

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
June 27, 2010**

Sacredness is not a scarce commodity. We betray our faith and the essence of our aspirations for thousands of years by being stingy.

—Brad Hirschfield
You Don't Have to be Wrong for Me to be Right

**“First Be Reconciled with Your Friend”
by Donne Hayden**

I made a delightful discovery this week: some letters about Quakers that the great French writer and philosopher Voltaire wrote in the 1700s after a visit he made to a prominent Quaker in London. Voltaire interviewed the elderly Friend about the beliefs of this strange, new, slightly disturbing sect—the Religious Society of Friends. I will first give a quotation that relates to my topic today, but then I'll tell you something the old man said that we would probably rather not remember.

Voltaire asked the Friend all sorts of questions about Quakers and he quotes the old man as saying at one point,

We never swear, not even in a court of justice, being of opinion that the most holy name of God ought not to be prostituted in the miserable contests betwixt man and man. When we are obliged to appear before a magistrate upon other people's account (for lawsuits are unknown among the Friends), we give evidence to the truth by sealing it with our yea or nay; and the judges believe us on our bare affirmation, whilst so many other Christians forswear themselves on the holy Gospels.

Most of you are probably aware that early Friends were not permitted to swear an oath of any kind, but you may not have been aware that they were not supposed to engage in lawsuits, particularly not with each other, though they often were the focus of lawsuits by

others. They were supposed to resolve disputes among themselves in the Meeting, discerning the Truth in the Quaker way.

One passage in the letter that we'd rather not remember about early Friends occurs when Voltaire asks the weighty Quaker about baptism. Here is how Voltaire recorded the conversation in the letter he sent to his friend in France:

"My dear Sir," I said to him, "are you baptized?"

"No," replied the Quaker, "and neither are my brethren."

"My God!" I replied, "then you are not Christians."

"My son," he replied in a gentle voice, "do not swear. We are Christians and try to be good Christians, but we do not think that Christianity consists of sprinkling cold water on the head."

"Good Heavens!" I replied, shocked at this impiety, "have you then forgotten that Jesus Christ was baptized by John?"

"Friend, no more swearing," said the benign Quaker. "Christ received baptism from John, but he never baptized anybody. We are not disciples of John but of Christ."

"Alas," I said, "you would surely be burned in countries of the Inquisition, you poor man. For the love of God, how I wish I could baptize you and make you a Christian."

"Were that all," he replied gravely, "we would willingly submit to baptism to comply with thy weakness. We do not condemn anyone for using the ceremony of baptism. But we believe that those who profess so holy and so spiritual a religion as that of Christ must abstain, as much as they can, from Jewish ceremonies."

"What! Baptism a Jewish ceremony!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, my son," he continued "and so Jewish that several Jews today still use the baptism of John. Consult antiquity. It will teach thee that John only revived this practice, which was in use a long time earlier amongst the Hebrews, in the same way as the pilgrimage to Mecca by Muslims is copied from the Ishmaelites."

A wee bit of anti-Semitism we would prefer not to acknowledge, but which did exist among early Friends.

Back to my topic today, which is the Friends approach to resolving conflict.

A few weeks ago, we had a conflict resolution workshop here at Cincinnati Friends Meeting. Ministry & Counsel brought in speakers from the Education Department and Peace Resource Center at Wilmington College, a school founded by Quakers and still dedicated to

Quaker values. We assumed that because the speakers came from a Quaker college, and given the Friends peace testimony, they would approach conflict resolution via a Friends lens. The speaker wasn't sure what to call this workshop since they had not given it before to a Quaker meeting. So I came up with a name for the workshop that reflected my understanding of what we sought: "Peacebuilding Among Friends." He liked the title, so that's what we called it, but even though the speakers were knowledgeable about conflict resolution, neither of them were Friends, and surprisingly to me, they seemed to know little about the Quaker approach to resolving conflict. I was not alone in being disappointed in the workshop. (Jim Crocker-Lakness has offered to develop a workshop on resolving conflict using Quaker principles, one that could genuinely be called "Peacebuilding Among Friends.")

