

The Transforming Power of Mercy

Colin Saxton

Canadian Quaker Learning Series

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2022 CYM Gathering Bible Study

by Colin Saxton

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About the Author

Colin Saxton and his wife, Janine, are Quakers from Newberg, Oregon. They are parents of four grown children and two grandchildren.

For the past 35 years, Colin served the Quaker community in various ways as a pastor, adjunct professor, Yearly Meeting superintendent, and General Secretary of Friends United Meeting. He has had the privilege of serving as a board member for many organizations and traveled the world visiting and teaching among Friends and others. Colin received his M.A. from Eastern Mennonite Seminary and D.Min. in leadership and spiritual formation from George Fox Evangelical Seminary. He has written for several publications, including a handful of books through Friends United Press. His blog, *Walking in the Way and Stumbling Toward Faithfulness*, is found at <https://walkingintheway.blog>. Colin currently serves as the Everence Stewardship Theologian and Director of Church Relations.

CYM 2022—Monday
The Transforming Power of Mercy
Luke 18:9 - 14—Have Mercy on Me

Good day, Friends! I am grateful to be with you this week. Thank you for the kind invitation.

Before introducing myself or talking about this week's topic—I want to invite you to join me in rooting ourselves in God's merciful Presence. Maybe you don't feel the need for mercy today—but I invite you to soak in it regardless. We never quite know what broken places exist, what hidden wounds we bear, or the burdens we carry that may be helped by the tender healing of the Spirit.

Maybe you can imagine yourself sitting perched on the edge of a pool of water—one that is deep and clear. You are hot, tired, and exhausted—and nothing would feel more refreshing than sliding in and sinking below the surface. As you imagine yourself settled and resting in the water—receive and reflect on these words from Friend Isaac Pennington's *Some Directions to the Panting Soul*:

Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sows in thy heart and let that be in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows and loves and owns that, and it will lead it to the inheritance of life.

As mentioned, I am Colin Saxton—a Friend from Newberg, Oregon. Over the last 35-plus years, I have had the privilege of serving a variety of Quaker organizations and traveling among Friends all around the world—including Canadian Yearly Meeting. I am grateful for the Quaker community, and despite now having made my home among you for so long, I still feel very much a novice when it comes to living in the Life and Power of the Spirit. Maybe this is one reason I am drawn to the subject of mercy.

Over the next five days, I hope not simply to think about mercy—and its ability to transform our lives and impact the lives of

others—but I hope *we can also experience it*. As I understand it, the power of Bible study comes not simply through knowing the content and squabbling over its interpretation—but rather in experiencing the text. Embracing it, standing within the story, and recognizing it as our own. As Robert Barclay, one of the first early Quakers brave enough to dabble in theology, suggests, the Bible functions as a looking glass or mirror by which we can see ourselves more clearly. Hopefully, as we engage the text, we will see ourselves and the world more clearly.

In an age where hate, cynicism, impatience, gracelessness, and a woeful lack of humility often cloud our ability to see ourselves and others plainly, some of us may find the corrective lens of mercy bringing the world back into proper view.

As we wrestle with the text, I'll also share some of my own experiences of mercy. All of us, no doubt, call God by many names—and in some cases, it may be by no name at all because we doubt the presence of the Divine. And likely, we each relate more deeply to different aspects of God's character—love, grace, justice, peace, or truth, for instance—than we might others. For me, the word that best captures both my most profound experiences of Spirit and my theological understanding of who God is—maybe not surprisingly—is mercy. *Mercy*—that overwhelming, undeserved kindness shown to individuals and the entire human community and creation. Mercy—powerful enough to transform lives, heal conflicts, engender hope and make all things new.

Before diving in, I offer this disclaimer to frame where my words come from and, if needed, invite you in the *exercise of mercy* toward me. I come from a Christ-centred experience of Quakerism. As you will learn throughout the week, much of my adult life has been spent within the pastoral tradition, including serving as a Quaker pastor for over 18 years. This is my spiritual root. I met the Living Christ on a college campus many years ago, which changed virtually everything about who I am and what I do. This doesn't mean I disrespect or want to diminish others who have a different experience—but this is *who I am*. I pray, in all earnestness, that God's Spirit may translate, soften, and enrich

whatever words I share, especially to those of you who find particularly Christian and biblical language challenging to hear. So I ask in advance for your mercy and invite you to consider this as a laboratory and practice field for learning how to show mercy to others who may need it. Consider it my gift to you—my way of helping some of you become better people!

If there is at all a trajectory with these messages, it is likely in the move from how *we receive mercy* to being able—and maybe even willing—to *extend it to others*. And along the way, see if we can imagine mercy as an avenue for the transforming power of God to be released through us in a way that may be equally as important as our prophetic calls to justice, our protests, and our unashamed truth-telling as Friends.

Let me begin today with this challenging confession and prayer:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy
on me,
a sinner.*

In one form or another, the well-known “Jesus Prayer” dates back to the early fifth century. Particularly prominent in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, this short, simple, repetitive prayer has been used by desert mothers and fathers, some of the more well-known saints, and by countless unknowns like the rest of us in our quest to inhabit the grace of God and learn to abide in the Presence.

Prayer is a puzzle I have been trying to solve for most of my adult life. Since I did not have the benefit of growing up in a religious home, I did not learn how to pray when I was young. No one bothered to explain its meaning or model its form. As a child, I did not develop the habitus, that deeply ingrained disposition and skill, to naturally turn to God in any and every circumstance. For me, learning the language of prayer as an adult has been like trying to acquire a foreign language as an adult—it is not impossible, just way more challenging.

Over the years, I have learned and used a variety of prayer patterns, alternated my spiritual disciplines, and generally tried to cultivate an ongoing conversation with God throughout the day. I have been moved by the notion of prayerful worship as living with a heart perpetually bent toward God. Whether waking or sleeping, working or playing, all life can be lived in this manner. And in my experience, even if it is at times more sputtering than ceaseless, prayer is the essential portal that makes a worshipful life a more vital and vivid reality.

Equally important, I've come to experience the substance of what the French philosopher, mystic, and political activist Simone Weil uncovered in her pursuit of God—that prayer is essentially learning to pay attention.¹ And in the process of doing so, finding that the experience of abiding in God not only *tenders and transforms us*, but it also animates and enables us to live in solidarity with others—especially those who are suffering.

Of all the words used to describe God, each and all of them together is insufficient. As I said, however, were I to choose one that best describes who God is and how God relates to me, the easy choice is *mercy*. Maybe this is one reason I am drawn to the Jesus Prayer.

Mercy is a concept integral to an understanding of God's dealings with humankind. Sometimes, theologians differentiate "mercy" from "grace" by considering grace as offering an undeserved gift, while mercy is seen as withholding a deserved punishment. I think this limited definition undermines the fullness and beauty of God's mercy, however, and unintentionally hinders the power it can have in our lives. Mercy is much—so much more—than being let off the hook.

Above all, mercy is the demonstration of God's loving kindness. The primary Hebrew term is *hesed*, which is God's committed, covenant love for us. In the New Testament, mercy is described as *compassion in action*—God's kindness coming to us over and over again to liberate and free us to become something more than we otherwise might be on our own.

¹ Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*

I think about this when I read the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee from Luke 18:9-14:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

For those who think of justification or reconciliation with God only in legal or forensic terms, the mercy God showed to the tax collector changes his status before God. It moves him from the unforgiven list to the forgiven list—but it does not necessarily change his life. God's grace covers the debt he owes for breaking a divine law. The prospect of punishment is now withdrawn, and whatever guilt he feels may be relieved. Among the many ways atonement gets described in the Bible, this view dominates Western Christianity. While there is something helpful and even truthful to consider in this understanding of justification, it lacks the fullness, nuance, and beauty of mercy being fleshed out in a real, moment-by-moment relationship between humanity and God.

Differently, Eastern Orthodox Christianity tends to view justification in less legalistic and more medical terms. As much as we might do wrong, it may also be true that we are sick, or maybe broken, and in need of healing. Perhaps our circumstances are so toxic that we have, over time, become unwell. And so—we cry out to God for mercy, not simply for forgiveness-sake, but because we long to change, to be renewed into the image of Christ, to grow in ways that make us fully alive, fully human. More than simply wanting to be forgiven, *we want to*

be well for our own sake and the sake of all of God's good creation. Our longing for mercy is about our fragmented lives and the shatteredness of creation coming to a place of wholeness.

Now, maybe the tax collector from the Luke passage only wants to have his sins forgiven. Perhaps he feels miserable knowing he had cheated people, been a traitor to his Jewish sisters and brothers by serving a brutal and oppressive Roman Empire, and gained his wealth at the expense of others within a culture where roughly 60% of the population lived below the poverty line. Maybe it is all guilt talking when he says:

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy
on me,
a sinner.*

But for many people—including me—this prayer is not rooted in the desire to be forgiven. I have received God's forgiveness many times for wrongs I have knowingly and willingly done and for countless harms I was too blind or ignorant even to notice. What I hunger for is not that grace that no longer tracks my trespasses, but rather this prayer is yearning to be wrapped in a mercy so powerful that it transforms and heals my broken and twisted humanity. It is a longing to be refashioned into something more like the One I have committed to follow. Maybe the tax collector, who is living at odds with his Jewish sisters and brothers and finding himself more committed to acquiring wealth than serving God, actually seeks deliverance now. Maybe his cry of repentance is less about expressing remorse and more about receiving the healing and renewing grace that will free him to embrace a whole new self-understanding and way of relating to others—that includes peace, justice, simplicity, generosity, integrity, and love.

Another Hebrew word for mercy derives from the most-motherly organ in the human body—the womb. This is the place of our formation, where we live in the greatest state of dependence upon

another. I love this image of being surrounded by, enveloped in, and solely dependent upon God's compassion in action and loving-kindness. When I wait within this womb of mercy, I find the patient power of God helping me become less of a sinner and something more akin to a saint. I also find myself becoming just a little less embittered toward those I don't see eye-to-eye with. Those whom I feel are encroaching on my life, my hopes, my rights, and my sense of right and wrong. In the womb of mercy awaiting my formation and growth I am far more likely to understand another person's need for the same kind of growth in grace. In the experience of being surrounded by and held in mercy, I am changed and made whole in a way that transforms how I relate to others.

I confess I do not pray this prayer publicly very often, and maybe I should. I fear that in our day, we are being trained to become more like the Pharisee, glad that we are "not like those people" who differ in culture, class, race, political party, and theological position. As I listen to others, I hear how smart, just, and knowledgeable they are. I hear how they are keeping themselves from others whom they disagree with or consider somehow wrong. Among American Quakers, I often sniff more than a whiff of spiritual pride "that we are not like others."

In all my travels among Friends over the years—visiting hundreds of meetings and churches—and dozens and dozens of Yearly Meetings—the only community I've known to embrace a regular practice of inviting God's mercy into their lives is the Friends from Cuba. Cuba Yearly Meeting is small, has few resources, and lives under constant insecurity, surveillance, and hardship. And yet, they are powerfully alive, radically resourceful, and some of the most grateful and hopeful Quakers I know.

