

Jer. 6:13      For from the least to the greatest of them,  
                  everyone is greedy for unjust gain;  
                  and from prophet to priest,  
                  everyone deals falsely.

14      They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
                  saying, “Peace, peace,”  
                  when there is no peace.

A couple months ago, in one of our spiritual nurture groups, we were talking about our Quaker testimony against lotteries and raffles. To me, that’s one of our most important testimonies, but it usually isn’t listed among the big five—integrity, simplicity, peace, equality, and community—unless you consider it as a sub-testimony of integrity and equality. It springs from the same source as those two, so you maybe could think they cover it, but more on that later. At any rate, it’s easy to think of the testimony against lotteries and raffles as one of our lesser testimonies, maybe even a trivial testimony that we’ve outgrown, which is kind of the way we look at our earlier testimonies against color, and art, and works of fiction, and music. Something quaint, but no longer applicable. But I don’t think it’s a lesser, trivial testimony, and it was my passion for this testimony—which isn’t about chance but about disproportionate gain—and my simultaneous feeling that I repeatedly fail to live the testimony to the fullest, that I was trying to convey to the group.

And half of them seemed to resonate with my dilemma, and the other half—well, maybe not. So it was a surprise and a joy last week to hear how the testimony had played out for someone else in that group.

I will call this woman Chloe, so it will be up to her to reveal her true identity, and I will call the store she works for Bargain Books. It’s a chain store, and like many chain stores these days, they keep a mailing list. Sign up for the mailing list, and they

send you a flyer with some coupons a couple times a year. But also, on a weekly basis, they take the names of the people who've signed up for the mailing list, and draw a name out of a hat, and give that name a \$25 dollar gift certificate. Even though you don't know it, there's a chance, if you sign up for the mailing list, that you could win the equivalent of \$25.

Recently, the Bargain Books employees have been pushed to make sure they ask every customer who makes a purchase whether they want to be on the mailing list. I don't know whether there was an incentive for the employee who managed to gather the most names or not, but the word had come down—get people on the list. And at one of their staff meetings, a fellow employee of Chloe's, Bruce, suggested that instead of asking customers whether they wanted to be on the mailing list, they just ask them whether they wanted to sign up for a free drawing for a \$25 gift certificate. Because, after all, they did draw one of those names out of a hat and give away a gift certificate. The manager thought about it and agreed. From now on, they'd ask customers whether they wanted to sign up for a drawing. So all week long, cashiers were asking customers whether they wanted to sign up to win a free gift certificate.

Chloe didn't say anything, at least not at first, but it bothered her. Asking people whether they wanted a free gift certificate wasn't quite truthful, for one thing. They were gathering names for a mailing list, not taking names for a drawing, even if a drawing would eventually be held. And there was the whole lotteries and raffles thing, the whole question of disproportionate gain, which is what the testimony is about. So eventually she went to her manager and said, "You know, this kind of bothers me, asking people whether they want to win a drawing when we're really gathering names for a mailing list. And maybe there aren't a lot of them, but there are some people who might be willing to be on our mailing list, but who wouldn't be willing to sign up for the drawing. Like Quakers, for instance. I know there aren't a lot of them, but they wouldn't sign up."

Well, I'll think about it, her manager said. Then just a couple hours later, on the very same day, when Bruce was at the cash register—his was the idea to push the drawing, you might remember—and Chloe was working nearby, a woman came up to the register whom Chloe recognizes from here, from Cincinnati Friends. She sees her in the store pretty regularly, but Chloe's never quite sure that it's really her, and that she's really from here, and so she never says hi, and she doesn't know her name, but she notices when she comes in. And now she was at the cash register, and Bruce was asking her whether she wanted to sign up for a free drawing.

And when Chloe came to this part of the story, my heart kind of started sinking inside me, because, like I said, I really don't think that the testimony against lotteries and raffles makes it into our top five, I sometimes wonder how many Friends even know about it, and here Chloe had just given this testimony about Quakers to her boss, and I was afraid it wasn't going to be proved out.

But Chloe was continuing her story, the woman was at the register, and Bruce was asking his insidious question. And the woman responded...

