it new, listening to the sacred in the silence and listening to the testimony from each others’ lives and lips. It is our tradition to constantly hear a new message.

One of the aspects of the holiday season just ending is that we hear a lot of talk of tradition, but much of that talk comes through asking each other about each of our traditions—what many might call family traditions, or perhaps simply discussing our favorite ways to observe or celebrate, or in some cases not do so. And in those times of sharing, we hear a very huge variety of traditions, in fact, essentially about each unique configuration of what any individual regards as tradition. I’m sure we’ve all had the experience of siblings or members of the same family not quite agreeing on their own traditions, or expressing them differently, or placing different importance on varied elements of those traditions. I know that I’ve had conversations where someone has taken some time to explain or describe to me a very elaborate tradition and all

of its history and meaning, but then say something like, “but we don’t do it that way anymore,” or “but I don’t do that in my house.” Knowing the form and making the meaning are two different things, and both of them only exist within a context that is always changing. We dip into our reservoir of traditions, constantly adapting and selecting elements that will be meaningful in the present. We adjust in order to have the same internal, deep experience under new circumstances. What we seek to replicate in feeling must be for the people we are now, not those who we were before, and so we build new ways from experience with new friends in order to preserve our old ways and old friendships. We are faithful, with a faith that will be able to proceed as way opens.

Not all of us have patience for repetition, and sometimes the things we once greatly appreciated many times become painful or irritating under changed circumstances. We also often have the unrealistic wish that others will anticipate what we need and behave accordingly without having shared or communicated with them. An exchange of spiritual insights and information is the most likely way to have spiritual needs met, and so we must find openings to these conversations.

It is interesting in our readings today that the first conference of the early church in Jerusalem reached a decision about removing obstacles to participation, about adapting tradition to be open to others. Similarly, among the first members of the Society of Friends was the clear notion that it is the multiple revelations of many different encounters with truth and Spirit that lead to more insight, and a greater knowledge of one eternal sense of God. We learn and grow precisely when we encounter something new, a different idea or method or vista and are curious and want to know more about it or figure out how it fits with what we’ve known before. The wise men were sages, scientists of their day, some might see them as astrologers of some sort, but who as such were curious, who wanted to know more, and sought to find out what

the sign of the star meant. They sought interpretation and meaning and went to great lengths to find it. They were the sort of people out of whom the Quakers came, they were seekers. As Isaac Penington noted implicitly, we have an ever-changing tradition because the Spirit leads, because way opens. And yet, the inner light, the star that we follow each in our own way also leads to one point, one place. There is a tradition of representing the kings as from India, Africa, and Arabia, coming together on a peaceful journey in a search for truth. Herod tries to disrupt them, and to introduce the ways of the world, the politics of power, the sense of jealousy and comparison and deceptive manipulation—‘come and tell me where he is so that I can worship him too.’ It is the Spirit of God who comes to them so that they know not to listen to that.

There are wonderful, consoling, and powerfully meaningful uses of tradition and revelation, but also harmful and limiting and deceitful uses of them as well. This is where we must turn, as Paul does in I Corinthians, to the discernment of maturity, to God’s wisdom, to the patient sense of the Spirit so that we proceed as way opens. It can come in a deep thought in the quiet, in a dream, as to another King, Martin, it did as well. We have heard the angels sing of good will and peace in our hearts, we have seen the star in our souls, we have longed for it, we try to follow it, we can feel lost or doubtful, which is why we need each other on the journey. Even Kings did not try to go it alone. They were three, two or three gathered together—or in this year at Poplar Ridge, four. In any case, be sure to make it a way that is open to all, that our traditions grow and are shared, seek and ye shall find.

Our closing hymn is #76 in the Green, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” but with the traditional John Calkin melody.

Closing: From George Fox in 1657: “Friends, meet together and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was.”