One evening I led a Bible study and discussion with the congregation at Puerto Padre. These Friends had been studying hope and asked me to continue the theme while I was there. As is usual when I visit among Quakers, I received much more than I contributed. I began the study by talking about the "crisis of hopelessness" that plagues many people in North America. I mentioned the growing despair and anxiety I hear among so many people of faith—and how

in our sense of uncertainty about the future, we often find ourselves paralyzed by fear or driven by an anxiety to do something!

Some of the Cuban Friends found this surprising. We agreed it seems ironic that those who have significantly more resources than the vast majority of other members of the human community and have virtually limitless access to information and entertainment and unrestricted freedom to travel—these are people who feel most hopeless.

As I mentioned, Cuban Quakers are—generally speaking—brimming with hope. As far as I can tell, their hope arises from an unwavering confidence in the present reality of God and an abiding sense of God’s mercy—that undeserved kindness that forgives, mends, and heals profoundly and thoroughly. Through enduring hardship and daily reliance on God, they have cultivated an active trust in the goodness and provision of God. “We never lose hope,” one Cuban Friend commented, “because God always provides just what we need when we need it.” They seem to know this not as an idea but as a lived reality.

I also know there are many days when Friends in Cuba long for just a little more. Simple provisions in the country are often in very short supply. Sometimes basic staples—medicines, toilet paper, building materials, and foods for a daily diet—are unavailable. The last time I was there, a coffee shortage meant the amount distributed through their regular rations was being cut with roasted yellow peas to stretch the supply. As one Cuban Friend joked, “Now we get our daily vegetables along with our daily dose of caffeine!”

The ability to find humour in hardship shows uncommon grace. The ability and willingness to live in hope and to trust in God’s relentless goodness, well, that is remarkable. These Friends embody a spirit of contentment and deep trust in the One who is their source of daily bread and joy. They know who they are before God and share what they have gratefully received with others.

And so, I wonder and find myself drawn to pray—

*Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
have mercy
on me,
a sinner.*

As we wind up today's study, let's return to the text. Remember that this story is a parable—a form of teaching that, by design, is meant to stir us to reflect deeply and act differently. Parables are generally a swift kick in the religious backside that surprise us and alert us to a new reality.

The parable of the sinner and Pharisee is preceded by and paired with one that is commonly known as the parable of the persistent widow. Remember that the readers of Luke's gospel are several decades from the days of Jesus. They have learned, just as the first disciples did, to pray, act, and believe in God's Kingdom come—God's will be done—on earth, now! But they are in the thick of it—amid persecution, hardship, injustice, and under the thumb of an oppressive regime. Hope in a beloved community is under assault, as internal and external pressure is causing it to tear apart at the seams. Many of these folks are undoubtedly tired, disappointed, angry, and losing heart. Their sense of perseverance is eroding under the relentless suffering and injustice they experience and see others experience.

I will not delve into that text, but I encourage you to read it this week as you meditate on the one we are considering today. The parable is not comparing God to a cruel judge. Instead, the text intends to say, "If a cruel judge will finally relent and respond to the cries of a poor widow, how much more will a Loving God respond speedily to those seeking justice, healing, peace, hope, and grace? So don't give up. Go deeper—*so much deeper*—than prayer as a passing promise to hold someone or the world in the Light. Rather, learn a way of prayer described by an African American pastor who cautioned: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you may not know what real prayer is."

God will vindicate. God will justify the faithful—this is part of the promise of the first parable. But immediately, the context is switched, and the tables are partially turned as we meet the Pharisee and sinner. More than the first, this parable would have been a shocker to Jesus' first audience. The Pharisee, in this context, is not some shady television evangelist or crooked villain. He is an authentically devout person—a convinced Friend, if you will. No doubt, they attend Meeting regularly, come to every business gathering, and check all the

boxes of being a “real Quaker.” Heck, he or she even comes to Yearly Meeting. We might even know them as a “weighty Friend.”

By contrast, the sinner is not a misunderstood hero. Their life is not yet made whole. Maybe their actions and attitudes are still marked by injustice, violence, greed, racism, or one of the myriad ways we harm others. This person is still struggling with their own lack of integrity and personal challenges. The cry for mercy, and the inability to lift either hand or head toward heaven, comes from a real sense of having missed the mark—of not living up to and into the Light they know is real, good, and true.

To nearly any observer, of course, the Pharisee goes home justified, despite the off-putting phrase about “not being like those sinners.” This would not have been such an uncommon thing to say in this context—just as it has become quite common in the US to hear folks talk about how much they are not like “*those people*” who are part of “*that other*” political party or religious persuasion.

Maybe in our day, part of the challenge of this text is to be mindful of those moments when it is easy to “be thankful we are not like those sinners” AND to pay attention to when we begin to think, “I thank thee that I am not like those Pharisees.” When our openness to God’s mercy is measured against someone we may rightly or wrongly perceive, we may have missed the point and the prospect of experiencing our own needed transformation.

Ephesians 2 says that God is rich in mercy. And though we have lived in broken, bent, and sometimes rebellious ways, God’s grace comes to us and heals us. It sets people, relationships, and the world right. It saves us—in the fullest possible sense—from ourselves to a life of shalom, justice, righteousness, and enoughness. Through God’s mercy and grace, we come to find our place in the world. We uncover our calling and have the opportunity to enter into the work we have each, and all of us together, have been created to do. Essential work—that is part of God’s restoration of the cosmos. In its fullness, mercy draws us together into a beloved community that is expressed in the text of Ephesians 2 as a poem or song. “We are God’s workmanship”—a

poiema—written, spoken, and sung to the world in a way that restores beauty to creation.

In mercy—through receiving mercy—I believe we become a gift of mercy to others—a healing song that invites others to seek what we have found.

As we sit in silence for a few minutes, I again invite you to imagine yourself awash in mercy. This time, not sinking in it—but drenched by it. As you do, you might find these words from the hymn writer Robert Lowry helpful:

*On the mount of crucifixion, fountains opened deep and wide.
Through the floodgates of God's mercy flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers, poured incessant from above.
And Heaven's peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love.
Here is Love Vast as the Ocean, Robert Lowry²*

Let's settle into the silence to pray and offer any responses or raise questions as led.

² www.hymnary.org/text/here_is_love_vast_as_the_ocean

CYM—Tuesday

The Transforming Power of Mercy

Matthew 3:13 – 17—Mercy that Enables Resiliency

As we begin this day, let's reflect on this piece from Mary Oliver:³

*Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden
cloth of the sand and say
some kind of musical thanks for
the world that is happening again—another day—
from the shawl of the wind coming out of the
west to the firm green
flesh of the melon lately sliced open and
eaten, its chill and ample body
flavored with mercy, I want
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am
not ready or worthy, I am
climbing toward you.*

Like many of you, I begin most of my days in quiet—trying to find that place beneath the silence where there is stillness. I am a better human being and find I can better face the day when I dwell in that Centre and Loving Presence.

One of the disciplines I regularly practice includes reading and reflecting on Romans 12:1-2. I have done this for several years now and have retranslated it into my own words—a version that I call Colin's Unique Language Translation—or the CULT version. My friends in marketing tell me I may want to rethink that name. I'm not sure why?!? But it goes like this:

*Therefore, I plead with you, beloved, in view of God's
overwhelming mercy—
Take your ordinary life, the one you live every day,
and give it as a gift to God, all you do and say.*

³ Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, "On Thy Wonderful Works I will Meditate," section 8

*This is THE highest act of worship.
So do not conform and adjust to the pressure of the world around you
or the fear and anxiety within you,
which only keeps you immature and misshapen.
Instead, be transformed by fixing your attention on God.
Then you will know and follow God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.
(CULT Version)*

When I take time with this—and am honest before God—I remember the mercy I have come to know in my life. I find myself being re-membered within Christ's Spirit and the community of Friends who have so profoundly influenced me. In an often-confusing world where I am sometimes left wondering how it is I am supposed to best spend my time and energy and best use the resources and gifts entrusted to me, this practice has been immensely helpful and freeing.

These words from Paul come at a transition point in the larger book of Romans. For eleven chapters, he has rambled on about God's involvement in history and the way grace is available to those who will receive it. In chapter 12, he now says "therefore" or "in light of all I have said," this is what I want you to do. It is the "so what" or the action step we are invited into that arises from our experience of God.

And so, in response to God's overwhelming mercy, we open ourselves—fully and unreservedly to the Spirit. Hold nothing back. Receive every ounce of God's goodness, kindness, grace, and love into your life so that you might be set free. When this act of true worship happens, we will know ourselves, know who we are meant to be, and become more ready to walk in the way of the Spirit. In mercy—this Centring Presence—helps us live transformed rather than conformed lives. As Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, put it, "*The glory of God is a person fully alive.*" I believe the abiding power of mercy is essential to becoming one who is truly alive.

I don't know how many of you have ever seen a square watermelon—but they do exist. The little research I've done on them suggests they first started showing up in Japan about 40 years ago. Initially, they were grown this way because they easily fit into small

refrigerators and stack well. Nowadays, they are mostly grown as ornamental or novelty items. I'm told they taste rather bland, partly because they are harvested long before they are ripe. And, of course, they are now sold at outrageous prices in another example of how we value form over substance.



How do you grow a square watermelon? Well, you raise them in glass boxes, restricting their shape and size. Through the glass, light can get in to make them grow—but the mold forms them unnaturally rather than allowing them to develop and flourish as intended.

I hope in your minds you already imagine the applications of this to the human condition.



Quakers have long differed in our understanding of humanity. Rarely do you run across a Friend who would assert that humans are totally depraved. Instead, we have tended to be very optimistic about the human condition. There is often a sense of anticipation or confidence that we will naturally evolve toward the good, because there is *that of God*—that Seed, that Spark, the Divine imprint—alive and growing in each of us. Others might say this reality exists as a

possibility rather than an inevitability. Indeed, there is a need for cooperation on our part.

Early Friends believed in our need to be transformed and *convinced* in a way that radically alters our lives. In her *Letter to Convinced but not yet Crucified Friends*, Margaret Fell calls us to a very serious and more profound personal and communal renovation of life that is unsettling to some. And yet, in our season of growing violence, division, and injustice I hear many current Friends rethink their positions about the innate goodness of humanity. Though created good and indeed made in the Imago Dei—the image of God—maybe we all have much more work to do as individuals and as a human community.

As I read them, Early Quakers affirm the centrality of God's good creation and Presence in our lives. The Divine Image marks us far more powerfully than sin mars us. As I read them, there is also a sense that we've been twisted and tamed by the external pressures of the world and by our internal selfishness, arrogance, independence, and sin.