My personal reason for seeing a need for such a workshop in our worship community comes from a particular passage in the Gospel of Matthew—a passage that is central to the understanding of one of our sister peace churches, the Church of the Brethren. First a little background. Some of you may know that Earlham School Religion (ESR), a Quaker seminary, shares a campus and instructors with the Brethren's Bethany Theological Seminary. Early one morning in my first semester at ESR, I was sitting in a New Testament class at Bethany when I reached for my cup of coffee, knocked it over, spilling it on my new Bible. I hated that my brand new Bible now had two stained, brownish and wrinkled pages, but given to looking for signs in everything at the time, I thought, "Hmm... maybe I'm supposed to remember or notice something on these pages. It will certainly be easy to find the Beatitudes now." The passage we were studying that day was also on those pages, and it is that passage, Matthew 5:21-26 (easy

to find in my not-so-new Bible—I just looked for the coffee stains), that I want to reference today. Here is the passage:

As you know, our ancestors were told, “You must not kill” and whoever kills will be subject to judgment. But I tell you: those who are angry with a companion will be brought before a tribunal. And those who say to a companion, “You moron,” will be subject to the sentence of the court. And whoever says “You idiot” deserves the fires of Gehenna.¹ So, even if you happen to be offering your gift at the altar and recall that your friend has some claim against you, leave your gift there at the altar. First go and be reconciled with your friend, and only then return and offer your gift. You should come to terms quickly with your opponent while you are both on the way (to court), or else your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge (will turn you over) to the bailiff, and you are thrown in jail. I swear to you, you’ll never get out of there until you’ve paid the [fine in full].²

What the passage says is that before we can worship together, we must resolve any tension or conflict we have among ourselves so we can trust each other. How can we worship, how can we lift our spirits to something higher if our minds are cluttered with negative thoughts, especially toward someone who may be sitting across the room? How do distrust and conflict affect the quality of our worship?

This passage from Matthew is couched in terms of its time and place, of course: Roman-occupied *Palestine* where these particular references to law and courts relate to ancient Jewish Law, *halakhah*, which “classically draws no distinction in its laws between religious and ostensibly non-religious life . . . ³ In this, I think Quakerism in its best form ought to be like Judaism, in that it’s a *way of life* as much as a set of beliefs. It is *how we live*, not just what we *say* we believe.

¹ “Gehenna is derived from the Hebrew meaning ‘valley of Hinnon,’ which ran southwest of Jerusalem. At one time human sacrifice was practiced there (2 Chr 28:3; Jer 7:32). In the NT it is a metaphor for Hell.”

² Robert J. Miller, Ed., *The Complete Gospels* (HarperSanFrancisco: Polebridge Press, 1994), p. 66.

³The Hebrew word *Halakha* “is often translated as ‘Jewish Law,’ although a more literal translation might be ‘the path’ or ‘the way of walking.’ The word is derived from the Hebrew root that means *to go* or *to walk*. “Halakha” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halakha>

The passage begins with a reference to the commandment in Deuteronomy against killing, and as he often does, Jesus updates the information. It's not only the physical act of killing that we have to answer for, he says, but for being angry with someone in a way that makes the person less than human. Notice the examples given are words that insult someone's intelligence, i.e., "moron," and "idiot." When are we most likely to say to a friend or companion, "You idiot" or "you moron"? When we disagree with them—when we believe *we* are right and they are wrong, too stupid to see things the way we do. These words translate the word "*raca*" in Hebrew means "fool, ignorant, empty." "*Empty.*" "*Raca*" was considered a curse in Hebrew and Aramaic because it implied that you had no intellect and therefore no soul, and thus you were not fully human.⁴ In other words, it denies that of God in the other. Thinking of it that way, it's a little more serious.

