

Epistle | 2020

“Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing, compared to love in dreams.”

Ray Geers, of Cincinnati Friends Meeting, used that quote from *The Brothers Karamazov* in his Bible study on the scripture that grounded this year’s sessions: Micah 6:8. It is a familiar verse to many Friends: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?”

We are unaccustomed to thinking of love as harsh or dreadful, but to be truly merciful requires us to comprehend the depth of pain of the one who needs mercy. Ray illustrated this with the parable of the Good Samaritan, pointing out how the extravagance of the Samaritan’s mercy is fully seen against the backdrop of the injured character’s pain and the indifference of the passers-by. Ray encouraged us to think of love in experimental ways, as scientists exploring the field of love. He gave us these queries: “How can we stop tripping over the threshold between knowing what to live and actively living by what we know? How can we walk gracefully over this threshold between knowing what the Lord requires of us and actively living a life of love?”

While we chose Micah 6:8 well before the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the ensuing national and local conversation about dehumanizing and deadly police tactics, civil rights, and racial justice, we found that the prophet’s words spoke pointedly to our present faith concerns. Together we felt an urgent concern to respond to God’s call to action—if we could discern that call—at this moment when our corporate sins as Americans have been displayed so clearly before our eyes and hearts. With more energy and concord than your correspondents can ever remember, Friends freely discussed social issues like racism and public health and what we can do about them.

Throughout our sessions—in business, lectures, bible study, and small groups—we kept returning to this question of action. How do we act justly? How do we become people who love mercy? How do we come together to walk humbly before God?

But we must also acknowledge, before we go any further, that this year’s gathering wasn’t, remotely, anything like those in previous years. Our annual sessions in 2020 were held almost entirely on the Zoom video conferencing platform, although a small group of people gathered in the library at Wilmington Friends Meeting—socially distanced and wearing protective masks—to video conference from the same location. Many normal features of Yearly Meeting sessions were lacking: there was no sitting down to share a meal, no fundraising for mission projects, no hallway conversations, no singing together.

Gathering over Zoom presented new challenges. Rather than using our voices to express approval or disapproval of minutes, we held red and green items up to the screen. When we wanted to gather in small groups, we were shuttled into Zoom breakout rooms. We made errors—especially in unmuting ourselves—and we forgave one another for errors.

We rejoiced in seeing friendly faces, though, even if they were just little boxes on a screen. On Sunday morning we experienced particular joy in recording the gifts for ministry of two

Friends—Hannah Lutz of Ada Chapel Friends Meeting and Miriam Speaight of Springfield Friends Meeting. Though these were the first virtual recordings in our history, they served as confirmation that however the world is changing, the Spirit is still working in us and with us.

In his workshop on clearness committees, Paul Buckley reminded us that answering the query Micah poses—what does the Lord require of thee?—is best done in the context of a worshipping community. We need spiritual community in order to rightly discern the voice of God.

Throughout the past year, an envisioning committee has been meeting to help us discern what God is calling Wilmington Yearly Meeting to become. They began that process by asking Friends for written responses to the unfinished statement, “Wilmington Yearly Meeting is” The envisioning committee heard that we are a Christ-guided community, a public Quaker presence in our various communities, a force for ministry coordination, a vehicle for affiliating with broader Quaker and Christian organizations, and a spiritual family. At our next Permanent Board meeting, the committee hopes to offer a plan for a new organizational structure that will free us to act together in love.

Wilmington College Interim President Erika Goodwin, reporting on the College’s plans for re-opening this Fall in light of the challenges of COVID-19, showed us how humility is necessary to ensure the safety of a community. This is a time at the College, she said, when we have to become learn-it-all, not know-it-all.

In her Saturday morning Bible study, Miriam Speaight spoke to us about the importance of compassion. She argued that compassion—loving mercy, as Micah would have it—must begin with a feeling of distress or discomfort. If we allow ourselves to pay attention to that anxiety, we can come to a place of calm from which we can act. When we act relationally, we create connective bonds of love that address our discomfort—and the pain to which we are witness—rather than denying that pain.

We could see this move from distress to creative action in how our constituent congregations have been moving through the pandemic. Both Miami-Center and Friendsville Quarterly Meetings cancelled their spring meetings to avoid bringing people together, and most of our Monthly Meetings have been physically closed for some period of time; many are still not meeting in person. COVID-19 hasn’t stopped Wilmington Yearly Meeting, though. Friends are creating self-directed worship services, recording messages for broadcast over the radio, going on Facebook Live, gathering congregationally over Zoom, staying in touch via email, hosting drive-in services, starting YouTube channels, and sharing fellowship from the foot of one another’s driveways. And more, we’re sure!

Our financial discussions were also underlain by a concern for action. We wanted to know what the budget required of us. What does this budget translate into for my Monthly Meeting, or for me personally? What is required of us to make the ministries of Wilmington Yearly Meeting successful?

Micah's call to act justly rang through both the USFW Lecture, delivered by Elizabeth Newby of Cincinnati Friends Meeting, and the Peace Lecture, delivered by Paul Moke of Wilmington Friends Meeting.

Ray Geers spoke of the threshold between knowing what the Lord requires of us and actively living a life of love. Elizabeth Newby offered one way over the threshold, as she shared some of her childhood memories of growing up as a vulnerable Mexican migrant laborer. As Elizabeth told her stories, she challenged us to see "immigration issues" as the stories of human beings trapped in a merciless system: people who are fully children of God and fully deserving of our emotional engagement, of love and mercy. God asks us to be willing to sit honestly with the discomfort of knowing that migrants are suffering—allowing ourselves to be horrified by the reality that families are separated at the border, children are placed in cages, refugees are sent back to be murdered in their home countries. We need to be open to grief and outrage so that we can move into grounded loving response.

Paul Moke, in his lecture on the work of the American Friends Service Committee during WWII, paid special attention to the AFSC's unofficial responses—to the fieldworkers, largely women, who rescued hundreds of Jewish children from concentration camps while the AFSC's official response concentrated on mediation and feeding programs. These fieldworkers provided fake identities for Jewish children, hid children and their families, and smuggled children out of camps and across national borders. Their choices were at odds with what the world expected of women—and also with AFSC policy. These women acted at considerable risk to themselves. Yet they saw what justice required of them, and they moved into action.

Quakers have not always been on the side of human freedom for all, and we as a Yearly Meeting have not done all we could do to root out racism within our own body and in our communities. As our offering in the current American conversation on racial justice and injustice, we approved a statement on racial justice. Our statement begins, "There is a gap between the ideals we profess and the realities we live." Quakers have, in principle, rejected the idea that race should pose a social limitation. Those of us who are white, however—and this is the vast majority of us—know that we benefit from our whiteness. We uphold anti-racist ideals, but have not done the work to destroy racism, either as it is hidden within us or as it is expressed through our institutions.

And yet, we pledge to work with renewed vigor toward compassion and equal justice for all. "True godliness," William Penn wrote in the quote that we chose for this year's theme, "does not turn men [and women] out of the world but excites their endeavors to mend it." We are gathered and ready for the work of mending the world.

Friends everywhere, we pray that you are also feeling this excitement about mending the world by putting love in action. True godliness isn't about escaping the world. It's about doing what the Lord requires: acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with Friends and with God. We extend our hands to all Friends with an invitation to walk humbly along with us.

Respectfully submitted,

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