Some of it is simply a result of our ignorance and lack of understanding. We are only human. And so, while they were, and I am, hopeful about humanity's capacity to change, that confidence is born less out of our innate goodness, wisdom, and ability to change ourselves and much more out of God's ability and desire to transform each of us and all of us into people more lovely and good than we could ever be on our own. It is a transformation that is not accidental but comes through a deep conviction as we encounter God and are immersed in the life of the Spirit within the Beloved community, working out of our faith in action over time. This personal spiritual formation and communal transformation are necessary for our life and life together. I will come back to this a bit later.

What I find most interesting about this image of an encaged, square watermelon is that it is so easy to see how it is true for others—but very hard to see it as being true *about me or relevant to my life*. Racists, misogynists, patriarchists? Absolutely! They are shaped by and imprisoned in their distorted culture. Nationalists, conservatives, and science deniers are conformed to a false reality. And those greedy capitalists and the wealthy who oppress others—their whole existence

has been framed by an Empire that destroys and distorts humanity and creation. But me? This life, this view, this reality feels so natural, so at home. I can't imagine being trapped in such a way. But maybe I am not so completely different. Perhaps my own distorted self has become so familiar to me that I can't see how I am immature and misshapen. Maybe the space I inhabit and the air I breathe are more limiting than I want to admit, and my life is still more bent out of shape than I imagine.

I want to suggest that part of mercy's work in our lives and the life of our community is to help remind us that we all need a bit of liberation. We need that transforming power to shatter the glass and the shackles that otherwise may limit and bind us. We need not remain captive to the world's image or live down to the status quo. We do not need to remain held in place within a system and structure that is flawed and broken. In mercy, God reminds us that conformity and acquiescing to the safety and security of the Empire harms us and others. The warped nature of injustice, violence, materialism, and narcissism can be overcome. And so, instead of giving up ourselves, our souls, or our integrity to fit in, there is something that can free us. And it is more potent than rage, anger, hurt, or despair. It is mercy.

A story that illustrates this reality occurs in the three Synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—and is crucial to the life and ministry of Jesus. Near the beginning of his public ministry at the time of his baptism, both in the waters of Jordan and by the presence of Spirit descending upon him as a dove, a Voice rings from the Heavens proclaiming, “This is my Beloved One, in whom I am well pleased.” Let's consider Matthew's account (3:13-17) at the launch of Jesus' public ministry.

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

14 But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

15 Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

16 *As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.*

17 *And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him, I am well pleased."*

Now audible Voices from Heaven are not common, even in the Bible, but they happen. My favorite example comes from John 12, where the very voice of God speaks audibly within the hearing of a large crowd. Some heard it for what it was and praised God. Others thought it was "just an angel;" others confused it for thunder. Many times, as recorded in the biblical text, God intervenes in some amazing way, and many people seem to miss it.

Our foremothers and fathers in the Quaker faith sometimes wrote and spoke of a *Day of Visitation*—a period or time in everyone's life when they are open to hearing the invitational voice of God and responding to it. For those who are attentive and responsive, life and connection to God will grow and flourish in them, nourishing and nurturing into a more significant and more robust faith. It is a day/time when God shows up in a way we can see/hear—and often, we do.

But for those who close their eyes and ears and hearts and minds to God's coming—if the Light is continually ignored or rebelled against, it is likely to grow increasingly dim over time and one day may disappear altogether. For whatever reason, we can learn to ignore the voice of Spirit.

Whatever one believes about the person of Jesus, the story in the Bible reveals someone deeply in tune with the Spirit. His baptism was not merely of water—it was by Fire and Spirit. But along with that transforming Life and Power that animated his life comes this word of mercy—overwhelming kindness and acceptance. "*You are my beloved one—in you, I am well pleased.*"

With that message ringing in his ears and, more important, established in his Spirit, Jesus spends the next 40 days wandering in the desert. The tempter comes to him with several alternative paths to the Way of Faithfulness. These were the temptations common to Jesus' ancestors and us. Some regard these from an individual perspective—

lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life—where we choose a full belly over God or choose that which is glittery and appealing over that which is true, and finally choosing ourselves over God. But maybe equally—or even more true—is a communal/social perspective for these enticements.

And so, in the first temptation, to turn bread into stones, maybe Jesus is saying no to a system that places economic security and the relentless quest to have more than we need over a vision of enoughness, justice, and well-being for all. Maybe instead of finding a way to make Wonder Bread, Jesus understood that the mercy of God would be revealed through the Beloved Community that breaks bread together and shares it with those in need. And so, the Teacher responds, “Humans do not live by bread alone, but by the proceeding Word of God”—the One that can speak and lead on time and in time for those with ears to hear. Physical bread is needed to survive. But to truly live—we need the kind of sustenance only God can provide.

The second temptation—to leap from the temple pinnacle to be saved by angels—touches on the potentially destructive nature of religion. In our quest to do good—it is so easy to use gimmicks or draw attention to ourselves. In our day, this shows up in how we yearn to be “relevant.” Rather than being spectacular or making a spectacle of ourselves, the root of our faith is found in daily faithfulness—doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God. And so, Jesus responds to the tempter’s invitation to gain a crowd by saying: “It is written—do not put God to the test.”

Finally, the third temptation faced by God’s Beloved is about worship, power, and idolatry. Jesus finds himself on a mountaintop and is offered complete authority and dominion over the world. “I will make you Prime Minister or President or Emperor over all people,” the devil says, “if you but pledge allegiance to me.” I think this is the greatest of all the temptations facing the people of faith today. It seems to me that this enticement to political power is the most alluring one we face.

In the US, most of us will be perfectly happy with a strong Democratic Party...or a Republican Party depending on our political persuasion. I don’t follow the news in Canada very closely, in part

because the culture and media of the US are so egocentric and self-important that most news about other countries is only focused on how it impacts us. But from what I understand, your federal parties struggle to work together, like ours, and political change is a challenge. I'd love to hear from some of you about how or whether partisan politics impinges upon your sense of faithfulness. In the US, a recent poll said that for the first time, over 50% of people of faith make their decisions based on political affiliation—rather than their spiritual convictions. The phrase “Jesus is Lord” was and remains a profoundly political statement, as much as it is a theological one. And yet, that meaning seems lost to many of the people of faith I connect with, for they seem far more interested and eager to serve their particular political party and place their greatest hope in the power wielded by their favorite political leaders.

Jesus refused to baptize political power or wrap religion in the flag of a nation. His kingdom was not of this world. And though he and many later followers would die for it—he adamantly taught us we must not kill for it or even, I believe, require others to adhere to our values and commitments. As I understand it, the Kingdom of Christ is invitational rather than authoritarian. At its best, the truth and beauty of the Spirit compel people to choose justice, peace, and righteousness—not the strong arm of religion and politics. And so, Jesus says: “Worship and serve God alone.”

Around the time Jesus would have been an adolescent, there was a Jewish rebellion in Sepphoris, a town near where Jesus lived. For a few brief moments, the uprising was successful, and the people were liberated from the oppressive rule of the Empire. But as is often the case, the Empire responded with great force and quickly crushed the rebels. Some reports say the town was burned to the ground—but this was not enough. To send a message to other future rebels, the Roman soldiers were said to have crucified a Jewish male every 30 feet along a 10-mile stretch of road. If my math is correct, this means approximately 1750 men were brutally murdered in full view of everyone. If Jesus witnessed this horror, how could it ever leave his mind? In that ugly

moment in human history, Jesus saw what measure of evil God's love was up against. It is no wonder that Jesus used the language of the cross as often as he did, even well before encountering his own literal one. But for him, the cross was not about people being unwillingly led to their deaths—but about people voluntarily laying down their lives for God's sake and the sake of the world.

In the face of such political brutality, what moves a person to stand against it with the resilience, creativity, lack of anxiety, and strength that we see in the example of Jesus and that we have come to know ourselves through the Spirit of Christ?

My premise is that one of the reasons Jesus could faithfully face these trials—and all of the rest that life would throw at him—was his self-understanding and experience of being God's Beloved. He knew, not as an idea, but in his bones, in his experience, that he belonged to the God who is merciful. That same Voice and message, "you are my beloved," shows up again at a critical juncture in Jesus' life in Luke chapter 9. Standing on the Mount of Transfiguration with a few of his closest friends, a Word is spoken in the hearing of all, "This is my Beloved whom I have chosen. Listen to Him."

From that encounter, the next chapter describes how Jesus "sets his face" toward Jerusalem in anticipation of encountering his own cross. He is resolute—determined—to walk in the way the Spirit is leading. And it is the undergirding mercy that enables him to act faithfully in the face of his temptation and hardship, and helps him shatter the oppressive confines of a domination system bent on warping and wounding humanity.

Walter Brueggemann is an outstanding Old Testament scholar who argues that empires, cultures, and secular societies live by our numbness. Empires, in their militarism, expect numbness about the social costs of war. Corporate economies expect blindness to the cost of poverty and exploitation. Governments and societies that dominate others go to great lengths to keep the numbness intact.⁴

In other words, in the face of all the daily horror all around us—the hope and expectation are that we will all just come to sing the

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*

refrain, “that’s just the way it is.” Individuals will acquire more and more stuff—despite the social cost—because that’s what we do. We won’t speak up when innocent lives are being destroyed or a new generation of hatred is being bred among people—because “that just comes with war.” The hope is that we will sit down in front of the electronic god in our living rooms or the one we carry with us in our pockets everywhere we go—the one that tells us what to buy, what to wear, what to think, who to be—and become distracted and entertained into being content with “what is.” In this way, we will not bother imagining and enacting a more hopeful, alternative reality, one that would dare to contradict a social system that calls violence, injustice, racism, environmental destruction and poverty, *normal* and *acceptable*. It is so easy to fall prey to this—at least for me.

I believe there is a need, at times, for holy rage and righteous anger. We are rightly angered by the injustice surrounding us and find both outward meaning and inward relief as we raise our voices and march in the streets in protest. In the same way, our souls need to lament the grief and anguish we may feel. Many of us feel shame over the past actions of our nations, our race, our genders, and even the Religious Society of Friends, and we are struggling to find ways to express it. There can certainly be something powerful and cathartic when we voice our sense of outrage and expend our energy in bearing witness to the injustice and violence around us. As memes remind us—“if you are not outraged, you are not paying attention.”

My concern is that these emotions, especially when unbalanced, may not carry us very far. They may not give us the resiliency to face what I believe will be more challenging days ahead of us. While it is true that “if you are not outraged, you are not paying attention,” I also believe there is a paradoxical and complementary reality that is equally true:

*If you are not absurdly joyful, you are not paying attention.*⁵

In the midst of all that makes us outraged—do we also see the overwhelming beauty in creation, experience the blessing of family and

⁵ Douglas Steere, *Prayer in the Contemporary World*

friendship, and extraordinarily ordinary goodnesses we are tempted to overlook each day? And do we remember—as Jesus did—that in mercy God knows us a beloved one? Do we find any joy in these and other similar realities?

