

Matt. 10:34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

35 For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;

36 and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Sometimes, in one or another of my black moods, I will start brooding on how few people there are, it seems to me, who are actually able to listen to another person. Who are able to listen to me, for instance. Obviously, there are many, many more people who are able to hear the sound of my voice. Hearing isn’t the problem. The problem, it seems to me on those black days, is how few people there are who are able to listen to me without putting some kind of filter between my words and their listening. Usually the filter they put there is themselves.

For instance, let’s say my wife and I happen to be walking through the produce aisle at the grocery store. I’m pushing the cart and thinking about the dinners I used to have as a kid and she’s looking at the grocery list and selecting vegetables from the bins. I might turn to her and say, “You know, I really like chicken.” If she’s just bagged the yellow squash, she’s likely to respond to my statement about chicken by saying, “You don’t like yellow squash?” Or, if it’s late and she doesn’t feel like cooking, she might say, “Are you going to fix it?” It may be that we had already been talking about what we were going to make for dinner, and she says, “You’ve decided you don’t want

stew?” If there’s ever been any tension between us about who makes more of the decisions regarding groceries, she might get a little testy and tell me, “You say you like chicken, but then you’re always complaining about the grocery bill. If you want chicken we’ll get chicken, but then I don’t want to hear you complain about how much the groceries cost.” It’s even possible that the mention of chicken will recall some unpleasant episode from long ago, and she will begin to tell me that she’s never even been able to stand the smell of chicken since the class field trip to a chicken farm she took in 3rd grade.

It’s just plain difficult to listen to another person. I’m complaining, right now, about how few people are able to listen to me, but I’m fully aware how often I fail to listen to others. Somebody starts to talk, and it’s easier to start thinking about what I’m going to say in reply, to start wondering what aspect of their character causes them to say those things, to listen only for criticisms they make of me, to listen in order to gather material with which to criticize them—etc. etc. One of the most difficult tasks in life is to remove the filters I usually use when I listen and to simply open my ears and my heart.

The passage from Matthew that I started with isn’t an easy passage, because we don’t want to know that Jesus—who tells us sometimes quite explicitly that he has come to bring us peace, or to show us the way to peace—we don’t like to hear that Jesus is going to be divisive. We don’t like Jesus the peacemaker talking about war within the family, how fathers and sons, daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law will all be turned against each other. A good many commentaries on this passage take care to point out that the context in which Jesus spoke was one in which a man or woman had no identity apart from family identity, and that Jesus was using exaggeration to make the point that a believer’s primary identity was as a child of God, not as a child of Joseph and Mary.

I think that argument is persuasive, and to me it seems perfectly consistent with the rest of the gospel message that Jesus would work to release us from a family obligation that would block our relationship with God.

However. As Barbara Brown Taylor has pointed out in a sermon on this same passage, you don't have to draw on historical context to understand what Jesus is talking about. All you have to do is belong to a family with even a smidgen of religious diversity. Maybe your father is a Unitarian and your aunt is a Southern Baptist. How many family reunions wind up in shambles over the question of the prayer before the meal—do we pray in Jesus' name, or in the name of the burning Oneness binding everything?

In the case of my own family, when my stepmother became a Jehovah's Witness, my father migrated from agnosticism to atheism, or at least liked to pretend that he had. Well, you want to talk about a sword. You never knew when or under what circumstances a pitched battle was likely to break out over the meaning and nature of life. Dinner might be ruined, a whole half of a work day given over to anger and recrimination, a project left unfinished on the kitchen table, doors slammed and voices raised. Of many things I am uncertain, but I know for sure that Jesus didn't bring peace to that household.

This has gone on now for something over 25 years, and I can tell you with some confidence that 9 times out of 10 it isn't possible to speak at all about God or faith in that part of my family and to have any hope of being heard. The opinions are too strong, the sides are too divided, the words themselves are too loaded. Any remark I might make is first assessed for which side I seem to be taking, and then measured out against any similar, past statements made by major parties in the on-going battle. By the time someone responds to what they believe I said, the words to which they respond aren't necessarily words I recognize as my own. After 25 years, God is a topic of conversation I've given up on in my family, and I don't understand why the entire family hasn't given up on it. When there isn't any willingness to be influenced by the other, or even to empathize, I'm not quite sure what the point of conversation is.

Of course, beliefs about God and Jesus aren't the only ones which can divide a family—or a community, for that matter. War, race, sexuality,

economic policy, flood control: there are any number of issues that can divide a family or a community, a city or a state.

In those places where the issues most clearly divide us, where folks most easily draw a line between right and wrong, those are the places where, in my black moods, I have the greatest despair about ever being heard. I have the sense that, all around me, there are people so firmly united to their positions, people so incapable of moving or of letting themselves be influenced, that speaking to them hardly seems to make sense. We decide whether or not we will let ourselves be influenced by another, and when we've made the decision not to be influenced, there is no amount of reason or persuasion that we will be able to hear. Even so, it might still be possible to listen with a sense of empathy for our adversary—but it isn't often my experience that the man or woman who has decided not to be influenced has much interest in empathy with persons on the opposing side. Some people's ears are so full of their own lives, that all they really hear is the sound of their own insides, no matter what I might speak.