"Oh, no," she said, "no, I don't want to be part of a drawing."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "It's really just to be on our mailing list, and a couple times a year we send you a flyer with some coupons."

"Well, that might be okay," she said, "to be on a mailing list—but don't enter me in any drawing." Chloe, standing a couple feet away, was doing her best not to say "I told you so," out loud although—and she wasn't proud of this—there was a part of her thinking it, and for my part, when I heard the story, I had to keep myself from saying, "Thank God," as though I hadn't expected all the time that that's what would happen. We do still have a testimony against disproportionate gain, whether it's in our top five or not, and on that particular day in Cincinnati, two Friends who hardly know each other, if at all, and who never planned on it, teamed up to prove it to one Bargain Books.

I think that's an incredible story, and I am so proud to think I know those two people, but you might still be wondering why I think the testimony on lotteries and raffles, and gambling, too, is so important, and where it comes from, and what it meant to early Friends. And the best way I know to answer is to completely change the subject and ask whether you're aware that when you go into a grocery store and pick up a loaf of bread for \$1.49 and a gallon of milk for \$2.23, and you go to the cashier, and she rings you up and charges you \$1.49 for the bread and \$2.23 for the milk—well, you have Friends to thank for the fact that you know what the price is going to be, and the cashier doesn't set the price when you get there, and you don't have to haggle her down. In America, as long as you're not buying an automobile, we're used to having a fixed price, where everyone who goes into a store pays the same price for the same item. But this hasn't always been the case, and it wasn't the case in England in 1650, when what you paid for an item might depend on your social status, on whether you were a child or an adult, and, especially, on how good a bargainer you were.

But Friends, even in their very earliest years, thought that Truth was Truth, and if an item was valuable it had one value, its true value, which did not change from occasion to occasion, nor from person to person. If you were a tradesman, and you made the item, then you knew what its value was, what you had paid for it, what you had added to it, what was a fair wage for your labor. To receive more than that, even if you could get the price, was only greed. The passage from Jeremiah with which I began was one of the passages Friends used to caution each other to make sure that all their business dealings were fair. There were others. They quoted the 12th chapter of Luke on the folly of storing up wealth for yourself while not being rich toward God. They quoted 1st Timothy chapter 6, which warns against imagining that godliness is a means of gain, and reminds us that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.” They quoted all the many passages

from the prophets and the epistles which warn against greed and the injustice of building luxury homes (really—the prophets talk about luxury homes) while others remain in want.

If I were a harness-maker in 1655, and I weren't a Quaker, I would expect that when someone came into my shop and wanted to buy a harness, I would know what it had cost me to make that harness, which would be the lowest price I could possibly accept. And I would have some idea how much money I hoped I might make from the harness, which would be the price I hoped eventually to reach. And then there would be the price I said first, maybe twice as much or more as the price I hoped to get, and my prospective buyer would offer a lower price, and I would offer a higher price again, until we came to an agreed compromise. And if that final price was ten pounds more than the figure I hoped for, it was all to the good for me.

But once I became a Quaker, I couldn't do business like that any more. That extra ten pounds, which was icing on the cake before, would now just look like greed. The harness had a true value, a value in the Truth, and it was greed to ask for more than its value, even if I could get it.

Still, the testimony against disproportionate gain is not only against greed. It also has something to do with integrity and truthfulness: if you are going to let your yea be yea and your nay be nay, if you are going to be truthful in all things, you can't really say that you want 50 pounds for a harness when you will gladly accept thirty.

Even further, the Quaker merchant was asked to remember the invisible party involved in all his business dealings. In a public letter of 1661, George Fox called on Friends everywhere to be righteous in their business dealings. He urged his readers to “Do rightly... whether you be tradesmen, of what[ever] calling, profession or sort [what]soever. Do rightly, justly, truly... equally to all people in all things. That is, according to that of God in every man and the Witness, Wisdom, and Life of God in yourselves...” When I draw out this particular phrase, I see how deeply the sensitivity to disproportionate gain dwelt in the Quaker heart. Because if I were to get ten

pounds above the true value for my harness, it wouldn't only be my buyer I was taking the money from—it would also be that of God within him. It was as though two people walked into my shop every time one customer walked in, the one being the customer, and the other being Christ. I could probably make a child pay more—but was that fair to that of God in the child? Or I could take less from a nobleman—but again, knowing that the next customer who walked through the door would, in some sense, be the same as the last customer, because they both contained the same Seed, how could I face God residing in all these different forms and not be ashamed of all the different faces God would see of me? Better by far to understand the true value of my product, and ask always for the one price, never more and never less.

