

A Radical Hospitality and an Imaginative Challenge

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Luke 14:15-24

The People called Quakers believe in radical hospitality, and that God is not bound by the lines of race, sect, class, sexual orientation or gender. What we experience within this Meeting Room is a mirror of the spirit of Jesus who shunned no one, and who consistently spoke in ways that broke down artificial barriers, and who, in his own life, shared bread and wine at table with all manner of people.

The Society of Friends has a unique and particular voice to raise to the world, a unique and particular vision of how the world is meant to be. Our Testimonies build a sense of identity around that particular voice and vision. Such practices as Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship of the Earth, strengthen our community by reminding us who we are. The Spirit of Christ as expressed through the People Called Quakers moves against classism, racism sexism and sectarianism, against the setting up of walls between groups of people who come to God in different ways. Whether it was women, children, tax collectors, people of ill repute—any who were outside the circle that society drew—Jesus *drew them in*, and *welcomed them in*. And he did **not** do it because they adhered to a certain belief. ***He did it because he loved them, because he***

made himself open to them. Put another way: The most important thing about being a Christian expressed through the People called Quakers is not about adhering to certain beliefs. What is most important is the desire for an experience with the Living God, the desire for the Spirit in our lives—the desire to be in touch with and transformed by the Light that is within us.

Jesus told a story about a man who gave a banquet. Some of the invited guests did not want to come or were too busy to come. That was frustrating to the host...it made him angry. But the impulse even stronger than his anger was the desire that his table be filled, that he gather in all who would come to his banquet. His was an energetic, active, even aggressive hospitality, bringing people in from streets and lanes and even out on the country roads. His hospitality extended to those fleeing oppressive governments and gang warfare, including Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Syria. Friends and strangers, people of every and any condition, the host wanted to bring them in.

I think of God this way...as the host of a banquet. Here God is pacing inside the house, looking out the window every few minutes, eager to see more guests coming up the walk, eager for more people to come and be at his table. This is how Jesus understood God's love and his radical hospitality. He boiled down his faith to just two propositions: to love God and to love one's neighbor. The writer

of Matthew would later add: the second is like unto the first. I believe this to be true. To love one's neighbor is to love God. For to love God is to love *love* itself.

Jesus believed that the experience which he had of God, could be translated into human relationships and forms of community. How did he imagine this? Jesus told many stories, parables offering glimpses of what authentic human community might be: the story of the table that is open to all...the scripture reading I shared earlier. The workers in the Vineyard, a parable of worth and work, in which all receive at the end of the day enough pay to meet their need, no more, no less...the Samaritan, where one's enemy becomes salvation and unexpected care renders the old maps of who belongs where, utterly ridiculous; the Prodigal, a tale of lost and found, in which a brother must choose love over honor or risk losing everything. How can we imagine human life and relationships lived out of the fundamental reality of love? Jesus tried out scenarios in his parables. As stories, they are experiences of love manifest in relationships, *not* templates for community formation. They are not a blueprint, but invite further imaginative work: How might love be embodied in all of our relationships...immigrant, documented or undocumented, and citizen? Caucasian or black or brown skinned people? English speaking or Spanish speaking?

I do not know where such imaginative work on love and community will take us. I do know where it will not take us, and that is to deal with the problems

surrounding the immigration debate by separating children from their parents and enforcing a zero-tolerance policy where rational judgment and compassion are negated. I saw on **Facebook** a sign that was in front of the Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City. It said, “America does not need a multi-billion-dollar wall at our southern border...What we need is a giant mirror so that we can see what we have become.” The words on the Statue of Liberty seem no longer applicable and a sentiment of a former time... “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free.” In our current situation, these words sound quaint and out of touch.

The imaginative challenge of love that Jesus presented in his stories about human relationships and community has never been more needed than right now. How might we imagine life together in this world where the poor are blessed, the hungry fed, the depressed filled with laughter, and the abused and frightened made safe? How might we imagine a world in which the anxieties of those who live teetering on the margins of life, never knowing whether food will come tomorrow, or if at the end of a long trip to seek asylum not knowing if their children will be taken from them, *might disappear in a sea of freedom and a sea of enough?* Does this sound too hopelessly naïve? I don't know. I do know that Quakers have always worked toward providing that sea of freedom and sea of enough. I do know that Jesus dreamed such utopian dreams. Are we not called to do likewise?

