

John Sampson

“Friends”

Text: Excerpt from George Fox’s *Journal*

Preached at KVCC

August 25, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today we welcome the Quaker tradition into our worship. We welcome it through song and silence and readings. We welcome it by welcoming Michael, a member of the Saratoga Springs meeting. We welcome it by acknowledging the members and friends of our own congregation who may consider themselves Quakers, or have been deeply moved and influenced by the beliefs and worship and community of the Society of Friends. We welcome this tradition by

remembering that the silence of our prayer time came to us by a Quaker, as a spiritual practice to quiet our hearts and minds, and open them to the stillness of God already present.

We welcome the Quaker tradition into our worship this morning because you have asked for it. Members and friends of our congregation, through the Interfaith group led by Alice Boutte, explicitly asked me if we could to invite Quakers to share with us something of their spiritual path. But this desire for dialogue between spiritual traditions isn't just held by the Interfaith Group. About a year ago I asked everyone present in worship one Sunday to write down your hopes and dreams for the future of our church, and share them with me. One of the things you told me was that it was important to you, to our gathering of spiritual seekers, to hear from those who walk a different path to God than we do, who use a different spiritual and liturgical language than we do to connect to the Spirit of Love that founded our world.

We welcome the Quaker tradition into our worship of God today as a response to this congregation's desire to make connections between the life of our church, and the paths walked by others. In this welcome we thank God for all of the ways she has revealed herself to humanity across time and space. We thank God that our hearts speak many languages of the spirit, and that we have the opportunity to find the language that best expresses our own experience of the Divine, and allows us to more deeply understand what God might be up to in our world.

This multiplicity of nourishing spiritual traditions, of multiple spiritual languages, is a truth that we know from our own lives. Here in this congregation sit people from all kinds of religious backgrounds. Here among us are people who claim dual citizenship in this church, and in one, or more, other faith traditions. Here in our pews sit people who are hungry to learn more about other

traditions as a way to understand the reality of our spiritual lives, and who may feel that traditional Christianity doesn't always give us everything we need to get there. Here in our pews are people who speak Buddho-Christian, and Progressive Christian with the unmistakable twang of Southern Baptist. And there are some who speak nothing but straight up Congregational. And others who know only Athiest. Here in our church many of us speak a spiritual creole or patois.

Today we welcome the Quaker tradition into our worship because we understand the validity of many spiritual paths, and we also know that we don't need them to be reflections of our own personal beliefs, but can allow them to exist in their own difference and particularity. We welcome the Quaker tradition into our own frothy mix of spirituality with the open hand of friendship.

And so, as we extend our spiritual friendship this morning, who is it we are welcoming?

Now I am not a Quaker, so I don't want to appropriate what it means to be Quaker. I leave that to the Quakers. But what I will share with you this morning is the effect the writings and history of this tradition have had upon me.

A couple of months ago our Faith and Issues book discussion group read excerpts from the *Journal* of a man named George Fox, who lived in England in the 17th century. Fox was an unexceptional man in terms of wealth, and social standing, and education.

But, for whatever reason, and Fox never fully explains why he thinks it might have happened to him, in 1647 he began to have powerful spiritual experiences, which lasted for the rest of his life. In these experiences Fox came to understand his Christian faith directly, and

not through the teachings of the church, and tradition. He began to understand God, and Christ, in ways radically different from what his family, and the church, and his neighbors believed. This led him to not only believe differently, but also live and worship differently. He began to address everyone in the same way, regardless of social standing. He named the days of the week differently. He began to forcefully speak out against war. And he spent the rest of his life traveling and sharing the truths, which had been revealed to him, with anyone who would listen, even if this meant he ended up in jail, and was persecuted.

Here is an excerpt from Fox's *Journal*, which I think has meaning for us here this morning, whether we call ourselves Quaker, or not:

“So I called all people to the true teacher, out of the hirelings such as teach for the fleece and make prey upon the people, for the Lord was come to teach his people himself by his spirit, and Christ saith,

‘Learn of me; I am the way’ which doth enlighten every man that cometh into the world, that all through him might believe.”