Douglas Steere, quoting a Methodist theologian named William Russell Maltby, once wrote that those who are committed to following Jesus are only promised three simple things: **To be absurdly joyful, entirely fearless, and always in trouble.**

I encourage you to reflect on Steere's quote, maybe this evening. If I had more time, I'd love to develop each piece of it—but for today, I want to wind things up by considering the deep and absurd joy that arises out of being known and loved by God and invited into this powerful Way, Truth, and Life aimed at setting the world right.

Within Hebrew spirituality, the faithful community is invited to Tikkun Olam—to join in repairing and mending a broken world. Especially in its modern use, this invitation is most often understood as a strong call to work for justice. In our urgent, divisive, and polarized times, as humanity cries out for justice and creation groans in anticipation of being healed, it is not always clear how best to go about this work. As Friends, we join in prayer, protest, and often push to dismantle and transform systems of oppression and violence—all of which we find within the biblical story. What we also find in the scripture is this unsettling presence of mercy, not as an alternative to these other actions but as an integral part of them. We also find the invitation to a joy that finds its root in the experience of mercy.

I confess that I don't often connect Quakers with joy. We are so serious. Some days, we are more at home with rage than joy. In a recent study on social media platforms, the most commonly expressed emotion was—any guesses? That is right—rage. I don't spend much time with the various forms of social media these days, but in my unscientific surveillance of the landscape, I would say that we Quakers are doing our part to keep rage in the lead!

As much as it saddens me that so few people are finding joy in life, I am maybe more concerned about its impact on the work ahead of us.

Again, I am convinced that joy and mercy, rather than rage, enable us to face suffering, engage opposition, and overcome the challenges we have and will face in ways that rage never can. Appealing again to the example of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews says:

Therefore, since such a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.⁶

In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, Jr. writes about four avenues for social change. He mentions the basic collection of facts—starting as honest learners with the mindset that I may not know everything about an issue. *Imagine that!* Second is negotiation—a willingness to come close to others and meet them where there may be common ground. The third avenue I want to highlight at this moment is what King called “self-purification.”

This is the coming to the Light—the willingness to renounce ourselves, our brokenness, biases, and our need to fix others or smooth over conflicts. It is coming to a place of being well-used rather than simply trying to be useful. He suggests it is through this process of self-purification that one finds the strength and wisdom to love even their adversary. In other places, King speaks of this work as central to learning to persevere in facing hardship, violence, and rejection.

For King, the willingness to listen to our own need for change—before we rush out to save the world—enables holy transformation or his fourth avenue of change, which is direct action. Listening in this way helps me act faithfully, powerfully, and prophetically as called upon. He says it often makes the difference between us being authentic agents of reconciliation or well-meaning reformers who may do more harm than good.

⁶ Hebrews 12: 1-3

In my own experience, the work of self-purification has come most powerfully through the liberating gift of mercy. Though not yet entirely free from my self-protective, self-reliant, and sometimes self-righteous enclosure—mercy has cracked the glass and bent the frame that seeks to imprison me. And this brings me deep joy—because now, the possibility of partnering with God feels more natural. I have a better understanding of who I am and what I am called to do in my sphere of influence, rather than giving into paralyzing fear or being driven by the anxiety to do something that may, in fact, harm rather than help.

As we move into silence, Loving Spirit, I pray you will be a fire and hammer in our hearts. Shatter, as needed, the external and internal barriers that have encircled us and limited our experience of you and our faithfulness in the world. Teach us, amid all the world's fitfulness and turmoil, to become joyful and non-anxious people. Free us to live into the fullness of whom you have created us to be rather than conformed by the pressures around us.

CYM—Wednesday

The Transforming Power of Mercy

Good day, dear Friends! As we concluded yesterday, I mentioned that my use of the word “mercy” is broader than the narrower definition sometimes used as “withholding punishment.” Similarly, I suggest mercy is more profound than “grace” as “an undeserved gift.” Along with these, I believe the Bible envisions mercy as the kindness and generosity of God and compassion expressed in action toward humanity. Today, I wish to shift our focus a bit toward our expression of mercy for others.

Sit with me for a moment, please, and reflect on these words from William Penn:

We are too ready to retaliate rather than forgive or gain by love and information. And yet we could hurt no one that we believe loves us. Let us then try what Love will do: for if one did once see we love them, we should soon find they would not harm us. Force may subdue, but Love gains: and they that forgives first, wins the laurel.

– William Penn, 1693, in *Quaker Faith & Practice of Britain Yearly Meeting*, 24.03

In the sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel, we encounter these words from Jesus as he was preaching to a crowd.

To you who are listening, I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other cheek, as well. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you; if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love

*your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*⁷

In the context of the longer Sermon on the Plain found in Luke 6, mercy is a form of active resistance. It is a demanding lifestyle and a set of strategic choices to respond out of love and unrelenting grace rather than force, coercion, or revenge. Within the actions highlighted in this text—blessing rather than cursing, reckless giving rather than withholding, turning the other cheek—I am mindful that the last admonition may be the most challenging of all: Be merciful—BE, not just do—but BE merciful, just as God is merciful.

Of all the amazing abilities Jesus possessed, I think his most crucial superpower may have been his ability to see invisible people. *That's right, see invisible people.* In some ways, this is even more miraculous than the ability to raise the dead, walk on water, or turn water into wine, all of which are attributed to him in the New Testament.

Think about how many times in the gospel stories you have Jesus seeing someone that others tend to ignore, overlook, see-through, look past, or *treat less than human* in myriad other ways. And in seeing that person, Jesus is moved inwardly with compassion. More important, that same mercy, or compassion in action, moves him physically and relationally to engage the other. It happens with the widest variety of people—women, lepers, the infirm, children—any and all who fall to the periphery or are purposefully marginalized by those with the power and resources to do so.

I encourage you to leaf through your New Testament and witness these stories of Jesus seeing someone and moving toward them. In these encounters, he heals the sick, restores the dignity of those diminished, recognizes their humanity, welcomes them into fellowship, and raises them to life. His ability and willingness to see, coupled with the compassion that moves him toward people others often ignore, is what best resembles the mercy and the way of God.

⁷ Luke 6:27-36

Maybe my favorite example of this comes from Luke 7 because it is here that Jesus' ability to see the invisible gets contrasted with the blindness that plagues some of us. This story is found in Luke 7:36-50.

36 Now, one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table.

Jesus is not only a friend of sinners but even religious types. The Pharisees are often villainized, but the truth is they had much in common with this Rabbi from Nazareth. They shared a common concern for holiness, righteousness, faithfulness, and fidelity to the Law and God, even though their view of what this looked like often varied widely.

37 When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, this woman brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and

38 as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears.

Likely, a large crowd gathered outside this man's home. Houses were built so small and open that if a rabbi or teacher were speaking, it would be common for a group to gather and listen in. I experienced this visiting among Friends in Nepal many years ago. During a trip through a rural area, I was invited to speak at an outdoor assembly. Nearly the whole town turned out—stopped what they were doing—to listen in even though they were not invited. The text and context make clear that this woman was not an invited guest. By custom, she may have been present as one of the “needy” people who qualified (maybe) for the leftovers from the banquet table. This practice was a form of social concern and safety net for the poor—and a relatively easy way to help those in need.

Biblical scholars have long conjectured that the woman is a prostitute, and there are hints in the text that lends to this interpretation. The truth, however, is that one only needed to be ill or be in contact with a Gentile to be labeled a sinner by all the Jews in the

city. It was not necessarily a moral transgression. That label—sinner—was akin to being known as someone with an infectious disease. Maybe you can imagine what it looks like, feels like, and *actually is* to avoid people out of concern you might catch something from them or cause you to be avoided because you had contact with someone who was ill.

Now, why the woman is crying is not completely clear. Maybe she is weeping because Simon the Pharisee so botched the job of host. Perhaps she is grieved that one so lovely as Jesus would be so badly mistreated and not even offered the most minimal hospitality. Or maybe it was just the emotion that comes from hope—a longing or dream that things could be different for her, that she might be acceptable to others. Maybe she had heard this Jesus speak before and seen him model God’s love to someone else who was invisible—and this moved her to this bold and risky act of stepping into the centre of the gathering.

Whatever the case, she anoints Jesus’ feet passionately and thoroughly with perfume and tears. As we will see in a few verses, she also kisses them over and over again. Now, in the following few verses, the scene is set for Jesus to teach Simon the Pharisee something important about how it is you see and treat others with mercy—compassion in action.

38 Then she wiped Jesus’ feet with her hair, kissed them & poured perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him & what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”

Simon is upset. The happy little gathering is not going as planned. His regularly scheduled program is interrupted by someone he did not invite. Simon was not interested in this woman’s needs, and the fact that Jesus was paying attention to her and not him caused him to question whether this Rabbi was authentic or worth the trouble of hosting.

40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

41 "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii and the other fifty.

42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

43 Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled. You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Simon is in trouble now—and I think he knows it. He is falling victim to a parable. The power and point of a parable are to surprise, expose, and uncover an unexpected truth. It is meant to help us see a different reality—which is about to come crashing down upon Simon in three, two, one...

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Do you see her? It is almost as if Jesus is taking Simon's head into his two hands and turning his gaze upon this woman—the person—he has only bothered to acknowledge as a problem to be solved or a nuisance to be rid of.

Jesus goes on:

45 I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet.

46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

48 Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

49 The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

50 Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Notice in our story how two very religious people respond to the woman. One sees her immediately and welcomes her. If he sees her at all, the other only views her as an annoyance. It is often this way—and maybe all of us are guilty at times—especially when the “other” is disrupting our party, plans, and priorities.

Interestingly, having experienced the acceptance of Jesus—the welcoming mercy shown to someone on the margins—this woman can *love freely*. She starts to act as one who is acceptable to God—*despite what others might think about her or say about her or even what she has believed about herself in the past*. She lavishes love upon Jesus—doing far more than Simon should have done as a matter of common courtesy or customary hospitality. She loves so very much because she’s been forgiven so much and found freedom to be herself in the Presence of Christ.

Faith, as one person describes it, is really about “accepting acceptance”—a very simple but radical definition of what it means to relate to Spirit. It means coming to terms with the fact that God has already declared us loved, forgiven, and healed and that out of that profound freedom, we will experience the grace, strength, and courage to become the people God intends us to be. We’ll be changed from the inside out—not in a mad attempt to earn God’s grace or because we fear punishment. Instead, we will be transformed because mercy has touched us so deeply.

All of this begins for her because Jesus sees her. And maybe—just maybe—Jesus helps Simon learn to see someone—and a group of someones—he has been unwilling to notice.

Over the last few years, I wonder if our ability to see others—and to see them clearly and genuinely for who they are—has been clouded. COVID has certainly robbed us of proximity—that essential ingredient that allows us to be present with one another in ways Zoom does not allow. Our infatuation with technology—while connecting us at a distance, often isolates us from those nearby.