If Jesus said these words exactly, he may have been exaggerating for effect or being funny, even—this man was a powerful speaker, he can't have been dry and humorless. So when he says, "those who say to a companion, 'You moron,' will be subject to the sentence of the court. And whoever says 'You idiot' deserves the fires of Gehenna,"⁵ I doubt that he meant it literally, but he was making the point that calling each other such hateful names is *serious*. He says, go find your friend—seek the person out and talk to them before you come back to worship. "First go and be reconciled with your friend, and only *then* return and offer your gift." How can you worship the God of Love if you harbor ill will against one of God's other creatures, if you are not loving? The first commandment is "Love God (with all your heart and mind and

⁴ <http://www.marmsweb.com/>

⁵ "Gehenna is derived from the Hebrew meaning 'valley of Hinnon,' which ran southwest of Jerusalem. At one time human sacrifice was practiced there (2 Chr 28:3; Jer 7:32). In the NT it is a metaphor for Hell."

soul and strength),” and the second is like it, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” You must do those two things before you can, without hypocrisy, worship a God of love.

In Mark 11:26 we find a passage reflecting this same idea: *“And when you stand up to pray, if you are holding anything against anyone, forgive them, so your Father in heaven may forgive your misdeeds.”* I see this as an extension of the idea “as above, so below,” expressed so beautifully in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven.”

The last part of this passage may be the closest to something Jesus actually said, according to the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. “You should come to terms quickly with your opponent while you are both on the way (to court), or else your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge (will turn you over) to the bailiff, and you are thrown in jail. I swear to you, you’ll never get out of there until you’ve paid the [fine in full].” Again, I can see Jesus saying this with humor, pointing out how far unsettled conflict can go. These lines, which resonated with the early Friends, seem to be advice to avoid *human* justice, *human* courts, *human* decisions, which may be corrupt and merciless; instead, rely on the spiritual law, which is “Love one another.”

In earlier times, if a Friend brought a lawsuit against another Friend, s/he would probably be disowned. Instead, Friends brought their disputes to the meeting; all differences were to be worked out with each other, and if necessary, through discernment of the meeting. Of course, if you read the old minute books, the earlier Friends were only human, no better than we are, and they could be pretty snippy with each other. But they had faith that something greater than all of them called them to resolve differences in Love, to seek higher truth through unity with each other.

As a worship community based on faith and higher principles, it seems to me that none of our assertions about what we believe has much meaning if we don't first seek the kingdom of God, where Love rules. *First, love each other; respect each other; don't ascribe low motives to each other.* We are *good people* in this room; though we may disagree, *not one of us* is a bad person. Each of us has access to only a *portion* of the Truth, whether we're discussing the peace testimony, whether or not we are Christian, or whether we should write a check for several thousand dollars to support a particular group's favorite charity. Resolving conflict and building peace begin at home and among Friends, based on the faith that if we are still and quiet and dedicated to seeking higher Truth, we can be guided to find it together, though no single one of us can find it alone.

(See next page for the original poem, "The Blind Men and the Elephant.")

“The Blind Men and The Elephant” by John Godfrey Saxe (cir. 1850):

I.

It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

II.

The *First* approached the Elephant,
And happened to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
And began to brawl;
“God bless me! But the Elephant
Is very like a wall!”

III.

The *Second* feeling of the Tusk,
Cried, “Ho! What have we here
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me it might be clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear!”

IV.

The *Third* approached the animal,
And happened to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Thus boldly up and spake:
“I see quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a snake!”

V.

The *Fourth* reached out his eager hand,
And felt upon the knee.
“What this wondrous beast is like

Is mighty plain,” quoth he;
“’Tis clearly enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!”

VI.

The *Fifth* who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: “E’en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!”

VII.

The *Sixth* no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope,
Than sizing up the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
I see quoth he, “the Elephant
Is very like a rope!”

VIII.

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

MORAL

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!