

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa wrote, “My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”

First hymn is green #160, “Holy Spirit, Come With Power”

George Fox, who helped illuminate the Quakerism in all of us, wrote in 1656: “And all Friends take heed of jars and strife, for that is it, which will eat out the Seed in you; therefore let not that harbor in your bosoms, lest it eat out the good in you, and ye come to suffer in your own particulars. Therefore dwell in love and life, and in the Power and Seed of God, which is the honorable, royal state.”

Our second reading is from 2nd Corinthians 9:6-15 “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should give what they have decided in their heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: ‘God has scattered abroad gifts to the poor; God’s righteousness endures forever’ Now the one who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will

go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!”

Our final reading comes from Alison Sharman of Britain Yearly Meeting who wrote in 1986: “I come back again and again in my own mind to this word Truth. ‘Promptings of love and truth’ – these two sometimes seem to be in conflict, but in fact they are inseparable. If we are to know the truth, we must be able to see with unclouded eyes, and then we will love what is real and not what is duty or fancy. Once when I was in the middle of a difficult exercise of Quaker decision-making, I wailed to an older and wiser Friend “How can I speak the truth in love when I feel no love?” Her reply was, “Unless you speak the truth there never will be love.”

Our second hymn is Green #261 “I Would be True”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—With Bishop Tutu, let us be truly human together. Kindle in us the driving power of light, not just illumination, but inspiration. The Seed in us needs both warmth and light. As it germinates and grows, let us be generous with those around us. Let us recommit to the connections between love and truth, for there is much to dare, to laugh, and love, and lift. When conflict and misunderstanding arise, let us go first to empathy and to our common humanity. Let us see the sacred in each other, and answer that of God in all whom we encounter. Refresh us in surpassing grace, and keep us in the blessed community. Keep us together in the Light, so that we see each other more clearly in love, and in a hopeful expectation that we will always be for each other. Amen.

Third hymn: green #250 “Julian of Norwich”

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: Dear friends—Yes, let the winter come and go, for we have spring, not only coming in the seasons according to the groundhog, but coming from within, from the wellspring of hope in our hearts, in our inner light.

On March 5th, the Day of Empathy will bring together thousands of Americans impacted by the criminal justice system to meet with federal, state, and local lawmakers to share their experiences and show the human-impact of a broken criminal justice system. Family members who have lost loved ones to violent crime, formerly incarcerated people, children of incarcerated parents, individuals who have overcome addiction, and many others will join together across demographics and social lines to generate empathy on a massive scale for the millions of Americans impacted by the criminal justice system. This is the 3rd annual Day of Empathy, a national day of action that I learned about through an organization called Love Army. For only love can bring us all safely home. Only love can be sent in to rescue us in an emergency, in an attack, in our defense. Let us see what love can do. Empathy is an important dimension of generosity.

Peter Gabel in his recent book *The Desire for Mutual Recognition* states that deep in our hearts, humans hold a longing for authentic presence with one another, the need to see deeply and be seen. Much like the day of empathy, he looks for moments of what he calls “redemptive mutuality” where we take the risk of loving one another and freeing one another from an existential solitary confinement. Away from that place, we risk finding ourselves reacting to a shortage of love, a lack of empathy, a fear of being alone that may incite us to lash out, to cause harm, to speak with malice or unfair judgment. There are spirals up and spirals down, as George Fox observed in our first reading when he urged us to take heed of “jars and strife”. Instead, we should dwell in “love and life and in the Power and Seed of God, which is the honorable,

royal state.” His use of royal as noble and as a possibility for all people is refreshing, subversive, leveling, and aspirational. When we live and listen generously, as Paul encourages the Corinthians to do, it fosters gratitude, it dispels resentment, it raises the bar. While there is the phrase made popular in recent years “when they go low, we go high”, that statement still poses the sentiment as a we and they. I think what we are urged to do by Bishop Tutu and our readings today is to recognize the moments when we are tempted by the low, and instead go high. There is no “they” about it—everyone is we. Another aphorism that is often attributed to Quakers is the idea of using three sieves before speaking of someone—asking ourselves the questions, is it true, is it kind, and is it necessary. As with empathy, these checks on our expression about others broaden our emotional reactions to a full consideration of context and of impact. Often, in interchanges where someone is offended when there is no intended malice, it is about a disjuncture between intent and impact. Empathy helps to bridge that disjuncture and make it less likely, while the three sieves give anyone some standards that are meant to be absolute and not contingent upon who the person is or what the relationship is to the listener. Do we speak in private the same way that we speak in public about individuals? How do we stay consistent to the promptings of both love and truth?

There are parallels to the three sieve questions--is it true, is it kind, and is it necessary--in many cultures and traditions. Yesterday, I attended a major Chinese cultural performance called “Shen Yun” which is translated as the divine in humanity. There are six major touring companies that perform a new Shen Yun program every year across the world, attempting to preserve traditional Chinese arts linked to a contemporary form of the Confucian and Buddhist traditions banned by the Communist party. They describe their own commitment to the principles of truth, compassion, and forbearance, which are essentially the same as truth, kindness and necessity. These sorts of links that some might be tempted to call

serendipity are common in the weeks when I am composing my messages. I had already chosen my readings and written much of this message when I attended that performance yesterday afternoon, and then there it was, the same message looking back at me from a panorama of a large opera house in a cultural medium with which I was only vaguely familiar. A colleague in my office who originally taught English literature in China before emigrating to the U.S. invited the staff to the performance months ago. I set my schedule in order to be able to attend somewhat out of duty to the office, only to discover that it was directly about my message today. The performers put that intention behind their art and seek to communicate that message to the audience, even as their technique demands that they meditate together on these principles every day. The tremendous effort and discipline in that pageantry and art to inspire an audience is such an interesting ritual. The link of art and religion is so strong in so many traditions. It sometimes comes to the point of art as religion or religion as art, as both seek the profound and the true. They both seek to reconcile the basic contradictions of life and to transcend its evanescence.

Finding these messages in the world and in the heart and in each other is such a blessing for me to share with you, and I learn so much from all of you in both spoken and silent ministry. Those are the promptings of love and truth as we make community from the everyday, as we continue to be human together.

Yes, conflict and gossip arise, resentment and misunderstanding and hurt, but as one Quaker once wrote to me many years ago, these are but the mere pinpricks in the loving mystery of life. I had written to apologize to this older friend for the behavior of some of my friends who I had brought to his home on a lake when we were in our twenties. He looked with empathy on the young and saw beyond his inconvenience and a certain disregard for his generosity. He remained generous, for he knew the deeper source

of replenishment. The daffodils beneath the snow. All shall be well again, I know.

Our closing hymn is Green #330 “As We Leave This Friendly Place” sing through twice

“Now the one who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.”