



Teach Me Your Way, Oh Lord

Tom and Liz Gates
(Philadelphia Yearly Meeting)

Sunday meeting for worship
at the 21st Triennial Gathering
of the Friends World
Committee for Consultation
King's College, Auckland,
Aotearoa/New Zealand
January 18, 2004



Introduction

These messages were presented to the plenary meeting for worship on the first Sunday morning of the Triennial, before the gathering settled into unprogrammed worship.

The source for the graphics is GreenFlame Graphix, specialists in Maori design. The spiral shape in Maori art, below and on the covers, symbolizes the unfolding of a new fern, and in general is symbolic of new birth and new growth. The web site for GreenFlame Graphix is: <http://greenflame/maoriart.net/>



Scripture Reading:

“...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8

Liz: Tena koutou, Tena koutou, Tena koutou katoa.

Tom: Hamjambo Marafiki.

Liz: Bon jour, les Amies.

Tom: Buenos días, Amigos!

Liz: Good morning, Friends.

Liz: Teach me your way, O Lord,
that I may walk in your truth;
give me an undivided heart...

Psalm 86:11 (NRSV)

I stand before you this morning, struck by the irony of having been asked to speak in worship. For the past year and a half in my home meeting I have been mute – words have not come into my heart. I have felt dry, remote, lost, alone, isolated; even abandoned; there have been times when all I could do in meeting for worship was weep. The deep and abiding assurance of God’s love and guidance I had always known evaporated, leaving behind a void I have never experienced before. For months I have been saying with the Psalmist:

Hear my cry, O God; Listen to my prayer
From the ends of the Earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;...
I long to dwell in your tent forever
And take refuge in the shelter of your wings

Psalm 61:1-2,4 (NIV)

And yet, here I stand before you today.

The pain of this estrangement, this dark night, has confused and bewildered me, yet I am coming to know that it is a path I do not walk alone. God lays it before many of us; it must be navigated if we are to mature in our faith, to grow in our capacity to love. Faith

alone allows me to continue to trust that God walks beside me even when I can't feel God's presence.

In preparing for worship this morning, I have been thinking about what it might mean to be a "faithful witness." In English, the word witness can be either a noun or a verb. A witness is a person who observes or who testifies. The verb "to witness" can be either active or passive. A person can witness to the truth through words and actions – active witnessing; or a person may witness things – simply observe –passive witnessing.

Can I be a faithful witness when I walk in this dark dryness? I am learning that I need only open my eyes. When I allow myself to see – **really see** – the staggering variety and beauty of the world, I know that God is real. When I witness the tenderness of a son walking with his aging father or the compassion of a mother for her daughter with cancer, the substance of Love stands before me. The God who loved us first is there, teaching, waiting, watching, hoping. Thomas Merton has written that, "even the desire for God is pleasing to God". Even in my dark night, the desire for God has not left my heart.

Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again – a seemingly impossible feat. Yet in this life, we all have times when we need to stop, to rest, to wait, to struggle. Before every new birth, there is a time of dark incubation, of growth in the quiet. We must be knit together in new ways while we wait in pregnant expectancy for the Light that is always there to steal into our hearts and illuminate the path ahead. The prospect of this new birth can be so daunting, it seems like death. Near the end of his life, Jesus told his followers,

...unless a grain of wheat falls
into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 12:24 (NRSV)

The old must die for the new to become.

The idea of “dying to the old self” is hard to grasp. Recently a story book, *Hope for the Flowers*, has helped me to see it in a new way. The book tells about two caterpillars and their quest for a meaningful life. One of them meets an old, gray caterpillar who tells her it’s possible for her to become a butterfly. She doesn’t know what that would mean and asks him, “What is a butterfly?” He answers, “It’s what you are **meant** to become....” She asks how one becomes a butterfly.

“You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar.”

“You mean to **die**? ...”

“Yes and No... What looks like you will die but what’s really you will still live. Life is changed, not taken away....”

- *Hope for the Flowers* (p. 75)

In the end, she takes the risk, enters the dark of the cocoon and dies to her old life, becoming what she was meant to be. Parts of us need to die in order to be transformed. Giving birth to new life is both agony and joy.

And so it is my prayer that with time, I can move forward, that we can move forward, move from passive to active, can be born anew and sing a new song – one that God plants in our hearts – that our hearts of stone will be transformed into undivided hearts of flesh.

Teach me your way, O Lord,
and I will walk in your truth;
Give me an undivided heart...

Psalm 86:11



Tom:

Liz's thoughts leave me with two questions. First, what is it to which we are called to witness? And second, what is it that leads to transformation? I think these questions are related, because I suspect that in the end, what we are called to witness to is that which transforms us.

Liz reminded us of Jesus' saying about the grain of wheat that must fall to the ground and die in order to bear fruit. In Luke (chapter 8), Jesus gives us a similar metaphor. In the parable of the sower, a man went out to sow grain. Some seeds fell on the path, some on rocky ground, some among the thorns, but some fell on good soil and bore fruit a hundred fold. When the disciples ask him about the meaning of the parable, Jesus by way of explanation, says "The seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11).

The Epistle of James picks up on this theme:

"Submit to God and accept the word that
God plants in your hearts, which is able to save you.
[Furthermore] do not deceive yourselves
by just listening to the word; instead, put it into practice"
(James 1:21-22, Good News Version).

Or, as the King James Version says: "Be not hearers of the word only, but doers."