That's the core of the teaching against disproportionate gain. And it isn't far from there to the testimony against raffles, and lotteries—and gambling. Because if a thing does have a true value, and you know that value, to desire to gain it for less is greed. The testimony against raffles and lotteries is the testimony against disproportionate gain applied to the customer, not only the merchant. If I go into the harness shop hoping to buy a harness for less than its value in Truth, then I, the customer, am the one who is giving way to greed. And if I enter a raffle to buy a harness, a harness that I know to be worth 50 pounds, and I pay one pound for my raffle ticket, and am willing to carry the harness home if I win, having paid only one pound for it—well, what could that be but greed? Or in the case of a lottery, if I pay one dollar in hopes of winning a hundred, I can't even plead that I don't really know what the true value of the thing is. In gambling, one could argue that the case is slightly different, that at least in some gambling, like poker or horse-racing, there is an element of skill involved. But it still comes back to proportion. Is the skill of choosing the fastest horse a piece of work with a true value of a thousand dollars?

We are increasingly raised in an environment where getting something for nothing, or at least getting something for less, is seen as a skill and a sign of strength.

But the early Friends would have had none of it. Because they understood a relationship easier to understand in their world than in ours, which is that goods and services originate in people, that the value in them is value created by real living persons. And to try to get advantage over an object is really to try to get advantage over a person. If one of our early Friends wanted to buy the colt down the road, liked the colt and had need of the colt, but thought that he would wait six weeks to make the offer, because as winter came on the colt's owner would have to get rid of him under any circumstances—well, the Friend might wait, but he would know that his advantage was the neighbor's loss. And if he was willing to take advantage from his neighbor, wasn't he saying, in essence, that he deserved more than his neighbor, that there was some way in which he believed himself to be superior to his neighbor? It might only be the usual superiority of selfishness, but Friends set themselves firmly against the notion—though it was a very Puritan one—that God loved some persons better than others. If God loves us all equally, then to try to take advantage of a neighbor is to be out of alignment with God.

Okay, but so what? In a world so full of selfishness and hunger and violence, what does it matter if I win a harness in a raffle and take it home?

I think it matters every time we let ourselves act from the sin of pride. There is a difference between having more than another person and believing that the surplus you have is no more than you deserve, because you are more worthy of God's favor than others. Believing that you, or I, deserve more from God than others do, and that we deserve it at their expense, is what the early church called the sin of pride. The early Friends believed that disproportionate gain was simply another form of pride. And when they said that they lived in that life and power that took away the occasion of war, one of their clear meanings was that they had won out over their pride.

One night in the early 1990s, as army reserve units and national guard troops were being called up and shipped to Kuwait as support in the first Gulf War, I sat in

a motel room talking with the members of a reserve unit from Sharon, Pennsylvania, which was shipping out early the next morning. I remember especially my conversation with one young man, 19 years old, who was excited to go off to this war because he believed he was really doing the right thing.

“I mean, I can’t even drive,” he said, “and I don’t have a car, but I will some day, and I’m not going to let somebody in some foreign country make it so I can’t have gasoline. I mean, that’s just not right.”

To believe so strongly in his right to gasoline that he believed he had the right to take it by force—that’s what the sin of pride is. That’s why our testimony against disproportionate gain, against lotteries and raffles and gambling and in favor of fixed prices—that’s why the testimony still matters. It hasn’t become less important because there are so many more important things in the world to worry about. War and hunger in the world, selfishness and abuse in families, they’re all mixed up with wanting more for me than I want for you. It’s why it still matters that we ask ourselves, “what is the true value of the things that I want?”, and why it matters that we are willing to pay for them their proper price.