

Do the Hardest First

Message for 14th October 2018

From John 16 when Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane with the disciples “the Spirit will receive from me what God will make known to you.”¹⁶ Jesus went on to say, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”

Our first hymn is green #154, “Be Thou Our Vision”

Our first reading is another from the mystical Sufi poet, Hafiz,
I Got Kin

Plant
So that your own heart
Will grow.

Love
So God will think,
"Ahhhhhh,
I got kin in that body!
I should start inviting that soul over
For coffee and
Rolls."

Sing
Because this is a food
Our starving world
Needs.

Laugh
Because that is the purest
Sound.

A Second Reading comes from John 17:20-26. This is more from the prayer of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane beyond the

disciples and on behalf of us. “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Lord, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.²⁴ “Lord, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. ²⁵ “Righteous Lord, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I have made you^[a] known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”

On the same occasion in John 14, Jesus said “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my God, and you are in me, and I am in you.” And in John 13 it states: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Our second hymn is Green #237 “When In Our Music God is Glorified”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—We are grateful for music, for harmony and rhythm that causes our hearts to synchronize, our emotions to link, as they also do in poetry and prayer. The love we know, the love we are, the love we see, may even the love we pass by be powerful, be felt, transform. As the leaves and seasons change, as tempests rise, protect us in the loving Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter you

promised all to send. Be in us and with us. We pray for a blessing, for a blessing for us all, for sacred insight and steady vision in an unsure world. Our hope is built on nothing less. When we don't know, when we don't believe, let unseen faith, the breath of Spirit in the age that surrounds us, bear us up and make us strong, yes, strong enough. Amen.

Our next hymn is on the handout "That Soul Prays"

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear friends—The wordless beauty of music prays sometimes without knowing, the glorious natural world prays sometimes without knowing, and souls pray sometimes without knowing. The week before last I was in Washington DC for meetings at the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the Quaker lobby in the public interest. A young Friend in her late twenties sought the rest of our advice about clerking and described a situation on a committee she was leading, in the role at a significant level for the first time. The committee reached the end of their time with a difficult issue not quite resolved. While a result was accepted, she did not feel that it was really consensus, but rather a combination of exhaustion and acquiescence. It seemed that they were going along without enthusiasm, though also without true opposition. The sense was not of a non-consensus, necessarily, but of a non-Spirit-led make do. We talked about the process as she described it and learned from one another. In the break I asked her if anyone had ever told her in a clerking workshop that one should always bring forward the hardest thing first? When the meeting for worship with a concern for business first settles is when the Spirit is closest to the business, and when those present have the most energy for attention and creative discernment. When we are tempted first to get the little or quick things out of the way, we are dispelling the energy and focus that the big tasks need. The larger decisions need time and seasoning,

and allowing for maximum time, for initial consideration that even might break for smaller decisions and return can be a wiser course. Love and Spirit and consideration can pick up and sometimes work in the background, even when we don't know that they are working, as our last song described. There are those moments, perhaps not many enough, where we all have suddenly had that clarity of knowing what to do.

What do you do, however, when you feel that you are watching a wrong decision being made? When the process is failing. At the same time that we were meeting at FCNL, across the street at the Hart Senate Office Building were the hearings and protests and decisions of the latest Supreme Court appointment, and even last week another advancement of a federal judge nomination who had been rated "unqualified" by the American Bar Association. When we all witnessed the supreme court nominee give completely intemperate, partisan, and in some cases clearly untrue testimony, the history of his behavior became less important than his present lack of integrity to serve justice. His disregard for that of God in himself and others was on display. In the past, the Religious Society of Friends has gone back and forth between taking on public issues with public witness and pulling away from the public sphere to avoid involvement in war and other evil. Deciding not to be involved, however, is also a political and religious decision.

We live in a nation, as did the first Quakers, that strongly mixes religion and politics, as do most individual people. We watch many decisions being made all around us based on feelings and beliefs, some of those being religious beliefs, rather than on reason and deliberation. It is religion that leads many men and women to regard women as not fully autonomous, capable, and worthy citizens of the nation and society today. The decisions being made are often large and consequential decisions that affect our own lives, neighbors, and communities. In the time of the early Friends, during the Protestant religious wars of Oliver Cromwell in

England, and many others in Europe, violent religion in search of power was a grave danger, as was noble privilege and intolerance and endorsement of a divinely ordained severe inequality. While Quakers knew many sides in those conflicts to be wrong, they engaged them in non-violent ways that sought to invoke a force more powerful from within all people. Is this force and method of a combined reason and deliberation with serious attention to empathetic and discerning feeling and belief, a listening, seeking, and searching approach to a collective sense, still possible in times of strong conflict? All we can say is, that it has been before, and our faith deems it so as the only path forward. We take urgent action, but always grounded in conscience and consideration.

In the face of the evils of privileged entitlement on display on all sides, of naked grabs and assertions of power on all sides, of intemperate argument and expressions of threat and fear on all sides, only love can bring us safely home. Not a soft and sentimental love, but a fierce and profound love. It is interesting that Quakers, often thought of as the most mystical of Christians, to the point of moving beyond specific, historically bound Christianity, are also historically the most scientific. The prayer of Jesus in the garden recorded in John is very different from the story I had heard in traditional presentations of the passion. Jesus is very explicitly and at length speaking to God about us, and about how he and God will live in us forever--that there will be an indwelling Spirit. There is a Christ within, a still small voice, and we can get to it patiently, with purpose, up front, at the most difficult times, together, both methodically and transcendently, working on the hardest things first. Jesus spoke of it directly in John before he left this world.

Our closing hymn is Green #245 “How Can I Keep From Singing”

Closing: “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”