

Mystery and Community

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: 1st Corinthians 13: 4-13

Over the years I have often referred to the African-American theologian, Howard Thurman. I love the way that he would conclude all of his sermons by saying, “I don’t know, I don’t know, it may be.” By closing his message in this way, he would leave his hearers much to contemplate. Long after the thoughts in the sermon would be forgotten, the depth of humility of the speaker would be remembered. “It may be...”

Humility...It is a spiritual quality that we could use more of these days. *Love is the basic ingredient of all humility.* As Paul says, "Love does not insist on its own way." We are living in a time when people are insisting on their own way, as more and more people become certain of their opinions and beliefs, with precious little room in their minds and conversation for doubt. It is as if the more you recite what you believe, and the louder you state it, the more your

hearers will become convinced of its truth. Raising questions, looking at possible exceptions, maintaining a healthy level of doubt in all of one's assumptions, are not an active part of today's public discourse.

Why is there an ever increasing cacophony of certitudes that are paralyzing discourse? Why have so many of our minds and hearts closed to any challenge put forth by those who disagree with our beliefs?

First of all, I would suggest that we have become closed because of our discomfort with mystery. Such discomfort has many origins, from the rapid change that we are experiencing in our day to day lives, thus the increasing hunger for certainty, to the lack of time for reflective thought when we can simmer and muse on our stated beliefs. If we are to know TRUTH, it seems to me that we must learn to be comfortable in the mystery that surrounds us. This is especially true of the religious seeker. No matter how much we try

to define God and systematize our process of knowing, there will always be mystery beyond our knowledge.

I was a young boy when I first heard the words of the 17th Century Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay. The context was the Minneapolis Friends Meeting. Sitting in the silence, I heard my father repeat the following words many times as he spoke out of the quiet: “For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a *secret power* among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up.” And the first part of Barclay’s confession is just as moving... “Not by strength of arguments or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine and convincement of my understanding thereby, came I to receive and bear witness of the Truth, *but by being secretly reached by the life...*”

Secretly reached by the life...in the silent assemblies of God’s people. Barclay uses the term “Secret” or “Secretly” twice in this brief description of his experience. It seems an odd use of the word

“secret,” and yet it is, perhaps, the only way that he could describe what had touched his soul so profoundly. It is to admit to the awesome mystery of God. It was not the kind of mystery or secret associated with a God who loomed high above the human race in a faraway heaven, but, instead, a “secret power” which was *felt* in this earthly realm, and which could actually move one to *feel* the “evil weakening” and the “good raised up.”

Learning to be comfortable with mystery is to accept our human frailty and admit with the Apostle Paul that in this life we do, indeed, “see in a mirror dimly.” The more we grow in Truth and come to know the Living God, the more we will become comfortable with mystery, and recognize that there is ever so much more we have to learn and discover.

***Secondly, does our focus on individualism over-shadow the importance of a community of diversity that will challenge our certitudes?* We are a nation of individuals. There is little within our national tradition that emphasizes community. This individualism**

has been with our culture since its beginnings, and involves giving priority to the concerns of an individual's private life and fulfillment over a concern for the whole of our society. Within the realm of religious faith, this involves giving priority to individual spiritual needs over the mission of the faith community.

Both a private life and a communal life are basic to the spiritual growth of individuals. Many observers of contemporary faith and society, however, believe that there has been a growing tendency to give the individual preference over the community. Many Americans view their religious involvement in a Meeting, Church, Synagogue or Mosque, as a journey among individuals rather than as a community moving together.

On this New Member First Day, can we affirm that we need one another to help check and balance our belief systems, as well as the certitudes that we express? I hope that as we collectively work out the faith by which we live within this beloved community, such a course will always be open to us.

Learning to be comfortable in mystery, as well as being a part of a diverse faith community that challenges our certitudes, seems to be a healthy way to be about the process of spiritual growth. In this process, I believe that we will also recover that most important of spiritual virtues...*Humility*. Humility is especially important within the imperfect institution that we know as Cincinnati Meeting. In the last session of the Quakerism classes that I teach, I share a warning to all those considering membership in the Meeting. In brief, I explain that Meetings are not perfect institutions, and neither are the members who fill the benches on First Day, or share the screen during our time of Zoom worship. Those who work on our committees or who strive to bring to life our commonly held Testimonies, or those who are on staff, are not perfect human beings. What does this mean? It means that if you are a part of this Meeting, one of two things will eventually happen. One, you will disappoint the Meeting, or two, the Meeting will disappoint you. The time may come when the Meeting doesn't do something that you believe is vitally important. We may fail to act on an issue or even

act in a manner contrary to what you expect. At the same time, it is possible that you might not do something that the Meeting asks of you or do it in a way that does not meet the expectations of other members. These disappointments are inevitable within a community of faith. Though such disappointments are sad and can be hurtful, it is a part of being an imperfect people banding together in an imperfect way to create an imperfect institution. It is only in a spirit of humility that we can work through these disappointments in a loving and caring way, striving to do better the next time. In the words of the columnist, George Will, words that can be applied to all areas of public discourse: “America is currently awash in an unpleasant surplus of clanging, clashing certitudes. That is why there is a rhetorical bitterness absurdly disproportionate to our real differences. It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure that you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate—even savor—the strangeness of everything, including ourselves.” *I don’t know...I don’t know, it may be...*