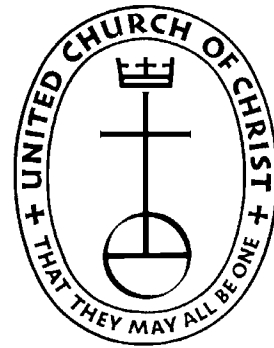


Colonial Quakers Putting Faith into Practice

A Sermon By —
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This sermon discusses how the early colonial Quakers in Pennsylvania treated the Native Americans, living peacefully with them. This is what we are called to do: see the Inner Light in all people, acknowledging the presence of the divine in everyone, including those who we fear or do not understand.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

The Rev. Jerald Stinson
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A Letter From William Penn

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Today I want to take you back into American history to that time when Europeans began to colonize what they called “a new world.”

Our Congregational religious tradition began in England in 1580, and forty years later Congregationalists called the Pilgrims began the Plymouth Colony, and ten years after that boatloads of Congregationalists known as the Puritans arrived in Boston to begin the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

A couple decades after the Puritans came to Boston, George Fox created the Society of Friends in England. They would later be known as Quakers – possibly because they trembled when they felt God calling them to speak in worship or because when George Fox was tried for heresy he warned the judge that he should tremble at God’s word and the judge mocked him as a Quaker.

Early Quaker theology resembled other Protestant theologies of that day, including Puritan theology. But there were three important differences.

First, the Quakers paid more attention to personal experiences of God rather than to the authority of the Bible. They stressed God’s love, not God’s harshness.

Second, they believed that a spark of the Living God, an Inner Light, burned in every human heart. Thus they were passionate about equality.

Third, since the Inner Light dwelt in every person, Quakers had profound respect for the sanctity of human life. They were reluctant to use force to settle conflicts, believing justice and courtesy should underlie political dealings and war could be averted by conscientious effort.

Now I want to look at how that theology affected the Quaker settlers’ interaction with Native Americans.

Mary Fisher and Ann Austin were the first Quakers to reach this hemisphere. In 1656 the two women arrived in Boston, where our rigidly dogmatic Congregational forebears humiliated them, imprisoned them and then expelled them from the colony.

Nicholas Upshaw was upset about how his fellow Puritans treated these women

and about a new law that would fine any ship captain bringing more Quakers to Boston. He spoke out and actually became a Quaker himself. He too was banished from the colony, and as he fled he was received kindly by the Indians he met and became the first Quaker to come into contact with Native Americans.

There are many stories from the latter decades of the 17th century about Quakers, persecuted as heretics throughout the colonies, finding help and acceptance in Native American villages.

Josiah Coale and Thomas Thurston were Quaker preachers from England who traveled by foot from Virginia to New England. They wrote, "We came upon the Susquehane's Indians who courteously received us and entertayned us in their houses with much respect." When Thurston was sick, Indians nursed him back to health. Another Quaker preacher, John Bowater, said the Indians entertained him in their homes but the Christian settlers held him in their cold jails.

Quaker Thomas Chalkley came to America in 1698 when most colonies were ablaze with war between the colonists and Indians. He wrote, "People generally rode and went to their worship armed, but Friends went to their meetings without either sword or gun, having trust and confidence in God." Chalkley said hundreds of people were killed by Indian raiders but only three Quakers died, two of whom had started wearing guns.

So early on, Quakers found themselves in debt to Indians for helping them. They also found they had much in common with Native Americans. Thomas Chalkley wrote about attending an Indian council which was like a Quaker meeting. He said: "They spoke one after another without any heat or jarring, and some of the most esteemed of their women do sometimes speak in their councils. I asked an interpreter why they permitted the women to speak. His answer was, 'Some women are wiser than some men.'" Indians like the Quakers gave women an important role in their community – something our forebears resisted. Like Quaker meetings, Indian councils operated on the basis of discussion and consensus, rather than conflict and majority vote.

The Quakers also approached Native Americans in a way different from our forebears. The Puritans saw Indians as heathen savages needing conversion. The Quakers saw them as children of God. Yes, the Quakers wanted to share the stories of Jesus with the Indians, but they never thought of them, or black slaves, or anyone else as savages – everyone possessed the Inner Light of God's love.