Can you hear in this statement the radical vision of humanity revealed to Fox? You may have missed it; it may have seemed like he was simply expressing a common Christian belief that Christ is the one way to salvation.

But listen closer.

Here I hear Fox saying that the light of spirit enlightens every human who comes into the world.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples that he is the light.

In Matthew, and the non-canonical gospel of Thomas, Jesus says that you, referring to his disciples and close followers, are the light of the world.

But in Fox's quote I hear him telling us that all humanity holds the light of God's spirit by the simple fact of being born.

All humans. No matter when or where they are born. No matter what spiritual tradition they belong to, or if they belong to no tradition. No matter race, or gender, or who they love, no matter ability. All of us, and all of the people we will ever meet, carry the light of God within them.

We welcome the Quaker tradition into our worship today and thank all of the Friends over the centuries who have reminded us that the light of God lives in each and everyone of us, and that it is not the gift

given to a select few based upon their perfection, but a consequence of what it means to be human.

I am not a Quaker, but I hear these words from George Fox, and I am profoundly moved. And maybe you are too. Because when I hear these words I see the spiritual equality of humanity that can give rise to an ethic of brotherhood and sisterhood among all of God's children. What a gift this insight is for all of us here today, and to all humanity wherever we may live.

We stand at a moment in our nation's history that is marked by violence, and shootings, a loss of common purpose, deep political and socioeconomic division, and I see Fox's insight regarding the spiritual equality of humanity reflected in the work of another Quaker. Edward Hicks' painting, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which is reproduced on the cover of our bulletin, gives me hope and joy. There in the foreground of the picture are a group of animals tame

and peaceful, and babies crawl among them without worry or anxiety. They know these animals will never hurt them. This image is a representation of the prophet Isaiah's words of hope for the future.

But look a little more carefully, to the left side of the painting, and in the background is William Penn and other Quakers, shaking hands in friendship, with the Native American people of what came to be known as Pennsylvania. These Europeans could shake the hands of the indigenous people of America because they could see the light of God living within them, even though the Native Americans had never heard of Christ, or his teachings.

What a different image this is from the images in our news media of how our nation is welcoming those coming from foreign lands to our home today.

This picture by Hicks, and the actions of Penn and his group of Quakers, is an image of hope and joy realized in the present, and in this world, not in some distant end time, in some heaven. It reminds us that violence and division aren't necessary, and that there is a different way to live our lives, and a different now that is already possible for our lives and our nation, if we want it.

To hear Fox's words of blessings, and to see Hick's image of peace among the animals, and to remember the spirit of friendship and peace in which Penn and his group of Quakers engaged with the Native Americans when they first settled in Pennsylvania, is why we have welcomed the Quaker tradition into our worship this morning. Because it offers us a gift of vision, that isn't absent from our tradition, but perhaps more pronounced and recognizable within the theology and history of the Quaker tradition.

So thank you. Thank you Michael for coming and joining us in worship today, and thank you for helping us come to understand the Society of Friends a bit better. Thank you to all the members and friends of this congregation who are connected to the Quaker tradition, for the ways you have shared with all of us from your own spiritual journeys. Thank you to George Fox, and all of the other Friends, who have helped our community and our nation better understand how the light and presence of God works, and how peace is of sovereign value in the world. Thank you to Edward Hicks for helping us to visualize what a prophecy looks like when it comes to fulfillment in our own nation's history. And thank you to William Penn for showing us how to live spiritual truth in the messiness of our ordinary, modern lives.

And I thank God, for all of the spiritual paths she offers to us, her children. She loves us enough not to demand that we reach out to her in only one way, in only one voice, in only one tradition, but

according to the diversity of life inherent in what it means to be
human.

Amen.