

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 5, 2010
Philemon 1-21

“Not a Spectator Sport”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

For members of the Religious Society of Friends, known as Quakers, wisdom begins in silence. Quakers worship together in silence believing that when we quiet our voices we can hear the “still small voice” that dwells within each of us. That voice, according to the Quaker faith, is the voice of God that speaks to us and that we express to others through our deeds.

A basic tenet in the Quaker faith is that all people are created equal—and they believe that each person is capable of developing a direct, one-to-one relationship with God. They feel that each individual has access to God through the powerful illumination of the light within. Therefore Quaker worship is a time of sitting together in silence, joined as one body with a sense of expectation, waiting for God to speak directly to those gathered, and to move individuals to offer vocal ministry. If that should happen, a person will stand and deliver the message she or he has received from God.

When Quakers migrated to this country from England in the 1600s, they brought with them their strong belief that “There is that of God in every person.” Consequently, they struggled profoundly—individually and collectively—with the institution of slavery. In 1657, George Fox, founder of the Quaker faith, wrote from England to Quakers in America, “To Friends beyond the sea, that have Blacks and Indian Slaves” to remind them that Quakers who owned slaves should be merciful to their slaves and should remember that God “hath made all Nations of one Blood.” Although Fox’s argument seems far from radical today, his words initiated two centuries of Quaker debate and activism over the morality of slavery.

Quakers are Christians and so it is of interest to us as Christians to understand how this group of thoughtful and devout people of God moved slowly, carefully, taking small, incremental steps toward the realization that slavery was antithetical to Christian tenets and principles.

Quakers only gradually embraced the complete abolition of slavery because many of them owned slaves themselves. There is an expression in Quaker circles that says: Quakers came to America to do GOOD, but unfortunately they did WELL. Many did well because they owned slaves and their financial success was dependent on the free labor slaves provided. Somehow many Quakers tolerated this arrangement even though slavery stood in complete opposition to their deepest religious beliefs.

Throughout the 1600s and 1700s, as Quakers sat in silent worship together, individuals would rise in the silence and speak to the issue of slavery. And together they would pray on the messages they believed were sent by God. Individual men and women took up the cause, and through their own personal witness put the struggle to abolish slavery before their fellow Quakers over and over again. They hoped that slowly all members of the Quaker faith would share the realization that slavery violated core Quaker principles and beliefs.

One Quaker leader who radicalized countless Quakers with his message of complete abolition was John Woolman. For 25 years, John Woolman traveled up and down the east coast visiting Quaker meetings, speaking out against slavery and staying with Quaker families. When he was entertained in homes where the food had been grown, prepared and served by slave labor, Woolman sat quietly at the dinner table and declined to eat—much to the embarrassment of his gracious hosts.

Through individual witnesses such as Woolman's, and the power of the messages shared in Quaker meetings, the commitment to abolition slavery grew among Quakers—slowly, carefully, small step by small step.

At first, led by George Fox, Quakers agreed that slaves should be treated mercifully. And so that practice was adopted.

And then over time, Quakers decided that slaves were not property and could not be inherited, they could not be left to heirs in wills.

Then over time Quakers were led to believe that children born into slavery should be freed at age 28.

Slowly Quakers came to believe that it was acceptable to keep the slaves you already had but human beings should not be bought and sold so no new slaves should be purchased.

Then over time Quakers came to believe no man, woman or child should be OWNED by another person, and that all slaves should be freed.

It was this gradual process, which spanned a full century, that led all Quakers to eventually refuse to purchase new slaves and to free all the slaves that they owned.

It was a process that involved prayer, discernment, insight, confrontation, corporate worship and personal witness. Over time, Quakers not only freed all the slaves they owned but they became brave “conductors” on the Underground Railroad sheltering slaves in their homes and moving them in the night from one safe house to the next. Through their own internal struggle and prayer, Quakers became leaders in the Abolitionist Movement—articulate, committed and courageous leaders.

Let us keep the Quakers in mind when we read the passage from the Book of Philemon that is our Scripture lesson for today. The apostle Paul, writing some 1600 years before the Quakers began struggling with the issue of slavery, is trying to cajole a fellow Christian into freeing a slave “on the basis of love.” Paul is not claiming his apostolic authority, but is writing as one Christian to another, careful not to offend, urging his friend to do what is right. The slave in question, Onesimus, was an early Christian, a “beloved brother” in the faith. Paul hopes that Onesimus will be treated as a brother in Christ and be allowed to travel with Paul as one of his co-workers.

The letter from Paul to Philemon advocating the release of Onesimus reminds us of Paul’s letter to the Colossians in which he writes, “...*there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised... slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!*” (Colossians 3:11). The letter from Paul to Philemon reminds us that Paul was himself a brave and faithful leader who dared to question the accepted practices of his time. In Paul’s writings, including today’s reading from the Letter to Philemon and in his Letter to the Colossians, Paul challenged the established practice of slavery. He wrote both letters in the 1st century. We know that slavery would not be abolished until the 19th century.