Now as persecution of Quakers as heretics intensified in England, more and more Quakers came to the American colonies. And in some colonies their numbers al-

lowed them access to power.

In Rhode Island, for thirty-six years Quakers held the governorship, and during the time that colony's laws changed for the better so that Indians tried for breaking the law faced a jury with at least half the members being Native American. The testimony of Indians now received the same weight as testimony from colonists. When King Philip's War between settlers and Indians spread throughout New England, Quaker leaders in Rhode Island couldn't stop that colony's participation in the war, but afterward, as many colonies sold Indian captives into slavery, that was prohibited in Rhode Island. But in 1677, Rhode Island elected a non-Quaker governor, and the colony soon mirrored the practices of the other colonies.

North Carolina was the second colony in which Quakers temporarily exerted a strong political influence. They were able to make some treaties of friendship and peace with Native Americans in that part of the New World. But the Quaker influence didn't last long at all.

Several Quakers came into power in New Jersey. Suddenly relationships between the colony and Native Americans improved dramatically. One major change came in terms of land purchases. When land was to be obtained for new colonial communities, fair negotiations with Native Americans were required and several laws were put in place to guarantee that that happened.

John Woolman's diary is one of the most important documents in early American history. A Quaker leader in New Jersey, even as threats of war between settlers and Indians escalated, he traveled to several Native American villages. He wrote, "Thence a concern arose [within me] to spend some time with the Indians that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live, if haply I might receive some instruction from them; or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of truth amongst them."

Woolman understood there was much he could learn from the Indians. A most unique idea.

But the place where Quaker theology was really put into practice was in Pennsylvania, the site of William Penn's "holy experiment."

In 1681, the British crown owed Penn's influential father a significant amount of money. To pay the debt, William, a Quaker, was given a "lordly province" in the colonies. He controlled the land and the government.

Before going to the colony to live, he sent ahead three ships of Quakers to begin

settling the colony. All settlers had to agree to a set of stipulations about how they would purchase land in a just fashion. He instructed the leader who acted on his behalf to “be tender of offending the Indians. Let them know you come to sit down lovingly among them. Let my letter, and the conditions about just dealings with them, be read in their tongue, that they may see we have their good in our eye.”

And here, in place of a biblical reading today, is part of Penn’s letter that was read to the native inhabitants of the land that would become of Pennsylvania:

“My friends. There is a great God that hath made the world and all things therein, to whom you and I and all people owe their being and well-being, and to whom you and I must one day give an account of all that we do in the world. This great God hath written [a] law in our hearts by which we are taught and commanded to love and help, and do good to one another.

“Now this great God hath been pleased to make me concerned in your part of the world, and the king of the country where I live hath given me great province therein, but I desire to enjoy it with your love and consent that we may always live together as neighbours and friends.

“Now I would have you well observe that I am very sensible of the unkindness and injustice that have been too much exercised towards you by the people of these parts of the world, who have sought themselves to make great advantages by you rather than to be examples of goodness and patience unto you.

“But I am not such a [person], as is well known in my country. I have great love and regard towards you and desire to win and gain your love and friendship by a kind, just and peaceful life; and the people I send are of the same mind.

“I shall shortly come to you myself, at which time we may more largely and freely confer and discourse of these matters. In the mean time I have sent my commissioners to treat with you about the land and a firm league of peace. Let me desire you to be kind to them, and receive these presents and tokens, which I have sent you as a testimony of my good will to you, and my resolution to live justly, peaceably and friendly with you.”

There was no other document like that in early American history. It reflected an amazing attitude anchored in Quaker convictions.

By the time Penn arrived in the colony there had been seven significant settler land purchases from three different tribes. Each tribe felt the purchases were just and fair. With Penn present there was a gathering with the leaders of those tribes under a famous elm tree for a public ratification of the purchases and for the declaration of a peaceful sharing of the land.

Penn not only fairly purchased the land, he sometimes bought the same land two times when two groups claimed to be its lawful owners or when one group resided on the land but were subject to another group.