A 2019 survey among people in the US found that the average person spends nearly 5.5 hours on their mobile phone. Thirteen percent of millennials spend over 12 hours daily on their small screen. In terms of total media consumption—the average is about 12 hours a day—spent on social media, TV, radio, and newspapers.

All of this—sociologists increasingly agree—leaves us further isolated, less hopeful about the future, and far more anxious and distracted than before. I understand and appreciate the positive impacts of technology. Still, I think we must also be honest and mindful of how it may hinder our capacity to be genuinely present to others. And given the way many of us relate to one another online, I wonder if our over-reliance on virtual communication may be impinging on our inclination toward mercy and genuine understanding of one another, especially those who are unlike us.

Many people would say we overestimate our ability to know and understand others. The writer David Brooks says we accurately perceive what one another is thinking 22% of the time.⁸ With a good friend or family member, our capacity increases to about 35%. Our raw ability to know another is not as good as we think. Instead of assuming we understand other's intentions—which I see as one of the most significant sources of division among people in conflict—maybe we would do well to practice a bit more humility, take time to listen deeply, seek to understand, and do what compassion (mercy in action) requires of us: To walk in another person's shoes.

We all know how increasingly divided our world is becoming. Politically, ideologically, racially—you name it—some people now refuse to interact with those outside their worldview or experience.

Sociologists note a physical migration in the US—a re-clustering of similar, more homogeneous communities in different parts of the country.⁹ This reality doesn't bode well for the future of a fractured society and one that will be more than half of people of colour by 2050.

Digitally, we are often segmented into social media bubbles that reinforce our values, stereotypes, and biases. Now, I am not saying all these things are inherently wrong, but they impact us, often in how or whether we will engage others. Many writers suggest that the same issues that have divided this nation still divide us at roughly the same

⁸ www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/institutes/lake-institute/lake-lecture-rsvp.html

⁹ www.npr.org/2022/02/18/1081295373/the-big-sort-americans-move-to-areas-political-alignment www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2021/10/white-flight-segregation www.brookings.edu/articles/neighborhood-segregation-persists-for-black-latino-or-hispanic-and-asian-americans/

rate and intensity over many decades. What has changed exponentially is the degree to which *we now hate each other*. That's way up! I am convinced that part of what drives this growing hatred is our fear of what and who we no longer know.

Some of you may have read Bryan Stevenson's best-selling book, *Just Mercy*. It is the provocative story of how his understanding of race, incarceration, and the death penalty was transformed by being with and listening to young, black inmates. What he found, and so many of us find, if we are fortunate, is that concerns of this magnitude are not simply a social issue to fix or a political problem to be solved. Whether it is incarceration, immigration, sexual/gender violence, clean water, hunger, poverty, or outreach to our neighbours—what we find when we get involved, beyond our debates and ideological positioning—is a **person**. A Name. A Face. A Child of God.

In his book, Stevenson urges us to get close to others we don't know and maybe fear. To hear them, to know them, and be known by them. Something profound and powerful happens when our work for justice, peace, or any cause is consistently grounded in living, breathing partnerships with others.

Real people with stories, experiences, perspectives, and wisdom impact the narratives we tell ourselves about the nature of problems. Real people keep us from losing sight of what ultimately matters or losing hope when issues are slow to change. Real people help us remember that the caricatures often created are usually false. Real people remind us that humans are far more complex and nuanced than issues of good and evil. Real people are often a mirror by which we see something of ourselves and where we discover more in common than we would otherwise have imagined or may even like.

We arise from a spiritual tradition rooted in proximity. John 1 declares that God moved into the neighbourhood when the Word became flesh and made a home among humanity. Jesus models proximity by being among the people. He went to those on the margins. Jesus was near to those who followed. He shared wine and bread with those hungry for a day's meal and thirsty for the eternal Living Water.

Jesus even lingered with those ambivalent crowds, who one day cheered his compassion and called for his crucifixion the next day. Christ modeled proximity in remarkable and relentless ways, demonstrating uncommon mercy for sinners and adversaries.

This closeness to others is not a metaphor or analogy to ponder. It is the incarnational reality we are to continue in our time and place. We are to be light in the darkness—not simply shining at the darkness or for the sake of the darkness. Being light to others may happen some online and in part through the ballot box—but I believe work continues to best happen when we are close, near, intimate, and engaged with others who can then see, feel, truly hear, and authenticate the truth and source of our Light.

Think about the profound meaning that arises through proximity as it is expressed in some of the religious practices found in the New Testament:

- ✦ In the laying on of hands—as an act of healing, commissioning, and sending.
- ✦ In the kiss of peace—as an act of forgiveness, reconciliation, and solidarity.
- ✦ In foot-washing—as an act of service, humility, and hospitality.
- ✦ And though we don't generally practice it in this way—the communion meal—where we drink from the same cup, eat from a shared loaf, and gather around a common table—as a potent reminder and reenactment of our unity in Christ and in one another.
- ✦ In mutual aid—where sharing our resources with one another turns a competitive and consuming economic system into a communal strategy where all are cared for and have enough.
- ✦ And lest we forget maybe our most important work: “I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me in. I needed clothes, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you looked after me. I was in prison, and you came to visit me.” —

“Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”¹⁰

In Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy*, he tells a transformational story about working to overturn a death row conviction of two African American inmates imprisoned for nearly 50 years each. Exhausted but ecstatic about the verdicts—he had a conversation with an older woman he had often seen during his many trips to the courthouse working on these cases. She congratulated him on his work, and he asked if she was related to either of the defendants.

“No,” she said, “I am not related to anyone here. I just came here to help people. This is a place of pain, so people need plenty of help around here.” She described how her 16-year-old grandson had been murdered more than a decade earlier. As she grieved and sat through the trial of the young men who were caught and found guilty of the murder, she hoped she would find comfort in their punishment. Instead, she wept in pain when their sentence—life in prison—was announced. Someone came to her and asked if the murderers were related to her, and she told them they had killed her beloved grandson. Not knowing what to say, the person—another woman—simply sat with her in silence for nearly two hours.

She never told her name, never said another word—but the fact that she saw her, her willingness to be there, something about her proximity and presence—turned out to be a healing gift of mercy to the grandmother.

She told Stevenson, “Now I just come here. I don’t really know why. I guess I just felt like maybe I could be someone, you know, that somebody hurting could lean on. Among all this pain, grief, and violence—among people shooting each other, hurting each other, and throwing people away like they’re not even human, I decided that I was supposed to be here to catch some of the stones people cast at one another.”

We live in a world where we overlook, condemn, and rage at one another. Many of us have grown comfortable quickly casting stones—

¹⁰ Matthew 25

so many stones—often without genuinely knowing who another person is or without an understanding of their actual circumstances. But this elderly woman chose to be a stone-catcher. Not simply someone who refuses to cast either the first or the last stone—but to be someone who, in mercy, steps in as a merciful presence—as compassion in action.

I am not exactly sure what that means to you—but it causes me to re-evaluate how I will respond to the “sinners” who interrupt my regularly scheduled program and my image of what society must be. Similarly, it causes me to rethink my response to all the Simon the Pharisees I run into.

Rather than condemning them immediately or ridiculing them with my rapier-like wit to my 13 friends on Facebook, maybe I can summon up the creative and compassionate energy to help them see a new perspective. Perhaps, in my willingness to stay engaged with the invisible woman and the blind Pharisee, several fewer stones will be cast, and others might be intercepted by someone with the spiritual strength and compassion to endure the harm.

Compassion means to let your innards embrace the feeling and situations of another. It implies entering into another’s suffering, walking alongside, and sharing in the burden of others. Compassion means *being gripped with concern at the sight of suffering—so much so that we are moved to respond with care. Not with superficial help or cheesy methods but in gospel power that makes all things new.*

In closing, let’s turn back to our story where we find Jesus saying to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Now go in peace.” It’s a beautiful story, isn’t it? But in my mind, the most important question remains; in the end, it is directed to each of us. And I suspect it was even in the mind of the gospel writer, whom you remember is putting the story of Jesus’ life together for a church that is still forming and at a time when they are struggling to learn how to reach out to and welcome people whose faith is brand new and whose lives are far from whole. **Here is the question:** *Where will she go when Jesus sends the woman away in peace (that is, into a life of right relationship with God and others and a sense of well-being and joy)? Who will welcome her now?*

Her only home to this point may be among the people, and within a system of oppression, violence, and dehumanization, she is trying to flee. If her healing is to continue and her personhood restored, she can't return to "normal." Will Simon now welcome her? The other Pharisees? Doubtful. How about the disciples? At this stage in their spiritual growth, they still had trouble welcoming the children who flocked to Jesus. Could they welcome this sinful woman? Would they really accept her—just as Jesus did—and provide her with the kind of community she needs to be transformed from a sinner to a saint? This is in play, too, Friends. You see, in welcoming her, Jesus is inviting her into a brand-new way of being. We are all welcome, but we are also invited into the beloved community—where hate gives way to love. Where violence is replaced by peace. Where justice reigns and oppression ceases. Where greed is swept away by sharing. Where duplicity finds its home in integrity and where the love of me becomes the love of we.

This scripture passage, Friends, calls out—cries out—for something called the Church—a group of formerly unacceptable people who have found their acceptance in Christ and who now share it freely with each other. It is the call to create an alternative community that bears witness to the healing power of compassion for one another and the world.

Mind you, one does not rest on its history or recite slogans about ideals—but instead seeks to incarnate this Presence by dwelling deeply in the Life and Power that makes it possible. This kind of witness, I believe, is as powerful, compelling, and radical form of resistance as any of our prophetic marches and demonstrations. Because now we are not only calling out the harm and condemning the injustice—we are offering a living, breathing, viable alternative that says, "Come and join us in seeking the Light and Love of God that makes all things—including us—new."

I wonder today who you, your meeting, your Yearly Meeting is called to be near to? I know you have a powerful and prophetic partnership with Indigenous communities—thank you for this good work and witness. Are there others you may have trouble seeing because they have been a source of irritation and disruption? What about within your own fellowship? In my experience among Friends,

sometimes the most challenging relationships are found right at home. How might you be called to extend mercy to a Friend or a group of Friends who may have gotten under your skin? What might it look like to re-engage with them—but this time, not as an adversary, but as someone with whom you are given the opportunity to practice compassion in action?

CYM—Thursday

The Transforming Power of Mercy

Good morning and afternoon to you, Friends!

God has shown you, O Mortal, what is good and what the Lord requires of you.

Do justice.

Love mercy.

*Walk humbly with your God.*¹¹

When Gwen Anderson and I were corresponding about a theme for the Bible study, my first thought was not around mercy. Actually, I suggested several other topics—not because I don’t believe this is an important topic. I hope you’ve caught a hint of just how important I think it is over the past few days.