And yet, theoretically, here in this meeting we are committed to listening to one another. And, theoretically again, to listening to all the human voices, as well as God's, that weigh in on any particular issue. When listening is such a difficult task, especially when or if we disagree, what exactly happens when we say we listen to one another in monthly meeting for business.

I recently came across a passage in Thomas Hamm's book, *The Quakers in America*, which was both surprising and enlightening. One of the virtues of that book is that Hamm doesn't write about the theories of Quakerism— about how Friends describe themselves—he writes about Friends as they can be observed. And so when he writes about the business process, he doesn't describe the way we think it ought to work, but the way it works in practice. Because Friends are fond of saying that any one person can stand in the way of agreement, or unity, it was startling to me to read this passage from Hamm's work:

“Friends do not make decisions through voting, as they do not believe that the will of the majority is always the will of God. Instead, objections from a principled minority can be enough to stop action until the meeting finds unity to proceed in some way... While Friends believe that any speaking to a matter should come only from a clear conviction that the Spirit is leading the speaker, they recognize that human nature often asserts itself and a clerk may be face with diametrically opposed views on an issue. One way that Friends have traditionally dealt with such differences is to acknowledge that Friends are usually at different levels of spiritual maturity. A clerk will judge individual comments by their “weight,” [by] whether they manifest signs of a divine leading and a good spirit.”

It was startling to me to read that passage, but the more I pondered it, the more I realized the truth which it contained. In my experience, it has been true that not any minority can keep business from moving forward. In practice, it’s the principled minority that counts. The reality of Quaker business is that some voices do carry more weight than other voices. What makes the difference?

Well, certainly the characteristics that Hamm identifies: signs of a divine leading and a good spirit. The voices that carry weight with me in meeting for business are those whom I trust to be able to tell the difference between their own impulses and the nudges of God. They are also the voices of those whom I know will not pout or stomp off in a huff if things don’t go their way. A good spirit—the ability to confess that others may have more Light, that one might be mistaken, the willingness to stand aside when unity is flowing the other direction—these are tokens which convince me that a voice deserves my attention. If there come times when one with a good spirit is not able to stand aside, the standing aside in the past will be a reason that his or her position bears more weight with me now.

I think what I'm saying, paradoxically, is that someone else's ability to listen plays a large part in my decision about whether or not they bear listening to, whether their discernment carries much weight with me.

I've also been thinking that I tend to hearken more to those who possess the fruit of the Spirit than those who don't. In Galatians, Paul identifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In Colossians he speaks of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, and forgiveness.

Paul speaks of self-control. As we try to make decisions in the Meeting community, I find that's not only self-control which is persuasive to me. I also want to see evidence of some self-knowledge, of some self-reflection. I want to know that the person I am listening to has some idea how to differentiate between his own voice, the voice of the gathered community, and the still small voice that may be God's. In Meeting, and in any other setting, I also find that I am much better able to listen to those who possess some of the other fruit of the Spirit. I am more likely to let myself be influenced a man, woman, or child who is loving, who is kind, who speaks with compassion and humility. Someone who isn't able to recognize or respond to my own humanity is not someone I am likely to listen to very attentively.

And if I want to be listened to, I would do well to remember what it takes for me to listen well to another. I would do well to be loving, to be kind, to speak with compassion and humility, and to never forget the very humanity of the one to whom I speak. This is, in fact, the path that the very best Friends have always chosen.

Stephen Cary writes about the distinctively Quaker way of being with an adversary in his essay titled, "The Quaker Mandate." He talks about the conflict Friends often feel between confronting wrong and reconciling opposing sides. But Love can transcend this apparent conflict. He writes:

“Do we remember that it is the spirit of our service, the aura that surrounds it, the gentleness and the patience that marks it, the love made visible that compels it, that is the truly distinctive quality that lifts Quaker service above lobbying, above pressure, above coercion, that inspires the doubtful, and reaches to the heart of the adversary?...

“[S]urely Friends must sometimes confront, candidly and directly. John Woolman did it all the time, and if coercion is making someone feel uncomfortable pressure, then Woolman was coercive as well. But he was also marvelously loving. The miracle of John Woolman is that he was at the same moment able to be both a coercive confronter and a loving reconciler. That is what we have to aim for, too; without love, confrontation produces anger; with [love], [confrontation] provokes self-searching. I think therefore that we torture ourselves unnecessarily in our preoccupation with the conflict between confronting and reconciling. There need be no conflict. Confrontation in love has within it the seeds of reconciliation.” [pp. 266–268]

Confrontation in love has within it the seeds of reconciliation.

Given the nature of our attachment to Jesus, to God, to the work of Love to which the Inward Christ directs us, I think it's important to remember that message. Sometimes bearing the message of Love is like bearing a sword. But if the message is truly prompted by Love, it holds within it the seeds of reconciliation.