

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
February 14, 2010**

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

—Matthew 7:16-20

Luther & Virgil Talk about God, Gumballs, and Peaches (or Close Encounters with a Third Kind of Christianity)

by Donne Hayden

Matthew 7:16-20, the passage from scripture for today's Worship Sharing group and comments about whether or not Quakers are Christian from various members/attenders of our meeting have led me to think about two characters in a short story I wrote about twenty years ago. The story came to me as the voices of two young brothers, Luther and Virgil, from the Ozarks where some of my family comes from. Virgil's voice is based on one I heard from church people when I was a child. Luther, the narrator, is an answering voice I "heard" in my mind. He is a bit unusual in his approach to theology and perhaps, echoes my own understanding. Luther is going to speak to you this morning.

"Gumballs!" Virgil said. "Don't you understand? It's like gumballs in a gumball machine." He stopped in front of the hardware store and stood there looking at the glass ball filled with little colored balls. "You put a penny in, then follow directions—look here, just like it says . . ."

Virgil shifted his Bible to his left hand, put his right finger on the bumped-out words just above

where the gum comes out, and traced under the words while he read them out loud to me:

“Hold hand, Lift up, The Master.” I could tell how tickled he was to light on *that* word tho’ it wasn’t nothing only the name of the company that makes them machines.

“Of course,” he went on, “with God, it’s not just a penny you put in, you got to put yourself in. And I don’t mean just a little bit of yourself, *all* of yourself.”

I nodded like I do, and he kept talking. I wished it *was* all as easy as a gumball machine. I’d get me a bag full of pennies and empty out that machine, gobble down them gumballs. Fill up on the Lord. Not just one old cracker and some grape juice that don’t last very long, but a whole mouthful of gum. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of a gumball God. Instead of sitting there in church ever Sunday waiting for the Lord to breathe his spirit into me, I could stock up on gumballs. Carry some in my pocket and whenever I felt the need to uplift my soul, just take one out and chew on it a while.

Virgil and me was to wait for Uncle Zack on the grassy patch at the end of the parking lot, and for the few minutes it took us to walk there, Virgil didn’t talk; he was thinking what else he could say, I reckon. Soon as I sat down in the shade though, Virgil plopped down beside me and started in again.

“And Luther—” he said, without missing a beat, “Don’t be selfish. Think about me. What am I gonna do on Judgment Day? Huh? Did you ever think about that? There I’ll be, standing up there with the Lord and all his angels. And when they bring you up before the Almighty, he’ll say in a *greaaat* thunderous voice, ‘Did you know?’ And you—you’ll have to say yes. You’ll have to say you know, because I’ve *told* you. Then *I’ll* have to stand there and watch you, my *own brother*, be hurled into Hell! How do you think *I’m* gonna feel then?”

He looked concerned at me. I nodded and peeled the bark off a twig I found.

He was always asking me questions like that til I got sick of it. I couldn't answer such questions, now could I? How was I supposed to answer him? Eyes all full of love, hands all full of Bibles, how was I supposed to say, "I don't think there even *is* a hell, Virgil." How could I say, "Just don't worry about me," when that's all he did, was worry about me and my everlasting soul?

Virgil said, "If you'll open yourself up to the Lord, Luther, love him and accept him as your personal Savior, there's nothing you can't do. With the Lord inside you, why, you could go hunting bear with a stick."

He kept talking, but I mulled that over. Sure. If I had a pocketful of holy gumballs, I could hunt bear with a stick. I just about chuckled out loud, but then I remembered that Virgil was still talking serious. He pushed his dirty glasses up on his nose, and looked at me hard for a minute. I didn't look directly at him, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see his light again—sort of flaring around him. It often took on that reddish cast when he was preaching.

"You know, don't you," he said, "that the Devil is just waiting for you to leave the door open a crack, so he can slither in and pounce on your everlasting soul and cart it off to Hell."

I nodded, thinking it'd sure make a whole lot more sense if God was everywhere and easy to get to, like the Devil seemed to be. But according to Virgil, You had to go to church to find God, even if you did sit there, praying and praying, maybe he'd come to you and maybe he wouldn't.

Virgil took his glasses off and spit on them and wiped them off with his old handkerchief. I couldn't tell no difference when he put them back on. They was still smeared. I was trying to spread the grass back over the holes I'd poked in it.

"Well," he said finally, "Ain't you going to say *anything*?"

I sat there for a minute, thinking how when somebody loves you and worries about you like that, you can't say nothing *true* that won't hurt them somehow. And then I said, "I reckon you're right, Virgil."

But I don't think that he is. I just can't argue with him any more. One time I did, even talked scripture back at him, thinking he might listen better if it come in Bible talk. "By their fruits ye shall know them," I told him, "it says that somewhere in the gospel."

"Matthew 7:16," he said, nodding. He knows the Bible backwards and forwards.