I didn’t think about mercy because I am part of many Quaker conversations where mercy is considered suspect. Anything less than impassioned—and even strident—demands for justice can feel like a compromise, acquiescence, and in the case of someone like me, one more example of the kind of privilege that perpetuates systemic oppression, patriarchy, and injustice. Believe me, I understand this perspective. For so many people, it feels like the world is burning. It is time to stand up, speak up, and act up—not shut up. As Lucretia Mott once said, *“I have no idea of submitting tamely to injustice inflicted either on me or others. I will oppose it with all the moral powers with which I am endowed. I am no advocate of passivity.”*¹² Today has no room for passivity—and sometimes, discussion about topics like mercy, grace, patience, and civility can be seen as passive and tacit approval of all that is wrong with the world.

A few years ago, the Rev. William Barber spoke to a gathering of Quakers and outlined clear and specific strategies for how we might engage as a resistance movement to address some of the injustices

¹¹ Micah 6:8

¹² Margaret Hope Bacon, “Lucretia Mott: Pioneer for Peace, *Quaker History*, volume 82, no. 2

in our time and place. We need a clear moral witness, he said, and to sound a prophetic voice that speaks to our condition as a society. To Quakers in particular, he called us to speak up—because the times are urgent.

But he also said more than that—reminding us that we must first be silent. We must rather wait before God, in God, finding that clear and powerful Guide, that authentic Life and Power—so that it is not simply us speaking and acting out of our ego, our anxiety or fear, our own need to be noticed or relevant. With all the crises erupting around us—the world does not need my wisdom, and with all due respect, it doesn't need yours. We need an authentic, transforming, and prophetic word of God that speaks directly and powerfully in time and on time.

But I also know a reminder to wait and an urge for compassion, especially when it comes from someone like me—an old, white, middle-class man—rather than a Reverend Barber—who is an African American preacher and head of the Poor People's Campaign—can intentionally or unintentionally silence the prophetic voice or slow the march toward justice. It is easy for someone like me to say—"wait... let's be patient and understanding," because I don't have to live each day fearing being harassed, detained, or shot because of my skin colour. I am not pushed out or left out because of my gender. My children aren't being taken from me at a border crossing.

I was in the West Bank a few years ago, around the time the US embassy was opened in Jerusalem by the Trump administration, on the 70th anniversary of Israel's declared statehood. This is also the day before Nakba (Day of Catastrophe) when some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or had to flee their homes as a result of 1948. My friends in Palestine, many of whom cannot leave, encouraged me to go to Tel Aviv a day early because of expected violence and problems getting through the checkpoint. And so, I left—because I could. And all I could think about was, "How long, O Lord, *must these people wait?*"

Mercy—as I understand it—is not passive. Neither is it in opposition to prophetic justice. As we see in the Micah text, mercy complements, completes, and is encompassed in justice. And when it

arises from those who are learning to walk in humility with God, my sense and experience is the prophetic word, and accompanying witness carry an extraordinary power, sense of timing, and strategic application rooted in the wisdom of Divine guidance.

Mercy and justice-seeking, I would argue, find their home in one another. As I have been re-studying the notion of justice for the past few years, I am struck again by its complexity of meaning. I am not a Hebrew scholar—by any stretch. Hebrew was all Greek to me when I studied it in seminary! The meaning of justice is nuanced and includes aspects of righteousness/right-relatedness to God, one another, self, and creation. It is related to equity, wholeness, judgment, and law. And similarly—it is related to charity or mercy.

One of my favorite Psalms captures some of this complexity in Psalm 85. The writer is lamenting the loss of intimacy with God and the withholding of mercy. There is a sense of distress over whether God will relent because they know they have not been faithful to the demands of justice. They have oppressed the poor. They have neither loved nor followed God with a spirit of fidelity. In hope—they turn their face once more to God: The Psalm concludes with this great stanza:

6 Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?

7 Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation.

8 I will listen to what God the Lord says; God promises peace to his people, his faithful servants—but let them not turn to folly.

9 Surely God's salvation is near those who fear God, that Divine glory may dwell in our land.

10 Love (overwhelming mercy) and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness (the justice of God lived out in human relationships) looks down from heaven.

12 The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

13 Righteousness goes before God and prepares the way for God's steps.¹³

¹³ Psalm 85:6-13

In the mix of justice and mercy, shalom is revealed. Peace prevails. Sins are forgiven. Prisoners are set free. There is a spirit of enoughness—where no one has too much nor too little. Harmony wraps people into a blanket of well-being and connection.

The biblical concept of justice doesn't pit mercy against justice but ties it all together. Biblical justice is loving, merciful, gracious, generous, and restorative. It is not passive—but is an act of resistance against forms of justice that are intentionally or unintentionally punitive or incomplete.

The passage I want to focus on today reveals some of this complexity. It is a harrowing story from a difficult book in the Bible—Hosea. If you have not read the book, I encourage you to do so, recognizing how it reflects the atrocities of a culture of violence and a system of patriarchy that diminished and abused women in some of the worst possible ways. The book does not excuse any of this—but it reveals a world that is painful to behold.

The story is also multi-layered. On the surface, it is the tale of a prophet called by God to find and marry an adulteress woman, have children with her and become a family. The word of the Lord came to Hosea and gave him this command: Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry and have children of harlotry; for the land commits flagrant harlotry, forsaking the Lord.¹⁴

Basically, go find a partner who is going to cheat on you. Form a family and love her as any good spouse would—but know that faithful love will not be returned. Do all of this publicly, knowing full well you will not be understood and will likely be ridiculed by others for your actions. Love her—really love her—just like I love my people. Do this as a living parable.

There is a second layer to the story. Hosea's relationship with his wife, Gomer, mirrors the experience of God and God's people and, according to the text, gives us a window into what it is like for God to shepherd a herd of cats...

¹⁴ Hosea 1:2

Gomer, the wife, spurns her husband—repeatedly, boldly, and openly. Again, it is a painful book to read—seeing the heartache this brings her, him, and their children. Along the way, we gain hints of the cosmic pain and betrayal a good God may experience as humans abuse and do violence to one another, refuse to seek justice, mercy, and compassion, and repeatedly choose some other idol—wealth, security, self, power—as the false God they willingly serve. In watching the way of Gomer, some of us may see a glimpse of ourselves—and in a way that might make one squirm.

Throughout the first ten chapters, there is a back-and-forth between the Hosea-Gomer relationship and how God relates to God's people. Relentless and unfailing love is demonstrated. Resilient commitment in the face of rejection. Love is repeatedly offered—not because it can't let go—but because it won't let go, in the often-fragile hope that true reconciliation and intimacy will occur.

In the face of repeated rejection and betrayal, God and Hosea accept the challenge of loving their partner back into the relationship and belonging in the family. There is no pretending there is not a problem. Truth—prophetic, fiery truth with an edge—often gets spoken and enacted. And along the way, intentional and ultimately compassionate choices are made to restore dignity, to demonstrate patience, long-suffering, and a relentless willingness to stay engaged even in the face of infidelity and outright rejection.

And sometimes—both God and Hosea—get spitting angry. Ready to sign the divorce papers angry. Burn the wedding certificate and smash the china fury.¹⁵ Ready to be done once and for all. By the time we get to chapter 11, the imagery now shifts from husband and wife to parent-child as the metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. Things are at a low ebb—and looking hopeless. It is a moment of genuine anger—fierce rage by God, which we don't consider much these days. We may be outraged, but often people get very uncomfortable opening the conversation about God's righteous anger. We prefer a domesticated divinity who patiently puts up with all our crap and is committed to

¹⁵ Credit to Julie Rudd, pastor of Wilmington Friends Meeting, for this turn of phrase

grace and forgiveness no matter what. Somebody must remain calm amidst all the chaos—so we assign that work to God.

In this story, anger flares and flashes—but upon closer inspection, it arises out of unrelenting love. It is the longing of a parent, exasperated by their surly, dishonest, disrespectful teenager who insists we are the worst mother, the most horrible father ever to walk the face of the earth. They are better off without us, can take care of themselves, and are now about to walk out the door forever. “I hate you!” they scream in our faces and turn away. I imagine some of us gathered here know this pain.

This is where we are in the story. We pick it up in Hosea 11:1-4:

1 When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called my son.

2 But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals, and they burned incense to images.

3 It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; But they did not realize it was I who healed them.

4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them, I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

All that tender love—all of that overwhelming mercy—for nothing, it seems, as the relationship nears its breaking point. In 11:5-7, we see a hint of that parental anger:

5 Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?

6 A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans.

7 My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.

“Fine!” God says. Go screw your life up! You are so smart! If you want to do your own thing—go right ahead. But do not come back. Do

not expect me to bail you out of whatever mess you find yourself in.” And then—just as the door is about to close for the final time, we come to v. 8.

8 How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah?

How can I make you like Zeboyim?

My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.

9 I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man— the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities.

10 They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion.

When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.

Just as the last reserves of love seem nearly drained away and fury is about to breach the heart of God, there is a pause in the narrative. We can't know how long or short it lasts, but it shows up between verses 7 and 8. In that quiet moment, God's heart recoils. In Hebrew, it is described as something like an earthquake that takes place inwardly rather than outwardly. Instead of erupting in anger, mercy (compassion enacted) moves God to bear the wound of love in his own heart. Despite the pain and justifiable anger, and without any promise that the child will respond positively, God does not allow anger and rejection to be the final word. Instead, more bottomless mercy and compassion are aroused and offered—and a somewhat bewildered and amazed child scrambles back to her mother's side at the sound of her voice.

What is the power of a prophetic word when it is rooted in mercy's strong and loyal love rather than outrage and anger? If Hosea reveals anything to us, it may be that compassion is a greater means to transformation and restoration than outrage can ever be.

Micah and the prophets consistently remind us that the mix of mercy, justice, and humility before God is for restoration and transformation. The prophet speaks in time and on time, not simply to create an easy peace that muffles discontent or smooths over serious

conflict and pain. The prophetic word is not spoken merely as a catharsis, so we can better manage our anxiety. It is not spoken to squash or doom the other. The hope is that reconciliation may actually have a chance to occur through the courageous call to justice, the compassionate enacted mercy, and the obvious humble dependence on God.

Yesterday, I mentioned the idea of *Tikkun Olam*—the Hebrew invitation to join with Spirit in the mending and healing of a broken world. In giving—whether our time, energy, or resources—we align ourselves with God’s vision of shalom, so that wounded people, fractured societies, and a broken world find healing and are eventually restored to God’s original intent. Rather than undoing society, harming creation, or perpetuating the other-ing and fragmenting of society, *Tikkun Olam* offers us a way to partner with God in setting the world right.

I connect this here because when we talk about our prophetic work, it feels essential that we consider the outcome we are seeking. More and more, I run across Friends who seem so proud of their anger—even though it appears to do more harm in its expression than good. Sometimes the ways we engage may only exacerbate the divisions in our society rather than heal them. I recently finished Micah White’s *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution*. In it, this leader of Occupy Movement questions many of our old strategies for change as outdated, ineffective, and maybe even counter-productive—especially when our posture is adversarial rather than open to the possibility of a deeper healing.

