

Plenary Address

A Letter of Encouragement in Discouraging Times

2010 Lake Erie Yearly Meeting Sessions – Lloyd Lee Wilson

To the faithful Friends of Lake Erie Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, and to Friends Everywhere and to everyone who seeks to wait for and move under the immediate and perceptible guidance of God's Holy Spirit, by whatever name they are known to the world, greetings in the name of God our Creator and Sustainer;

From a fellow Seeker after Truth, a beginning student in the School of Christ who holds you in high esteem, in the love of Christ, remembering your hospitality when I was a stranger among you, and your desire to know God experimentally, more fully and more personally day by day;

May you persevere in the daily faithfulness that advances the Reign of God here among us, and so share daily in the joy that God offers to each one who seeks to live in God's presence, and in all the blessings of the Reign of God.

The trials and tribulations you face in civil affairs, in proper care for the earth, and in maintaining a consistent witness for God in these difficult times are well known; indeed, we also face these same challenges ourselves every day, wherever God's faithful are gathered. In these dark times, we write to encourage you to keep faithful, and to persevere in the Lamb's War which is our calling and our hope of glory; for we know that the Kingdom of God is already among us, though often unseen, and we know that our work is to bring it into its fullness, as God intends.

The ocean of darkness which surrounds you surrounds us all, and we are indeed beset on every side. In North America we must confess that we have been participants and beneficiaries in an unsustainable, inequitable economic system that now threatens to fail us all, rich and poor alike. War and the devastations and deprivations that war brings lie all around us, all over the world. The basic dignity of human beings, a beloved creation of God, is denied daily in every way the human mind can devise – and that blood is also on our hands. We human beings continue to assault the very Creation of which we are a part in ways that threaten soon to make it uninhabitable for human-

kind, as it has already become uninhabitable for thousands of God's creatures.

Yet though we are hard pressed on every side, we are not crushed; our woes perplex us, but not to despair; we are persecuted, but not abandoned; our circumstances leave us struck down, but not destroyed. Do not let the ocean of darkness overcome your faith, but have hope, for there is a Light which has come into the world, and which is even now overcoming the ocean of darkness, although the darkness cannot comprehend it. Remember the power of God and the love God has for every part of Creation, not least for humans made in the image of God.

Purpose

I want to encourage you to persevere, to maintain your witness for the Truth in these dark and discouraging times. To the human eye these are evil times indeed, with death, famine, war, and destruction on every side. The Creation itself groans with the pain of the injuries it has suffered at human hands, and the harm human beings have done to each other and continue to do to one another is heartbreaking beyond the ability of words to express.

To the eye of faith, nevertheless, the Light of God is apparent, and that Light pierces every shadow, revealing every deed and illuminating the path of healing and reconciliation. God is neither ignorant of our condition nor apathetic toward the suffering of Creation; indeed God is already at work restoring all that is to its proper and intended glory. Especially in these challenging times, let us not neglect our God-given duty, but rather let us embrace the opportunity to labor with God and for God on behalf of God's Kingdom.

Body

Our circumstances are not more severe or devoid of hope than those faced by many of God's people throughout history. Our situation is difficult and discouraging, but not unique. Like the people of God in other places and times, we have two ways to respond to the world: faithfulness or faithlessness. By God's mercy we have an option – an alternative to the death and destruction that surrounds us in so many forms.

By faithlessness I mean the path of collaboration with the forces and values of the dominant system. “Go along to get along.” “Don’t rock the boat.” “Keep your head down and blend in.” The primary value of the dominant culture in North America is that I am at the center of my story. The path of faithlessness is to put yourself at the center of your story, to look out for what’s good for Number One, and to view everyone and everything else as a means to increasing the good for you personally. Frankly, this is the most direct way to maximize your personal comfort, to avoid as much as possible the economic and social and environmental darkness that surrounds us all. It requires less personal and corporate effort: just do what everybody else does, which is easy because the culture is designed to make what everybody does easy. After all, these bad times seem likely to continue indefinitely, so it is best to protect oneself.

