

***Order of Service -- July 14, 2019  
Us and Them, Invasions and Self-Evident Truths***

*Musical Prelude*

*Greeting -- George Hirabayashi play quote*

*1st Hymn: O Beautiful, For Spacious Skies, Red 68*

*Readings -- Matthew; George Fox; Declaration of Independence; poem*

*2nd Hymn Song of Peace, Green 304*

*Joys and Concerns*

*Musical interlude*

*Prayer -- Teach us the way of peace.*

*3rd Hymn: We Worship God in Many Ways, Green 275*

***Message: Us and Them, Invasions, and Self-Evident Truths***

*Silent worship*

*4th Hymn: God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens, Green 309*

*Closing -- May God Shed His Grace on All of Us.*

*Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts*

*Postlude*

## **Greeting:**

Good morning, Friends. I begin this morning with a quote from a play by Jeanne Sakata entitled 'Hold These Truths,' which dramatizes Quaker pacifist Gordon Hirabayashi's life. As a University of Washington student in 1942, Hirabayashi defied the U.S. government by refusing to register and be interned in the desert with tens of thousands of fellow Japanese American citizens — who were viewed as a potential threat to national security after the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor. Hirabayashi also rejected signing a loyalty oath and doing military service, and for his acts of resistance, he served time in prison. In the beginning of the play, the actor playing Hirabayashi asks:

**Do we, indeed, believe in the existence of 'self-evident truth?' Which, by the very rightness of its being, needs no human justification? And if we say such truths exist, how will they appear to us? In fragments or in full? Over seconds or over centuries? And when they are made known to us, how fully will we see them? Will our vision of them be dimmed by the darkness of human corruption? Where is God? What is country?**

These seem like good Quaker queries for our time in worship today. **And so let us hold them together, and let us sing our first hymn: O Beautiful for Spacious Skies, from the Red hymnal, number 68.**

## **Readings:**

**Matthew 5:44** *But I say to you, Love your enemies. Matthew 7:12* *In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. Matthew 25:35* *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.*

**George Fox Statement of 1651:** *I told them I was come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strife were.*

Second sentence in the Declaration of Independence of the 13 United States of America, delivered in 1776. ***We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.***

**"Ahimsa" by Nancy Ann Schaefer (Sanskrit word meaning nonviolence)**

*What is this you and I? this division, separateness*

*struggling for supremacy —hostile & mistrustful*

*fight-faced, fists raised, one against the other, discordant & destructive?*

*When really there is only one of us — the we of us, the all of us*

*our mystic core immortal, down deep a recognition enfolding dove-winged into*

*cosmic divine ...Let's unlearn this way of war.*

### **Prayer**

*Holy One, God of All the Nations. Teach us the way of Peace. Help us unlearn the way of war. We are frightened, we are sorrowing...our world and our country and the very earth seem to groan in travail, truths seem to splinter and shatter. Let us come into your covenant of peace. Let us know your truth, that it may set us free. Let us hear you, your voice, your Word, in the silence and in the song. Let us know you are before and after. Let us feel you here in this land, and know you shed your grace upon all the other lands of our beloved earth. May our queries for today: Where is God? What is Country? Lead us closer, and closer still, to You.*

### **Benediction**

*May we unlearn the way of war. May we love our enemies.*

*May we hold these truths*

*May the God of all the nations shed his Grace on The We of Us, the All of Us*

*And May we come into the Covenant of Peace.*

## Message

Over the past four or five summers, my two boys, who are now 11 and 8, have periodically made it their mission to attack and knock down the encroaching stands of Japanese Knotweed that are spreading inexorably along the roadsides and creeks near our home. Knotweed, if you don't know, looks like stands of bamboo, with heart-shaped leaves. It's flowers have an incredibly sweet scent. It is native to East Asia in Japan, China and Korea. It's in the buckwheat family. It was brought to England in 1825 as an ornamental, and to the US late in that century. It forms thick, dense colonies that completely crowd out any other herbaceous species, is classified by the World Conservation Union as one of the earth's worst invasive species, and is considered ecologically disruptive in the eastern United States. At the elementary school from which my son Cyrus just graduated, there is a nature trail, a patch of earth on the school property that butts up against Six Mile Creek. Where there used to be ferns, trilliums, asters, elderberry, cat tails, reedy marsh, wild lilies and orchids, and a diverse understory, there is now just mostly knotweed. So, each summer, we've headed down our road where the knotweed is marching up, getting steadily closer to our house year by year, or we've gone down to the school. And my boys become triumphant with the thrill of battle, righteously vanquishing the encroaching hordes, cutting down the advancing guard of rhizomatous invaders, feeling like heroes engaged in a just war, protecting their homeland, while I, conflicted, wonder how the sanctioned destruction fits in with the Quaker peace testimony.