"And it goes on about how you don't get berries from briars nor grapes from thistles. And how persimmon trees or pear trees or peach trees or black walnut trees—they generally have fruit you can eat. But the chinaberry tree or the mountain laurel or the hedge-apple, why their fruit will just make you sick. And that's like people, too: "by their fruits ye shall know them." You can tell by what comes out of them whether they're good for you or not. I think about Brother Gamble, and how I used to get scared in church of a Sunday when he was preaching. But then I saw that when folks was scared and crying, he was smiling. And how when he talks about sin, the light around him gets narrow and spiky. All that shouting and crying from folks, that just feeds his fire; his faces gets red and his veins pop up on his neck, and the red light around him flares and dances when Sister Scott swoons or Old Man Hazzard yells out " Oh Jesus, Save me, Jesus!" What comes out of Brother Gamble is fear and anger, Virgil, fear and anger, treachery and discontent."

And right about here, Virgil quit listening to me. I could tell by the way his eyes went sort of dull and unfocused behind his glasses, and then he said, ""You still seeing that light around people, Luther? I do fear for your mortal soul, Luther. I truly do."

I knew it was no good talking to him about the Light nor about good fruits, like loving your neighbor and not judging others, the way Mother talked when she was still alive. Hers was the first light I saw. When she'd sit me on her lap, and get Virgil perched on the little stool beside her chair, and tell us stories from the Bible and how we should treat each other, the light that glowed around her was pure white.

Virgil and me come from the same tree, but since Mother died and he's taken to going to church regular, he's different. I reckon, when worms get inside it or an early hard freeze comes, even a good peach can go bad. Of course, Virgil thinks the same about me.



This may eventually be a novel; it keeps growing little by little over the years as I hear Luther's voice commenting on theology and Christianity.

To finish today, I'd like to refer to a suggestion in *Friends for 300 Years* by Quaker historian Howard Brinton who described Quakerism as "an explicit and developed manifestation of one of the three main forms of Christianity, the other two being Catholicism and Protestantism."¹ *A third kind of Christianity*. Think of it.

¹ Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002), pp. xvii-xxi. Among "Protestants," Brinton includes denominations of earlier Protestantism i.e., "Lutherans, Calvinists, Presbyterians . . . Congregationalists and Baptists" which existed in the 17th century when George Fox and the early Friends were developing the faith and practice of what would become the Religious Society of Friends.

Writing the introduction to his book in 1952, Brinton speculated that “The time is ripe for the emergence of this third form of Christianity into greater influence and power.”² I find

this idea intriguing, and perhaps one explanation for why we find it so hard to determine whether or not we are “Christian.” Perhaps now, over 50 years later, others have caught up to Friends in movements like Progressive Christianity represented by *The Phoenix Affirmations* which I mentioned in an earlier message here at Cincinnati Friends (see below). Or perhaps we are a new old thing, “Primitive Christianity Revived Yet Again.” Whatever we are, however we manifest our current beliefs and understandings, it seems to me necessary that we know and acknowledge where we came from, i.e.,

The precedent for characterizing the faith and practice of the Society of Friends as a third form of Christianity was set by Quakers of the seventeenth century. In controversial books written to refute opponents, they draw a clear distinction between themselves, the Roman Catholics and the Protestants. . . . A large part of [Barclay’s Apology] is devoted to a comparison of the three positions. Sometimes for the sake of completeness, Barclay also brings in a fourth position which he calls the Socinian, representing the rationalistic point of view. Thus in the section defending the Quaker doctrine of immediate revelation through the Spirit, Barclay answers his opponents who argue that the leading of the Spirit cannot be trusted as a certain guide to truth, by saying, “neither tradition, nor the scriptures, nor reason which the Papists [Catholics], Protestants and Socinians do respectively make the rule of their faith are in any whit more certain. The Catholics, he says, disagree about tradition; the Protestants about the meaning of Scriptures; and the Socinians about the conclusions of reason. He then points out that in the last resort they all depend on the Spirit which produced all three, the Church tradition, the Scriptures and also the assumptions of reason.

—Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years*

as Samuel Caldwell phrases it, that the *roots as well as the fruits* of the Friends tree are

“radically Christian.”

The Phoenix Affirmations

² Brinton.

- 1) Walking fully in the Path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths that God may provide for humanity.
- 2) Listening for God's Word, which comes through daily prayer and meditation, studying the ancient testimonies which we call Scripture, and attending to God's present activity in the world.
- 3) Celebrating the God whose Spirit pervades and whose glory is reflected in all of God's Creation, including the earth and its eco-systems, the sacred and secular, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human.
- 4) Expressing our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.
- 5) Engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating all as creations made in God's very image, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class.
- 6) Standing, as Jesus does, with the outcast and oppressed, the denigrated and afflicted, seeking peace and justice with or without the support of others.
- 7) Preserving religious freedom and the church's ability to speak prophetically to government by resisting the commingling of church and state.
- 8) Walking humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies.
- 9) Basing our lives on the faith that in Christ all things are made new and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination—for eternity.
- 10) Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, and recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth.

11) Caring for our bodies and insisting on taking time to enjoy the benefits of prayer, reflection, worship and recreation in addition to work.

12) Acting on the faith that we are born with a meaning and purpose, a vocation and ministry that serve to strengthen and extend God's realm of love.