We can respond to our discouraging circumstances in faithfulness because we know that the situation is not as it seems. The physical world is just as broken as it appears to be – but we know that Christ has come already, to heal and to reconcile all of Creation to God’s loving order. Christ has given us each one a part in that reconciliation and healing process. The true context of our lives is that God has broken the “givenness” of the world, the inevitability of the course of events, by breaking into history by means of Jesus of Nazareth. Through the faithfulness of Jesus, and his resurrection by God after his death, the inevitability of evil and suffering is ended. Evil is still happening, and suffering continues, but it does not have to be that way. We know by experience that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Let us gird ourselves then, to the long-term task of bringing that Kingdom into its fullness in the here and now, blessing all of Creation as it grows.

We have faith in the ability of God the Creator and Sustainer of Creation to restore all of God’s work to its intended harmony, and we have faith in God’s intention to do just that. But our faith must be more than intellectual or emotional assent; it must be made manifest in our lives every day, so that our allegiance and commitment are evident to all who encounter us: we must be doers of the word, and not hearers only. Our ability to receive the salvation so freely offered by God is dependent on the ethical commitment by which we live our daily lives. Though with our outward mind and physical eye the forces of darkness seem to be everywhere active and ascendant, that is not the reality revealed to the one who looks with the mind of Christ and the

eye of faith. The eye of faith shows the seeds of the Kingdom everywhere, struggling to reach the good soil in which to thrive and bring forth the harvest God intends.

God wants our faith *and* our practice. God needs more than our belief, unconnected to our daily words and deeds. It is not enough to believe inwardly yet still collaborate with the powers that be in this dark and broken world. That may seem the easiest and least dangerous course, but such collaboration only strengthens the powers of darkness. We cannot wait – the world cannot afford for us to wait – until conditions are better, until it is less risky to walk with God, until God's Reign is ascendant everywhere. What is needed, to paraphrase Joseph Hoag, is for people who will not wait for everyone else to be transformed, but who intend to live into the Reign of God now, and set the rest an example!

When we begin to act faithfully as well as to believe, our first impulse is to oppose the forces of darkness directly: to defeat them head-on. This path of direct opposition seems clear and pure, but in fact it is itself a digression from the Kingdom of God. We may defeat the spirit of darkness in a particular situation, only to find that, as Jesus warned, seven more spirits flock into the same place, leaving us worse off than before. Simply being oppositional entangles the workers of the Kingdom in the methodologies of the dark, tempting them to become more and more like the darkness they oppose, in order to be able to oppose it more directly. There will be no deep roots able to sustain them. The path of opposition is the path of power, and its goal is to defeat the enemy. God's path is the path of love, and its goal is to institute the Reign of God, where there are no enemies.

We are called to live in the reality of this other kingdom, this kingdom struggling to be born, even while we remain physically in this apparently dying world. One does this by incorporating gospel values into every part of one's life, replacing the values of the kingdom of this world with the values of the kingdom of God. This inevitably means we will each one be marked as peculiar, strange, and different – we will be misunderstood. Do not be afraid of this, because it is a sign of faithfulness and also a means by which the kingdom of God is preached to the world.

God calls us to active discipleship, not mere belief or dedicated opposition. The best response to the presence of evil is the practice of

the Gospel. We are called literally to become “Good News” to everyone and every part of Creation. Active discipleship is costly; it requires that we give up everything, including our desire to be effective and relevant. It is my experience that whatever one gives up that is genuinely of the kingdom is given back in love. In God’s balance, the rest is dross anyway. Signs of progress may be few and far between, but do not be discouraged. Much of the growth of the kingdom is invisible to human perception, just as much of the early growth in a garden is underground, invisible to human eyes. Be diligent, to care for your part of the garden daily, whether the sprout is yet visible or not. Be vigilant, to watch for and encourage spiritual growth everywhere each day, so you help the harvest everywhere.

We are social beings, and our sins are societal as well as individual. We will at best be the “implicated resistance” to the powers of this world, and “flawed immigrants” to the new one. Our first task is to be always in the process of searching out the seeds of sin in our own lives, whether they be seeds of war, seeds of injustice to others, or seeds of environmental damage to the rest of Creation. Where we find these seeds we must be at work continually to remove them, even though that can be accomplished only little by little, over a long time. Our second task is to be always in the process of inviting others to join in the work, to become themselves implicated resistance and flawed immigrants.