The framework of invasion and battle is one way to understand what's happening to ecosystems that are undergoing massive disruption. Knotweed is just one of hundreds, maybe thousands, of animal and plant species that our species, homo sapiens, have introduced to ecosystems that did not evolve to include them, so that their introduction upsets a balance established over millions of years. Such an invasive species of Fungus attacked bats here in our part of the world, for example, and the bat populations collapsed. This story is being repeated now in just about every ecosystem on the planet, wherever humans have accidentally or on purpose brought in immigrant species. And of course, we know that such unprecedented species migration is just one of the many eco-disruptions that we homo sapiens are imposing upon our biosphere in these times. I mourn the loss of biodiversity in this land of my birth. I feel a great dread at the profound change to the landscape I

know and love, at the disappearance of the familiar, at the dominance of something foreign when I see the knotweed taking over, at the feeling that it is a harbinger of some deeper dis-ease and disintegration at work. At the same time, I recognize the irony of the greatest eco-disrupting, habitat destroying species -- homo sapiens -- deeming any other species invasive, especially when it is the actions of homo sapiens that precipitated said plant invasion. And, as a Quaker, a member of an historic peace church and an aspiring if conflicted and ornery pacifist, I must notice both the ubiquity of battle language throughout our culture, and its utter insufficiency in describing either the challenges we face as a species or our understanding of how we might affect potential solutions. In my lifetime we've had wars on poverty, drugs, and terrorism, but so far they have yet to declare unconditional surrender. Plants are invasive, and migrants are invading. Proclaiming something or someone an enemy can sometimes work like nothing else to create an army of righteous soldiers fighting on the same side, a sense of purpose, an us against them -- a dynamic my boys illustrate with relish in their noble, zealous battles with knotweed. But looking at our bloody history and the long story of human migration, I think we face an urgent invitation to not that warfare doesn't work, for what ails us now. from a certain macro-perspective -- maybe, from God's perspective -- there's a point at which the logic of battle and the language of war ceases to make sense. because on a finite, interconnected planet, *everything* we do unto others eventually is visited upon us. The whole of the law and the prophets is the truth that must become self-evident: what you do unto others *is* done unto yourself. We're all US, caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, as our prophet Martin Luther King Jr. put it.

But. on the other hand, from the microperspective, which where we live out most of our days, knotweed snuffs out trilliums and may-apples, lilies and hazelnuts, and that *feels* an awful lot like a ruthless incursion. From the vantage point of the gutted, shuttered towns that are hollowed out but for the sprawl at the edges, when Desperation, Sorrow, Wretchedness and Want arrive in a huddled mass on our border seeking sanctuary, it can *feel* an awful lot like an invasion, especially if the citizens of those towns have been looking for a reason for the irrevocable changes happening in a beloved landscape, or for someone to blame for their sense that precious things that used to seem plentiful -- like life, liberty, happiness, laws that

protected people and clean water, justice, healthcare -- are all now somehow feeling scarce.

So as I uneasily watch my boys hack away, joyful and triumphant, using their boundless energy in holy and just war, part of me wonders if knotweed is precisely the kind of enemy we are directed to love, a perfect foil, a worthy adversary, a method of evolution, whose capacity for growth meets and exceeds every capacity for violence. Knotweed is extremely difficult to eradicate. Even tiny fragments can resprout, the root system can travel for hundreds of feet, and remain dormant under extreme conditions. despite my boys' efforts at total annihilation, and their obvious enthusiasm for that endeavor, fighting knotweed doesn't work. the logic of warfare breaks down, becomes maybe, an opportunity to reflect on the limits of invasion as worldview, on the point at which dualisms and battlefields become insufficient spiritual platforms to the tasks at hand, on the realization that we've met the enemy, and he is us. Maybe knotweed, and other migrating species, are mirrors, messengers, telling us something about the nature of Us and Them, of Enemy and Friend, challenging us to ask who We think We Are, and just what truths we hold to be self-evident.

Last week, my family joined thousands of other people in Ithaca to watch the fireworks commemorating Independence Day, set off from the southeastern shore of Cayuga Lake. We watched from just across the inlet to the west in a public park. Spread out on blankets and in chairs, with coolers and snacks and an ice cream truck playing "It's a Small World After All" over and over, we came in the early evening, and we waited until dark. There were people of almost every hue, whose ancestors came from many different places. I heard languages I didn't understand. when the fireworks finally began, everyone cheered. As the grand finale built to its crescendo, the rockets' red, blue, and green glare revealed our faces all turned in the same direction, tilted up to the sky. And when the flashes and reverberations and great arcing plumes of sparkling light lit up that sky and surrounded us all in an explosion of white and gold against the dark, hundreds of people -- involuntarily, spontaneously, unrehearsed -- all together raised our arms as one in a universal expression of something like praise, something like elation, something like a joy or a longing that couldn't be contained. And then it was over, and thousands of cars idled for an hour -- a far more mundane expression of

American belonging -- the smell of gunpowder, and exhaust, and a haze of smoke lingered, and so did an afterglow that made people magnanimous in letting each other out into the traffic.

And I felt God was there. I thought of the places on Earth, past and present, where such overwhelming displays of sound and light are fire and fury, shock and awe, human aggression and human suffering, holy war and collateral damage. I thought of what it means to be a part of something larger than ourselves -- like a country or a planet -- how in the course of human events it seems like every "We" has wanted a "They" to define ourselves against. I wondered if God is a "We" that is big enough, loving enough, and wealthy enough, to welcome all of "Them," whoever and whatever they are.

**Do we, indeed, believe in the existence of 'self-evident truth?' Which, by the very rightness of its being, needs no human justification? And if we say such truths exist, how will they appear to us? In fragments or in full? Over seconds or over centuries? And when they are made known to us, how fully will we see them? Will our vision of them be dimmed by the darkness of human corruption? Where is God? What is country?**

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