I wonder if this is something for those of us in the Religious Society of Friends to consider. We swim in the prophetic tradition. Many of us love this label, and in plainness of speech and fierce fidelity, we seek to express the truth of our convictions with clarity and courage. And sometimes, I wonder if this familiar response too quickly becomes the only tool in our toolbox. Maybe—maybe—there are times when the prophetic word and witness can take on a different tone, a softer tenor, more of an invitational grace. Maybe there are times when speaking truth to power needs to be preceded by a word of mercy spoken in a way that seeks to heal and restore.

Similarly, I think mercy reminds us to consider the breadth of the outcomes we seek. Recently, I re-read Miroslav Volf's excellent book *Exclusion and Embrace*. Volf is the Director of the Yale Centre for Faith and Culture and has written extensively on the intersection of spirituality, culture, and politics. He is a Croatian Christian who lived through the Serbian war and came from one of the most marginalized communities at that time.

The book emerged from the question posed by a professor during his graduate study: Could he, as a Croat, *ever really be able or be willing to embrace the Chetnik?* Could he really imagine the possibility of being reconciled with the Serb fighters who, as he says in the book, "sowed desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities?"¹⁶

It is a brilliant and disturbing book that tries to honestly consider one of faith's vexing questions: How does one remain loyal both to the demand of the oppressed for justice and to the gift of forgiveness that the Crucified offers to the perpetrator? Did you hear it? Are these mutually exclusive—or is there a third way that leads us toward a more full and beautiful reconciliation and restoration in which all things are put right?

Volf offers no easy answer—he only admits that from a human perspective, it feels impossible. But as a follower of the Crucified and Risen One, he believes it can be and must be possible.

In an era where we are rightfully focused on the demands of justice and being a prophetic presence, Volf reminds us that there is another matter we ignore at our peril. How to embrace and show mercy to the other—the enemy—the one we most despise, the Chetniks of our lives, who perpetrate evil and stand against all we hold dear? How do we do this without losing our identity, compromising our values, or minimizing the atrocities they are committing?

Maybe this all begins by asking: *Friend, who is **your** Chetnik?* Who is the one you cannot bear... whom you have so much trouble understanding? Tolerating? Who is the person or group you want to give up on as a lost cause? Who you can no longer imagine listening to, let alone embracing?

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*

Just after college, I read a piece by the Catholic Worker Dorothy Day. The phrase that haunted me then and continues to haunt me today is: “*You only really love God as much as the person you love the least.*” Sit with that for a moment, will you? ***Whom do you love the least?***

Every fibre of my being wanted and wants to resist this. Everything within me protests that this cannot be the case. But deep down, I believe it is so. And I see that the question Volf raises is fundamental for our time. In our divided culture and our disintegrating communities, even within our fracturing Yearly Meetings and conflicted local meetings—who are the people who will take up the impossible possibility of reconciliation between those who have decided they can no longer embrace one another? And could it be that a renewed experience, understanding, and practice of mercy might help us make a start in this direction?

I have no easy answers for how we do this work. All I can imagine—is remaining engaged without denying our true selves. We may be rejected. More frighteningly, as we look into the eyes of our enemy, we may see a dim reflection of ourselves. Maybe my enemy is not my complete opposite? Even more shattering to our worldview is the possibility of discovering that the one we despise so completely is more complex than the caricature we’ve constructed. Or the position they hold, which we so vehemently reject, is a little more complicated than we wanted or want to consider. At least for me, taking on this perspective at least raises some questions about how I am called to deal with someone I might otherwise want to cancel.

When it comes to being a prophetic people, who so desperately and urgently want to change the world, I am mindful of what a wise African-American Baptist preacher said to me several years ago at a peace gathering: “You can’t be a prophet among people you do not love.” Today, in our time, I might add—especially among those you love the least. Can we begin to imagine ourselves, Friends, as more than angry prophets—but as ones who might also be used to show mercy—compassion in action and generous kindness to those who seem to stand beyond the willing reach of love? Do we, can we, will we seek to show unfailing love even through our prophetic word and witness?

I told the story of Hosea at a meeting several years ago, right after one of the many mass shootings in our country. A lovely Quaker woman I respect very much said, “Colin, I don’t want to think about an image of a merciful God today. I want the table-turning, butt-kicking Jesus who comes in and cleans out the Temple with a whip!”

I certainly get that sense. Having organized and been part of many protests, I have done my share of confrontational political activism and holy subversion—I do, indeed, recognize the value of righteous indignation.

As I said, we love to “speak truth to power” by being bold and plain-spoken. This is part of our beautiful heritage arising from some of our most central convictions. But can we also love and show mercy as we seek and do justice? Might a spirit of humility rather than arrogance define our approach? Prophets, at their best, invite others into an as-yet-unseen reality by painting a picture of how the Spirit calls us onward and into a hopeful, healed, and whole future.

As we spend some time in silence and seek to slip even deeper into stillness, join me in considering these familiar words in 1 Corinthians 13:2:

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge but have not love, I am nothing.” Love—even and especially the love of a prophet—is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast. It is not proud. It isn’t rude or self-seeking. It is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. Such love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It protects, trusts, hopes, and always perseveres. Always.

CYM—Friday

The Transforming Power of Mercy

As we gather this day, let's allow these words from Howard Thurman to knit us together:

Open unto me—light for my darkness.
Open unto me—courage for my fear.
Open unto me—hope for my despair.
Open unto me—peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me—joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me—strength for my weakness.
Open unto me—wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me—forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me—tenderness for my toughness.
Open unto me—love for my hates.
Open unto me—Thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me.

– *For the Inward Journey*, Howard Thurman

Thomas Merton wrote a beautiful piece about the hidden wholeness that exists in all things—if we will but see it.

*There is in all things...a hidden wholeness. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a foundation of action and joy. It rises up in gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being.*¹⁷

As Friends, we might connect this to our notion of “that of God” in everyone and our sense that all of creation is somehow imbued with the imprint of the Divine. “The earth,” the Psalmist writes, “is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Holy Wisdom)

¹⁸ Psalm 24:1

And it is hard to see that wholeness some days, isn't it? This good reality gets easily obscured for many people, and we carry a sense of sadness, loss, and despair in our hearts, in our minds, and sometimes we even feel it in our bodies. But while things may often appear dying, colourless, and beyond repair, there is another more abiding Truth.

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer writes about feeling like he and we are lost in a blizzard. Economic injustice, ecological ruin, physical and spiritual violence, war, greed, deceit, and frenzy are a few of the things he cites as making us feel like we are stumbling about in a storm. I think this feeling is magnified in our time by growing anxiety, deepening cynicism, apathy, and an overall lack of resiliency.

Palmer offers a metaphor for navigating a blizzard's whiteout with the old practice of tying a rope from the house's backdoor out to the barn as a way of getting home when trapped in a storm. I like that image, and it connects, in my mind, to this theme of mercy and how it can help guide us toward wholeness when we feel overwhelmed by all that is happening around us. And maybe—if we are willing—it offers us a way to invite others who are stumbling about to join us on the journey home. As Palmer writes, “We can become healers in a wounded world—in the family, in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and political life—as we are called back and call others to our ‘hidden wholeness’ amid the violence of the storm.”¹⁹

One of my favorite biblical stories of mercy—the one I wish to end this week—is found in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son and merciful father. It is familiar to most but bears retelling.

It is important to remember the context in which Jesus delivers this utterly fantastic tale. In the early days of the Hebrew people, the name by which God revealed Godself was YHWH—“I Am Who I Am” or “I Will be Who I Will Be.”²⁰

YHWH is an elusive name, not fully definable and beyond complete understanding. Within the name, there is both a deep level of

¹⁹ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

²⁰ Exodus 3:14

intimacy and a veil of mystery—which captures, in my experience, part of the perfect paradox of knowing God and walking in the Spirit.

During part of Israel's history, *the name* YHWH was considered so holy that it could only be spoken once a year by a particular priest in a special place. That Name was simply too awesome—so incredibly divine—mere mortals dared not utter it. To do otherwise could result in being stoned to death by members of the faith community.

God, they believed, was awesome in power, full of wonder, and above all—Holy. They had a sense of God being powerful, majestic, transcendent in glory, meant to be revered, and so far beyond those of us who are only dust at the end of the day. And yet—Hebrew spirituality was also earthy and intimate. The God of the Hebrew Bible was active and involved in creation, visible and on display. YHWH is the Burning Bush, Pillar of Cloud and Fire that leads the assembly, the Voice speaking from the mountaintop, the uncaged Lion of Judah who lives not in temples made by human hands. And lest we forget, known to Elijah and others through the Gentle Whisper.

Holding tension and embracing paradox is one of the most challenging aspects of navigating the mystery of God. I don't recall who it was, but someone once asserted, "All the great heresies of the church result from our inability or unwillingness to deal with paradox." Whether or not you agree with that—I do—this is part of what confounds the Israelites over time when an over-emphasis on YHWH's holiness and transcendence makes for a distant and inaccessible God. The Presence who once walked with humanity in the cool shade of the garden can now no longer be addressed by name. Temple walls and religious rituals separate the ordinary person from the glory they once saw with their own eyes. The one-sided sense of what they expect God to be skewed and hindered their experience as the paradox is lost.

But along comes Jesus of Nazareth, who helps humanity fully understand and experience God. Unlike any other prophets to appear on Israel's doorstep, Jesus dares to address the Holy One of Israel as Abba. God as Papa—a loving parent—not a distant deity whose name must never be uttered.

Let me read the story as it is told in Luke 15.

11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country, and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.

15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.

16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!

18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.'

20 So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.

24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.

26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

In this story, Jesus speaks of God as a tender, caring parent tottering down to the end of the lane each day, scouring the horizon for a wayward child on the way home.

By imagining God this way, Jesus radicalizes intimacy with the Divine. In doing so, he goes one step further and invites all of us to call on and experience God as the Papa—not because Spirit is male, but as a common, human way to connect with the care of a loving parent.

At least one theologian suggests this is the most revolutionary of all of Jesus’ teachings because of the way it transforms our understanding of who God is and how we relate to God. It turns our assumptions and the ingrained messages and pattern of religious rituals on their head.

In the story, a prodigal child walks away from their parents’ loving home. He cashes in his inheritance to blow it on all the things they likely taught him to avoid.

This is his chosen life—out carousing, having a glorious time—until one day, he wakes up in a drunken stupor to realize his cash is gone. As some of us know, no money equals no friends. With no one and nowhere to turn, the young man gets a job slopping hogs for a local

farmer—a Gentile, no less—which is maybe the ultimate indignity for a Jew. Now, after making complete shambles of his life, the young man *comes to his senses* and thinks about going home. But he *cannot imagine* returning home as a son anymore. Once he confessed and fully repented, he hoped his father might be willing to hire him as a servant.