Particular Issues

Two particular areas in which we must live out our faith in God intentionally are our relationships with our fellow human beings and with all of God’s Creation. The principle to be applied is the same in each case: to love our neighbor as ourself. This is God’s commandment to us all.¹

Earthcare: Remember that the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness therein; it is not ours to do with as we please. Indeed, it is time to take to heart the teachings of the Messiah, that the one who would be first must become last, and servant of all. The words of Genesis do speak of stewardship and even dominion, but the method by which God desires us to fill those roles is to become the servant of God’s Creation. That means humans will not by default have the favored

¹ E.g., Galatians 5:14

position whenever there is conflict between the needs of humans and the needs of other parts of Creation. That means some part of our own bounty and surplus will be expended or foregone protecting the habitat and general wellbeing of the rest of Creation. Our standard of living, as the world measures it, will certainly decrease as we move toward a right relationship with Creation.

God calls for us to enter into an I-Thou² relationship with the rest of Creation. The dominant culture of our time relates to Creation as an It, an object, a thing to be manipulated in ways satisfactory to the human or humans who are central and whose welfare and satisfaction are of primary importance. This has seemed to be a relatively harmless sin for much of history, when the ability of human beings, even in large numbers, to inflict substantial damage on Creation was very limited.

In the present stage of human development, this I-It attitude toward Creation is no longer a “harmless” sin. As humans have flourished numerically and become ever more powerful technologically, our ability to damage ourselves and all of Creation has grown almost beyond comprehension. There is literally no part of this world – earth, air, or water – that has escaped this damage. From the heights of the atmosphere to the depths of the ocean, to the most remote mountain peak or desert oasis, the mark of humanity may be seen – and it is a mark of senseless damage. We are all vandals.

It is past time to replace this I-It treatment of Creation with an I-Thou relationship. God calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves; Jesus teaches that our neighbor is the one who needs our loving care. All of Creation is our neighbor, in need of our loving care, and we are called to be in the sort of mutual relationship with Creation as we are called to be in with our human neighbors; one in which the welfare of our neighbor is as important as our own welfare.

Some will protest that to engage Creation as our neighbor rather than as our resource will make our human lives less bountiful, less free, and less good. They do not realize the true cost of treating Creation as subservient to humanity, because we have become very good at hiding from that true cost. Humans by and large have adopted an empire mentality regarding Creation: the human empire is surrounded by the barbarian Creation. We’ve ignored what’s happening outside the walls, in the rest of God’s Creation, in order to feel good about

² Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

our life inside the human empire. That time is coming to an end – the damage we’ve done is gathering to overwhelm us. Global climate change, destruction of irreplaceable ecosystems, poisoning the air, water, and land of God’s Creation: these will soon overwhelm our society, and there will be no place to hide.

To believe that humans are free to misuse Creation is a false understanding of the world. The Reign of God to which we are called is a reign of harmony for all, with no room for oppression of any sort. Our standard of measure is not merely our own life, or that of our family, or that of our nation, or even “what’s good for humanity.” The true measure of our wellbeing includes the welfare of every bit of God’s Creation, of which we humans are only a small part.

Resist the temptation to be ego-centered or even human-centered in your understanding! All of Creation is God’s and is beloved of God: even the sparrow which is sold for a penny, or the lily of the field which contributes nothing to the national economy.

What is required is a continuing, careful examination of our lives, to see where the seeds of harm to Creation may be, and then a continuing, careful consideration of how these contaminations might be rooted out and the harm ended. This will not be an easy or quickly-completed task. Over the past three centuries we have developed a society in which it is easy and inexpensive to live by oppressing Creation and almost impossible to live completely free of harm done to our neighbors.

You can’t buy your salvation in this project: a Prius in the driveway (or even two) is not a sign of righteousness. What is right for one family may not even be available as an option to another, as issues of rural/urban living, age, health, and financial resources impact our possibilities. There is not even a goal line or “end zone” in sight: because we live in the society we do, it is virtually impossible at this time to live without harming the Creation in some way, directly or indirectly. However, we can change what we are doing, we can live in ways that do less harm, we can move toward the goal, even if we can’t see it yet. If we stay close to our Guide, neither running ahead nor lagging behind, we will move toward that greater harmony which God desires and intends.