This seed, which is the word that God plants in our hearts, the word that is able to transform us, is in the Quaker understanding, not just the Bible. Rather, it is *the word* of John's Gospel, the *logos*:

"In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God, and Word was God ...
all things came into being through this Word ...
what came into being was life,
and the life was the light of all people..."
(John 1:1-4).

So the word that we are speaking of was from the very beginning, before people, before books. It is the Word which the author of Deuteronomy says is not far off, but very near to us, in our hearts (Deut.30:14). Now, the purpose of any word is to reveal. If I speak a word to you, it reveals my thoughts, reveals what is inside of me. In the same way, the word of God reveals God to us. That

is why George Fox, following John's Gospel, says that it is Christ who is "the Word of God", because God is revealed to us most completely through the Jesus of history and the inward Christ today.

One of the things that I love about our Quaker forbears is the rich vocabulary they used to talk about spiritual reality. We have already mentioned two, the Seed, and the Word. They also talked about the Light, the Light of Christ, the Inward Light, the Inward Christ, the Inward Teacher, the Holy Spirit, the Wisdom from above, and most often, simply Christ. Rooted in the New Testament, these are all ways of speaking about that divine mystery which is able to transform us. And it is these to which we must witness. Jesus before Pilate said, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). We Quakers talk about our testimonies. Properly understood, these testimonies are how we testify, or witness, to the Truth of our inward transformation, wrought by God. William Penn said of those first Quakers: "They were changed people themselves, before they set out to change the world". We need to remember that.

Despite this rich vocabulary and tradition, Quakers today face a great obstacle when we talk about transformation. The obstacle is this: we are good people; good people, with a good reputation. So good that we are often tempted to think, that if only others were more like us, the world would be a better place. We are sorely tempted to first change the world, instead of starting with ourselves. But, in our journey together over these last several months, the journey of darkness to which Liz alluded, we have come to realize that at some level, we are all broken people, broken people in need of healing, in need of transformation, in need of God's grace. At some level, we are all caterpillars, not yet willing to trust in the possibility of flying, not yet willing to become what God intends us to be.

I want to return to the image of the seed, which I find particularly helpful in thinking about the spiritual life. As anyone who has planted a garden knows, we can put a seed in the ground, and we can work to create the proper conditions, by fertilizing and watering and weeding, but we cannot make the seed grow. Only God can do that. Likewise in the spiritual life: we can and should work to create the optimal conditions, but transformation comes from God. Listen to the words of Isaac Pennington:

“Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sows in thy heart, and let it be in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee...”

The Apostle Paul makes much the same point (I Cor. 3:7-9, GNV). Who plants and who waters is not important. “It is God who matters, because God makes the plant grow... We are partners working together with God ... and you are God’s field,” or, in other translations, God’s garden.

We are God’s garden ... what a beautiful thought. But I never fully realized how beautiful until I read it in my Swahili Bible: *wewe ni shamba ya Mungu*. You are God’s *shamba*. Now, as our Kenyan Friends can tell us, in Kiswahili, a *shamba* is a garden or a field, but it is also one’s homestead, the place where you were born. Even if you move to the city to live and work, it is the place you will always call home. You return there at least once a year, hopefully to plant some maize and live as your ancestors did. It is the place where one day you will be buried. Even when circumstances take you away, your *shamba* is where you long to dwell.

To say, then, that we are God’s *shamba* is to say that we are where God longs to dwell. It is in our hearts that God longs to plant this seed, and see it come to fruition. God longs for us, just as we long for God. It is from this longing that God sends forth his Word, his Light, his Grace: God’s self-revealing initiative, surrounding us, inviting and waiting for our response. Thomas Kelly wrote that in this modern age

“we suppose [that we are] the initiator and God the responder. But the Living Christ within us is the initiator and we are the responders...

All our apparent initiative is already a response, a testimony to [God’s] secret presence and working within us”

(Testament of Devotion, p.30).

We are God’s *shamba*. It is God who chooses the seed, and plants it. Our first task is to wait, to notice, to really see: to witness God’s initiative, in the passive sense. Then we water and nurture and respond to the seed: to be witnesses to God’s truth in the active

sense; to be not just hearers, but doers of the Word. It is this which can transform us, and this which, through us, can transform the world. It is this to which we are called to be “faithful witnesses”.

Closing Prayer:

Loving God, creator and sustainer of all life,

Thou at the heart of all things:

Teach us your many names.

You are the Word, spoken from the very Beginning;

The Seed, planted in our hearts.

You are the Light which enlightens all people;

The Spirit which gives life.

You are the Bread of Life which nourishes,

The living Water which alone can quench our thirst.

Open our lives to your transforming presence.

Teach us, guide us, lead us, forgive us, transform us.

Give us the courage to become what you intend us to be;

The courage to become faithful witnesses.

Amen



About the Authors

Tom and Liz Gates live in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and are members of Lancaster Monthly Meeting. They have lived and worked with Friends in different corners of the Quaker world, both programmed and unprogrammed. They both seek to live more deeply into the gifts God has given them.





About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

Printed 2004,
with permission of the authors,
by the
WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation,
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102-1498 ■ USA
Tel: 215-241-7293 ■ Fax: 215-241-7285
E-mail: Americas@fwccamericas.org
Web: www.fwccamericas.org

jointly with
Friend World Committee for Consultation
4 Byng Place
London WC1E 7LE ■ UK
Tel: (44 20)7388-0497 ■ Fax: (44 20)7383 4644
E-mail: world@fwcc.quaker.org