Slavery was an entrenched and accepted institution in the ancient world and so it is remarkable that Paul stood up to a practice that was taken for granted in his time. Slavery was in fact an integral part of the Roman Empire. As many as 1/3 of those living in the great Mediterranean cities may have been slaves. In Rome and Italy, the figure was even higher, perhaps as many as 80% of the population was slaves. Originally, slaves came from the ranks of defeated enemies, but by the 1st century CE the main supply came from children born to slaves.

Slavery was the very system upon which the whole economy depended. And yet in his Letter to Philemon, Paul requests freedom for Onesimus. In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul refers to the bonds between the early Christians as one in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, slave and free.

And in his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “...creation itself will be set free from its bondage...and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Romans 8:21)

How is the apostle Paul so clear about the unacceptability of an accepted institution upon which the entire economy depended? How did he know that slavery, upon which the very foundation of economic, cultural, and social life was built, should be questioned and dismantled? How did Paul achieve this insight and what gave him the strength to name it?

The answer is simple: Paul was a Jew.

Paul’s Jewish roots gave rise to his resistance to the evil of slavery.

Paul’s own people were slaves once—his own people knew the horror of being owned and beaten, worked to the bone to the edge of collapse, robbed, dismissed, and viewed as sub-human. Paul’s own people knew the pain of being enslaved.

And so Paul, a good Jew, knew that the institution upon which the very society was built was immoral, unjustifiable, corrupt and soul-deadening. And so he wrote and witnessed, cajoled and prodded, taught and preached, modeled and nudged. Paul did what he needed to do to begin the process of questioning the practice of slavery. And that questioning would last for millennia.

What Paul is saying, in contemporary terms, is that Christianity is not a spectator sport. The Quakers eventually decided the very same thing. We cannot, as Christians, stand at the sidelines and watch life, politics, culture, out there as if the everyday practices and institutions around us do not influence our choices, our decisions, our behaviors, our personal witness. Christianity is not a spectator sport; we cannot sit placidly in the bleachers believing one thing and watching something radically different occurring before our eyes, and not get involved. Christianity is not a spectator sport—what we believe is connected to what we do, what we say, how we act, what positions we hold, what we risk, how we live.

Some 2000 years ago, Paul raised questions about an accepted practice, custom and tradition. In his Letter to Philemon, Paul is in effect raising a question for the whole early Christian community—not just a private affair between him and Philemon with Onesimus waiting for a verdict.

Some 1500 years later, Quakers took up the same question and struggled profoundly with the chasm between their beliefs and their behaviors—eventually coming forward as passionate leaders in the fight for equality.

Our faith calls us to examine the common practices, customs and traditions in our time, in our world that are accepted or ignored and question their legitimacy. Our faith calls us to leave the bleachers and come down onto the field and engage.

And so we must consider what practices, customs and traditions in our own time would fall before the power of the Gospel no matter how comfortable we are with them because they are part of the culture in which we live, as familiar and perhaps unnoticed as the air we breathe. Slowly, like the issue of slavery and the Quakers' struggle with that institution, slowly the Gospel's power will make it clear to Christians that certain accepted practices are unacceptable.

Today, for example, many churches are condemning human trafficking. As people of faith, our voices are being raised—like Paul's, like the early Quakers—on behalf of those held in bondage even in our “enlightened” age. In the Letter to Philemon, Paul is exhorting Philemon to remember who he is as a follower of Christ. If we remember who we are as Christians, won't that affect the choices we make, how and when we raise our voices to oppose accepted customs and practices?

And so today I raise questions and I invite all of us to pray on these concerns: What practices that are ignored or accepted today demand that we step out of the silence and bring to bear our faith, our witness, our voices, our resistance? How can we be like Paul and raise unpopular issues with sensitivity and skill, commitment and persistence? How can we be like the Quakers who wrestled individually and collectively with an accepted evil until they could no longer be complicit with that practice?

It has been said that religion at its best serves to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

Where and how are we comfortable, too comfortable, looking away, disengaged with evil practices in our world today?

Christianity is not fun. Not easy. Not restful, not cozy, not quiet, not apathetic, not complacent, not smug, not uninvolved, not meant for bystanders or spectators.

If we are true Christians, it means we are Christ-followers. And Jesus did not stand on the sidelines. Like him, we are called to confront the issues of our time. To think and pray alone and together, to raise difficult issues, to talk and disagree and talk some more, to struggle and resist and work together.

Thank God we have models—Jesus, Paul, the Quakers. And we have each other. Let us embrace the issues of our time together, head-on, with courage. And, when necessary, let us raise our voices in protest in the proud tradition of those in our faith who have gone before.

Amen.

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