Humanity: Our struggles and our failure to be in right relationship with the rest of Creation bring tears to the eyes of anyone who is willing to feel that reality; but our failure to be in right relationship

even with one another as human beings is overwhelming in its tragedy. Scripture tells us we are all made in the image of God: a powerful truth that should bond us in unbreakable community, even as we wrestle to understand and articulate exactly what it means to be in the image of God.

Instead, when we have so much in common with one another biologically and spiritually, when we share the image of God, our relationships with one another are characterized by an unrelenting focus on what is different. Our DNA, our thought processes, our emotions are so very nearly identical as to make the differences defy description. Beyond that, we each share the infinite and unconditional love of God who created and sustains each one of us from moment to moment! And yet what we focus on is how different we are from one another, and how those differences make it difficult or impossible to get along with one another, or even to tolerate one another's continued existence.

The current furor over immigration policy emphasizes differences in the legal status of people and mostly ignores our common humanity. Moses enunciated God's clear standard for how non-citizens were to be treated in the Promised Land:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.³

"You shall love the alien as yourself": the alien, the undocumented immigrant, is also our neighbor, deserving of our deepest care, whom we are to love as ourselves.

At best our society seems indifferent to those whom we consider "outsiders." Far too often that indifference ripens into a desire to punish the other as a scapegoat, under the guise of self-protection – protecting our persons or our "stuff." The alien is blamed for our own problems and fears, and then punished. This happens when I see myself as the righteous one, dependent on my own efforts and the efforts of those like me to gather and protect the things necessary to make me happy. It is a zero-sum game: there is only so much stuff to go around, and the more other people have the less there is for me to

³ Leviticus 19:33-34, NRSV.

have. If someone else has a certain thing, that only makes me want it more than ever. We can see this mimetic desire all around, from the nursery playroom to amassing personal fortunes to international wars fought over natural resources.

This behavior stems from two related sins: the sin of putting ourselves at the center of the story, and the sin of lust, which is the desire to possess that which it would be wrong for us to have. When I believe I am at the center of the story, then my own happiness is the measure of success and I am the only one responsible for or capable of making me happy. I am motivated to acquire more and more stuff (power, prestige, and perquisites), in the belief that more stuff will make me more happy. The winner is the one who dies with the most stuff!

In these dark times, when the love of God seems invisible and perhaps completely absent from so many lives, our task in faithfulness is to embody God's love for every person. We ought to love one another as fellow sinners, all equally reconciled to one another and to God by God's own unmerited love and mercy.

How can we expect world peace when the people around us cannot believe it possible to live in peace with their own neighbors? Or to live in peace with us? Surely a necessary foundation stone for peace-work among Friends must be the demonstration that peace is possible in our own local neighborhood. Only then will it be possible to hope and believe that peace can prevail in the nations and in the world. Peacework begins with the person next door.

In the process of working for peace and justice in their communities, nation, and the world at large, many Friends have directed their efforts toward the government, to make government itself less oppressive and unjust, and to enlist the power of government to protect those who are oppressed or persecuted. This is good work, and certainly should continue. We know from Romans Chapter 13 that there is no authority except from God, and that governments have been instituted to be a terror to bad conduct. Whenever government can be improved to better constrain persons from bad deeds, that change should be encouraged.

Remember always, however, that government is by its nature a system of constraints. It does not transform individuals or communities. It can be a very useful tool in constraining bad behavior, because its primary tool is retribution: if a person engages in a prohibited behavior, the government will punish that person,

which acts to discourage that behavior in the future. The government's ability to increase good behavior is by contrast quite weak and ineffective, because its best tools are retributive in nature. While improving government is helpful, never forget that our real goal is the Reign of God, where hearts are transformed and we behave well because we have the heart of God, not because we have been incentivized by government policy. Governments, even perfect democracies, are unable to take us where we ultimately want to be: in the Reign of God. These two tasks should go hand in hand: we must work to end injustice wherever we find it, and when government enables injustice it is right to work to change government. The primary task, however, is our work to change individual hearts, starting with our own, so that individuals may progress on the journey toward the Reign of God.