We are so used to the story that it no longer shocks us to read that the father has been waiting out at the edge of the road each day—pacing, waiting, longing for the beloved child to return home. There's a yearning in the father's heart because part of him is missing while the child is away.

When the father sees the young man coming from a distance, he rushes to the son in a manner that would completely offend the neighbours' sensibilities. In that culture, older men don't run. More importantly, they do not pull up their robes to do so, given the possibility that more than their knees might be exposed...

But here is the father, pulling up his robe and running shamelessly to his boy. In doing so, he draws the attention, the judgment, and the condemnation away from the child—and onto himself. "*Look at that ridiculous old man!*"—the nosy neighbours would say. You see, everyone in the community knows the young man's story and what a failure and disappointment he turned out to be. They are ready to give him their best look of disgust and dismay as he completes the walk of shame back to the homestead. But now, all of this is forgotten because the father acts in such a ridiculous and inappropriate manner. In their minds, the Papa, not the son, should be ashamed of himself!

In a moment, the father and son are face-to-face. Embracing the child, the father covers him with kisses, rejoicing that his lost boy is home. Remember—Jesus is teaching about the Holy One of Israel—whose name must not be even whispered. But now, the too-distant and unapproachable God is re-imagined as a crazy-in-love father, showering the beloved child with overwhelming mercy. Before the son can even apologize for his actions, the father locks him in an embrace. Before promising he will never, ever act this way again, the boy is welcomed home.

Apparently, the father didn't notice or didn't care that the son's clothes were dirty and torn, that he smelled of alcohol, or that he was

splattered with pig dung and the leftovers from a Gentile family's dinner. The father saw none of this. What he was wearing didn't matter. Where he had been didn't matter. What he had done didn't matter. All that mattered was that his lost child was home.

If only we could hear this story like Jesus' listeners did that day—how shocking and even disturbing it was for them. Several would have been stunned and insulted by the thought of the father acting in such a disgraceful way.

Many years ago, I was invited to travel among Quakers in Nepal. When I was there, I was asked to speak at an open-air gathering. In that culture, when members of the church came out to listen, so did most of the rest of the town. I chose to tell this story. At least at a gathering like this, part of the custom there was to invite conversation between some of the church's members and those who were not. And so, they broke up into small groups and talked about the story. Boy—did it get heated! There were loud and long exchanges within the small groups for nearly an hour. Later, the person hosting me said that this image of God was quite disturbing to many who couldn't believe God would ever act in such a way. They were shocked by the notion but also drawn to it.

I gave a similar message on another occasion with an inter-faith crowd in Pennsylvania. After the worship gathering, a woman approached me and said, "So many people in my faith tradition reject this story as absurd. They believe it makes God look stupid and silly. *But I love this story*—and my growing experience of a God this merciful has been changing my life."

Maybe if we could hear this story as Jesus' first hearers did—we would find ourselves touched and transformed by the power of mercy. Perhaps it would be that rope that helps us find our way home when we get lost and confused on our own or when we begin to feel overwhelmed by the storms swirling around us. And maybe—just maybe—it might change how we relate to those we think are so far gone, no longer worthy of our time, respect, and mercy, or to use the biblical word "lost."

Think for a moment about how Jesus uses that word in the parables of Luke 15—the ones involving the lost sheep, the lost coin and the

lost boy. *What is the overwhelming message?* Couldn't it be argued that the main point was not even so much that they *were lost as in rejected and no longer valued...but rather that they were so missed, so treasured, so beloved* that every effort would be made to ensure they were returned to where they belonged?

In the story, Jesus is at odds with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law *again*. This time, it is over this very issue—one's attitude toward the so-called lost. He puts off the fine religious folks—grumbling because Jesus is hanging out and in fellowship with undesirables—those many would rather exclude and keep to the margins.

The Pharisees stayed away from these people—living by an important rabbinic motto: "*Let not a person associate with the wicked—not even to bring them God's law.*" In other words—stay away from those lost people...even if you can help them be found. Otherwise, they'll pollute you.

Before we rush to judge *those Pharisees*, remember that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament warn against associating with evildoers—often for a good reason. How many parents worry about their kids falling in with the "wrong crowd?" Or how many of us have wanted to isolate and insulate ourselves from all the troubles and problems in the world? From my perspective, we are making an art form out of othering, marginalizing, and separating ourselves from one another these days. I've seen Yearly Meetings split over issues of belonging, only to have both groups become even less tolerant and diverse than before. Frankly, it is far easier to only be with people just like us—or more to the point—just like me.

But along comes Jesus—who by now, in Luke 15—has developed quite a reputation for hanging out with the wrong crowd. In fact, Jesus' behavior was so out of line that back in Luke 7:34—he is called a glutton and a drunkard by those growing angry and frustrated at what he is doing. The problem, you see, was not simply that Jesus was more friendly or outgoing than others—it *was what he was saying by his behavior*. By welcoming others to sit down at table with him—*Jesus was declaring them acceptable before God*.

To come to their home and share a meal with one of them was a declaration that God's salvation *had now come* to the people of that place. Jesus was doing the unthinkable—living forgiveness and acceptance toward those who had not yet done an outward thing to demonstrate true repentance. Imagine the horror this caused the Pharisees. These sinners hadn't jumped through the appropriate hoops and done what was necessary to be truly welcome. By the same token, I wonder how some of Jesus' friends on the margins reacted to his willingness to continue to engage those in power, with privilege, and those who seemed most responsible for perpetuating the problems of the day.

But instead of picking a side—Jesus lived with integrity and mercy with all people. He spoke the truth in bold and courageous ways. He found ways—it seems—to dismantle systems of violence, oppression, evil, and idolatry without undermining the dignity and belovedness of individuals.

He did not coerce, dominate, or force others—but instead invited them into a more hopeful future. By addressing the brokenness in others in merciful ways, he saw and sought that hidden wholeness in others and gave it a chance to flourish.

And so, as Jesus often does, when he is about to get in a big, blow-up argument with folks—he says, “Friends...sit down...I want to tell you a story.”

Suppose one of you has 100 sheep and cannot find one of them...

Or—did you hear the one about the woman with ten silver coins but found one missing...

Or, best of all—let me tell you a tale about a missing child.

Part of the power of this particular parable is that it throws us off balance on at least two levels. First, how am I the missing child? What do I know about finding welcome and acceptance in God's loving arms? How does this resonate with my experience of God?

And secondly, I think it moves us to ask—“Am I willing to show the same kind of compassion to others? To those who have rejected me? Those who see the world in ways I cannot fathom or respect? Who make choices that go against my most deeply held convictions? Part of

the problem is not just disbelieving God is this way—but that ***we might need to become this way to be whole.***

In each story, the man, the woman, and the merciful father take the initiative to search for the missing treasure—which is a much better way to think about those who are not at home. *I mean, wouldn't you rather be referred to as "God's missing treasure" instead of "the lost?"*

Notice, as well, there is a grand celebration when the missing treasure is back home in the company of others—in the safety of the flock—as it were. Each time there is a sign of reconciliation and restoration, or whenever justice triumphs over injustice, when peace prevails, when mercy triumphs—wouldn't it be good for us to celebrate—just a little? Maybe in a world filled with so much messaging about all that is wrong and broken, a few moments of celebration might remind us and others that over this ocean of darkness...*there really is a much greater, much more resilient ocean of light. And we should celebrate every time it is visible—for mercy's sake.* How often, amid all the good and hard work you are doing, Friends, do you take time to celebrate and give thanks? In my experience, our Quaker community is not very good at this.

One of the great questions from the parable of the Prodigal Son is, "what became of him?"

Was he grateful for the moment but then unchanged? Not ever fully reconciled to his family? Unmoved by the powerful love and grace he was shown? It is possible that he wound up just as before because we see this happen all the time. Love doesn't always win. Hearts are not always changed—at least at the moment.

I believe a far more likely ending to this tale is that the lost boy, this missing treasure, indeed found his home as never before. Along with being reconciled with this father, I imagine he and his faithful and frustrated brother even found a way to forge a deeper, stronger bond. Maybe he finally found his place at home, started a new rhythm, and began seeing the world in new ways—less selfish and more selfless. Who knows, maybe he even went out to the end of the lane each day in search of other lost children trying to find their way back.

The real answer to what happened to the lost boy depends on us. Again, this is the point of a parable. What does it evoke in you? How will it compel you to act?

There is a congregation I know that at the rise of meeting for worship, everyone leaves their seats. They then stand around the perimeter of the meetinghouse facing outward. There is a rhythm to the spiritual life, at least as it is lived in community, in which we gather in order to scatter. Gathering and scattering—this is the life of contemplative activism, faith-in-action, and service arising out of worship. As they end their gathering, they pray that they might be sent out into the world as ministers of reconciliation—which is the work the Apostle Paul calls us to in 2 Corinthians 5. “*For Christ’s love (that overwhelming mercy of God that we have received) compels us,*” the Apostle writes, to encourage those around us to be reconciled with God, themselves, and others. We have a merciful ministry of reconciliation—helping others, using Merton’s words, to seek that “hidden wholeness” and to find their way home to God and the beloved community.

I believe we are best able to do this work if we are comfortable in God’s embrace. So, Friends, do you know in your bones *the overwhelming mercy of the God who treasures you*? Do you live in and live out of that reality—that no one can take from you? Does it ground you and centre you—moment by moment?

Is your Meeting and Yearly Meeting a place that lives this reality—how you treat one another? By the way you welcome one another? And if not, what are the barriers to this kind of reconciliation being part of the practice, discipline, and grace of your fellowship? This is a serious question—Friends. Because as much as we are known for our peace testimony, many people look at the divisions that confound us and wonder why we do not always seem to possess what we profess.

Finally, in what ways are you wandering down to the edge of your lane—wherever you inhabit—to be on the lookout for ones trying to find their way home and recover that hidden wholeness? Does or how does your meeting live as eager ministers of reconciliation in your neighbourhoods, cities, country, and beyond? Are that work and witness arising out of your worship and sending you into the world?

I know some Friends have an allergy to the word “evangelism,” — which I will remind you means “good news.” We are resistant to anything that looks like proselytizing because we recognize rightly that religious labels mean very little. “*Proselutos*” is a Greek word focused on the religious affiliation one claims, and I do not see Jesus giving attention or care to labels. But what he does give great time and attention to is the great news of God’s liberating grace and mercy available to each and every person and to the radical invitation to “*metanoia*” — the overhauling power of God that heals the broken, liberates the captive, unchains the prisoner, and welcomes us home. As a former prodigal, I can’t tell you how helpful it was to have a few courageous and caring people offering me help and pointing me in the right direction. I imagine that in your home communities, there are people just like me wondering if there is any good news and longing for a home and family. What canst thou say to them?

Thank you for allowing me to be with you this week. Peace and mercy to you!

In an age where hate, cynicism, impatience, gracelessness, and a woeful lack of humility often cloud our ability to see ourselves and others plainly, some of us may find the corrective lens of mercy bringing the world back into proper view.