

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
October 4, 2009**

## **“Seek First the Kingdom of God”**

**by Donne Hayden**

In Matthew 6:33, we are admonished to “seek first the Kingdom of God.” If God is Love, then the Kingdom of God is anywhere Love rules, so our task is to find those places. So what will we find in God’s Kingdom, as understood by the Hebrew Christian tradition? Loving compassion. In the Old Testament, stories of violence and conflict often overshadow references to love and compassion, so you may be surprised to learn that admonitions to have compassion and care for the vulnerable—represented by widows, orphans, and foreigners—appear frequently *throughout* the Bible. For instance, from the very beginning, in Exodus, we find God telling the Israelites:

**Ex. 22: 22-23:** *You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry...*

**Deu 14:29:** *... the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the foreigners<sup>1</sup>, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word here is also translated as “aliens” or “strangers”—meaning “outsiders” or in our time, perhaps “illegal immigrants.”

**Psa 146:9:** *The LORD watches over the foreigners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

**Isa 1:17:** *... learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.*

**Jer 22:3:** *Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.*

**Mal 3:5:** *Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the foreigner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.*

In the New Testament, Jesus used similar language to talk about caring for the vulnerable, aware that his fellow Jews understood the allusions. In Matthew 25:34-36, he tells a parable pointing out who gains favor in God's eyes. Those who are "blessed of my Father," he says, are those who respond to the needs of "the least" among us: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

The Letter of James takes up the call for compassion from Hebrew tradition: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the

world” (James 1:27). It is clear from both Old and New Testaments that compassionate and charitable acts are near the wishes of God; our tradition teaches us that free and generous giving is good for both giver and receiver. So is free and generous *sharing*.

In various chapters, Old Testament writers delineate the following approach to caring for “the orphan, the widow, the alien”:

*When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Deuteronomy 24: 19).*

“Do not glean what is left.” “To glean” is to follow along behind the reapers, gathering up whatever remains—to take everything, to strip a field. The passage makes it clear that hoarding *all* the harvest is wrong. God blesses the landholder who leaves excess in the field for others to glean.

So how does this apply to us today? Most of us who live in North America must be counted as “wealthy landowners” among the millions on our planet who live in cardboard huts or under bridges, the “orphans, widows and foreigners” of our time. We live apart from those in most dire need, however, separated by social or national boundaries, so we seldom see them or know them personally. Our “field” is too far for them to retrieve the gleanings, so we rely on charitable

organizations to distribute some of our wealth. Giving to charities makes us feel a little better, but the discrepancy between our excess and the needs of others increasingly intrudes into our consciousness.

I first became aware of this discrepancy in the early 1980s when a social studies teacher in Colorado brought the Buckminster Fuller World Resource Map to the school where I taught. My students and I sat in the bleachers and watched as milling students went to stand on the world map that stretched from one end of the gymnasium floor to the other. Each student represented 100 million people. Candles, representing energy use per 100 million people, and egg cartons, representing food consumption per 100 million people, were distributed to the “population” of each continent. When it was time to “populate” Asia, more students and some of us teachers had to be called onto the gym floor. Dozens of us stood on the map of Asia; crowded and cramped, I looked across the “world” at the eight or nine students lounging on North America, playing with stacks of egg cartons and candles. No one near me had even one candle or egg carton.

This experience raised my awareness of the staggering inequity in distribution and use of natural and human resources. I was also aware of my own unwilling contribution to that inequity as a resident of a developed nation using more than its share of resources.

One Quaker organization working faithfully since 1968 to address the needs of “widows, orphans and strangers” is Right Sharing of World Resources. Following the Quaker testimonies of equality and simplicity, Right Sharing asks those who have *more than enough* to give a little, so that those who have little can use it to generate ways to have and maintain *enough*. In other words, using funds donated by individuals and Quaker meetings in developed countries, Right Sharing

supports microenterprise efforts through small grants to individuals and groups in developing countries like India and Africa. Such grants allow recipients to start their own businesses, providing a way for them to achieve sufficiency in their own culture. We should, I believe, support this organization in every way possible—through financial donations, yes, but also through working to simplify our own lives so that, one person at a time, we address the inequity of our country's excessive consumption of world resources.

The notion of “voluntary simplicity,” i.e., of individuals in the “first world” simplifying life and cutting back on consumption, emerged as early as the 1970s. Quakers, among others, had the idea much earlier. I could cite hundreds of examples, but will give you only one right now: in 1916 some British Friends sent the following message to their Yearly Meeting: *“We shall seek for a way of living that will free us from the bondage of material and mere convention . . . and will put no oppressive burden of labour upon any by reason of our superfluous demands.”* In other words, we seek to be free of enslavement to material things and fashion, and to suppress our appetite for “stuff” we don't really need that may be produced in sweatshops or cheap labor elsewhere on the planet. Can we live this way today? Can we also choose to live simply?

As anyone knows who has tried, living simply is not simple. It involves resisting our own culture, which is dominated by messages to consume. And while a social conscience may spur us to action, we're more likely to be *successful* in simple living if we are motivated by deep spiritual commitment. In his book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, writer and one-time Quaker Richard Foster stresses that simplicity, a change of direction for

most Americans, emerges naturally from a deepened relationship with God, a reality that cannot be imposed by our will to “fix the world.” He says, “The Christian Discipline of simplicity is an inward reality that results in an outward lifestyle . . . . We deceive ourselves if we believe we can possess the inward reality without its having a profound effect on how we live.”

One of the most compelling passages in Foster’s book comes in his summary of the response of Soren Kierkegaard (19<sup>th</sup> century theologian) to the question: In light of the New Testament admonition “seek first the kingdom of God,” “what sort of effort could be made to pursue the kingdom of God?”

*Should a person get a suitable job in order to exert a virtuous influence? His answer: no, we must first seek God’s kingdom. Then should we give away all our money to feed the poor? Again the answer: no, we must first seek God’s kingdom. Well, then perhaps we are to go out and preach this truth to the world that people are to seek first*

### **Ten Principles for the “Outward Expression of Simplicity”**

*(None of these should be considered “rules” or “laws.”)*

1. Buy things for their usefulness rather than their status.
2. Reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
3. Develop a habit of giving things away.
4. Refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
5. Learn to enjoy things without owning them.
6. Develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
7. Look with a healthy skepticism at all “buy now, pay later” schemes.
8. Obey Jesus’ instructions about plain, honest speech.
9. Reject anything that breeds the oppression of others.
10. Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God.

—Richard Foster

*Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*

*God's kingdom? Once again the answer is a resounding no: we are first to seek the kingdom of God. Kierkegaard concludes, 'Then in a certain sense it is nothing I shall do. Yes, certainly, in a certain sense it is nothing, become nothing before God, learn to keep silent; in this silence is the beginning, which is, first to seek God's Kingdom.'*

“To attempt to arrange an outward lifestyle of simplicity without the inward reality leads to deadly legalism,” says Foster, adding that “Simplicity itself becomes idolatry when it takes precedence over seeking the kingdom.” In other words, if I live simply because I feel guilty, because I feel I should *do something* to fix the world's problems, then I may be dogmatic and rigid, judging others who don't live simply. If my focus is on my lifestyle, on my self and what I am doing, I am essentially worshipping my own righteous actions rather than focusing on loving compassion for others, which leads me naturally to a simpler material existence. Always, we should seek *first* the Kingdom of God where Loving Compassion rules. After that, what needs to be done becomes not only obvious, but irresistible.