So while laws and government have their place as constraints on the evil that human beings may do, they cannot inaugurate or make manifest the Reign of God – only human beings can do that (with Divine Assistance), and only by making ourselves vulnerable in many ways, by acting as if the glimpse of the Reign of God which we have seen was already the reality everywhere.

In these times when devout religious faith is commonly seen as divisive and harmful to others, I encourage you to demonstrate in your daily lives that your devotion to God as revealed in the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit leads you to see all humans and indeed all of Creation as your beloved neighbor.

In a world which sees the very necessities of life in apparent short supply, and therefore believes that hoarding them or the means to buy them is the only practical way to live, I encourage you to strive to live without thought for tomorrow, recognizing that life is more than food or clothing (Luke 12:23), and that God will supply what we need. I am not saying “Do not work,” or “Do not save or plan ahead”; I am saying “Do not worry (Luke 12:25), but trust in God.” Demonstrate in your lives that God cares for us all, and will provide what we need. Understand that what we need is almost always far less than what we have, and “keep in mind how diverse and widespread are the temptations to grow richer at the expense of others,”⁴ human and non-human.

⁴ From Query Nine, Book of Discipline of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), 1983 revision.

Summary

There is no call here for you to become the faithful remnant, destined for salvation at the end of days. Your task is rather to be the faithful leaven, working throughout the world in the present moment to lift it into a renewed harmony with God's desires and yearnings. The message I have to share is not to move from the group who are condemned to the small group who will be saved, because Creation cannot be divided: either we and Creation will all be reconciled to the Creator, or no one and no part of Creation will be. The time of reward is not the eschatological end of time, when all the world is judged, nor is it the end of your individual lives. The time of reward is every day, every moment when you act from faith in God, when you make your contribution to the growth of God's Reign in this world.

Do not be deceived; the condition of the world can change, because God is in charge; and it will change, because God wills it so. Will you play your intended part, humbly assisting God in the healing of Creation, or will you neglect this opportunity and duty, thereby acting contrary to God's will?

God's ocean is so very large, and is often storm-tossed, but it is God's ocean, not the ocean of darkness. So "be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world,"⁵ whereby in the world you may be a blessing, and the witness of God throughout all of Creation will bless you.

Closing

In these dark and discouraging times, I write to encourage you to remember that our faith is real, and the object of our faith is God, the creator and sustainer of all that has come into being. God is faithful, and will not abandon or leave us without hope or healing. Persevere! Maintain your hope in God always, for God is our eternal hope and our eventual home is in God and with God.

Make your hope and faith manifest in your daily deeds, for faith without works is dead. God calls us to make our faith a living reality

⁵ George Fox, 1656

by acting faithfully toward everyone and everything that God loves: toward all of Creation. Our calling is to make manifest in every way God's infinite love. We accept God's loving invitation for ourselves by our own deeds which extend that invitation to others. It is here, in our daily praxis, that Creation's salvation will be accomplished. All the world will be affected, for better or worse, by your faithfulness in practicing the love of God.

Christ has already come, though not yet in fullness; the Reign of God has already begun, and grows in power and extent as we dedicate ourselves more fully to following the immediate and perceptible guidance of God's Holy Spirit, accessible to each and every person and especially to groups of believers, if we will but listen. This is indeed a great and terrible battle in the war between the Light and the Darkness – but we know that the Light is already victorious in the war, and if we persevere, this battle will be won as well.

May the Light of God's countenance shine upon you all, and give you strength to persevere, and having done so, bestow the peace that passes all understanding. A New Day is dawning, and is already here!

Lloyd Lee Wilson is a member of the Rich Square Monthly Meeting, North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative). As a recorded minister of the gospel for two decades, he has addressed many Friends' gatherings and yearly meetings. He is the author of two books, Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order and Wrestling with Our Faith Tradition, as well as numerous journal articles and pamphlets. He teaches at Chowan University in Murfreesboro, North Carolina.