In Pennsylvania in all early land purchases, the owners were paid what was in their mind a fair price. No other colony could make such a claim.

Penn was also concerned about trade with the Indians. He worried that non-resident traders might come into the colony to exploit the Indians, and so a law was quickly passed that prohibited that exploitation.

And Penn, like John Woolman, was intrigued by Native American culture. He wanted to learn more about it, to learn some of the languages and customs. He appreciated it for what it was, not for what it might be after Christian conversion.

During the time of Penn's leadership, no Quaker families suffered at the hand of Indians. No Indians suffered at the hands of the Quakers. Indians were welcome in the settlers' homes and settlers were welcome in Indian villages. In fact, Quaker settlers often left their children in Indian villages when they went off to church meetings. Quakers and Indians lived harmoniously as self-respecting neighbors.

While Penn was present, the strength of his personality and convictions created an atmosphere of cooperation. But Penn had to return to England to deal with some financial setbacks and he was never able to come back to Pennsylvania.

For almost 40 years after his departure, relations with Native Americans continued to go smoothly. But in the third and fourth decades of the 18th century, things began to fall apart.

Why? The Quaker population of Pennsylvania was soon outnumbered by others. Forty years after Penn's death in 1718, the population of the colony jumped from 60,000 to 250,000 – most residents being Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who did not share the Quakers' respect for the Indians.

But the Quakers themselves also began to change. Second- and third-generation Quakers lacked the enthusiasm for the Quaker ideals that their parents had had. This was true even for William Penn's own sons. Often economic concerns outweighed humanitarian ones.

Soon Pennsylvania was like any other colony, but for 75 years it had been a very special place because those early Quakers put their faith into practice.

And it seems to me that we, today, can learn much from Penn's "holy experiment." We need, perhaps more than ever, to acknowledge the Inner Light of God's love burning within the souls of each human being with whom we share this planet. That's what World Communion Sunday is all about – global oneness, radical equality. That's what it will take to overcome racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism.

It's hard! It's hard to acknowledge the presence of the divine within those we don't like, those we don't trust, those we fear, those we don't understand. Think of Jim Manley's hymn which we sang before the sermon, "Many are the differences that seem to cloud the vision from our sight; many long traditions seem to separate us when we would unite; many are the fears we hold that somehow our own voice will not be heard; many are the differences but God our unity is in your word."

That hymn then proclaimed the message the Quakers brought to the new world: "And we're created to be one, sister, brother, daughter, son; whether Jew or Greek you love us all the same."

God loves each of us just as we are!

Yes, we are created to be one: Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans and Americans; Israelis and Palestinians; gay, straight and bisexual; people of all genders and the transgendered; people of all races and religions; those in country clubs and those working behind the counter at McDonald's.

Beneath our differences we are created to be one. The colonial Quakers not only preached that message, they lived it. They courageously practiced their faith.

Libby began our last Church Council meeting with the Metta, a Buddhist loving-kindness prayer. We prayed for ourselves, for those we love, for others that we and they would be safe and free from harm, happy and joyous, filled with lovingkindness. But then she asked us to use those same words, that same prayer, lifting up someone that we don't like, someone difficult for us to be around. Thus, she called on us to recognize and honor the Inner Light even in someone we find difficult.

That's the challenge of our faith!

In a recent conversation, Rabbi Jonathan Klein, a good friend, and I were recently discussing Jewish and Christian theology. Jonathan said he thought Judaism often focused on a kind of justice that included not only fairness but compassion as well. But he said, "You Christians have it tougher – you must deal with the Sermon on the Mount, where justice isn't enough, where you are called to love even your enemies."

Colonial Quakers understood that. Everyone has within them the Inner Light of God's love. So today, may the commitment we make as we partake of the bread and cup at that table filled with images of global diversity be a commitment to try harder in the coming week to see the Inner Light in all of our global neighbors – in those afar but also in those with whom we work, with those in our families and with those with whom we share community. May we aspire to William Penn's desire to "live justly, peaceably and friendly" with all our human brothers and sisters. Amen.