

TEXT: Matthew 4:12-23
THEME: In the shadow of death light has dawned
SUBJECT: Persuasion
TITLE: How the Light Gets In

Third Sunday after Epiphany
26 January 2020
Messiah Moravian
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John Woolman, an American Quaker, lived through the middle years of the eighteenth century. He is known to the world of scholarship for his journal, a literary classic. He also almost singlehandedly rid the Society of Friends of slaves.

It is difficult to imagine the Quakers as slaveholders, but many of the eighteenth century American Quakers were affluent, conservative, and slave-owning. John Woolman, as a young man, set his goal to rid his beloved Society of this terrible practice. By 1770, nearly a 100 years before the Civil War, no Quakers held slaves.

His method was unique. He didn't raise a big storm about it or start a protest movement. He practiced gentle, clear, and persistent persuasion. Although not a physically strong man, he accomplished his mission by walking or by riding a horse up and down the East Coast visiting slaveholders.

The approach was not to censure the slaveholders in a way that drew their animosity. Rather, the burden of his approach was to raise questions: What does the owning of slaves do to you as a moral person? What kind of an institution are you binding over to your children?

By persistently returning and revisiting and pressing his gentle argument over a period of thirty years, the scourge of slavery was eliminated from the Society of Friends. The Quakers were the first religious group in America formally to denounce and forbid slavery among its members.

John Woolman exerted his leadership in an age that must have looked as dark to him as ours does to us. We may easily write off his efforts as a guide for us on the assumption that Quakers were ethically conditioned for his approach. Maybe so, but it is the same approach taken by Jesus in a world conditioned by the harsh realities of Roman occupation.

The Sadducees colluded with Rome, securing for themselves a modicum of power and privilege. The Zealots took up armed resistance against Rome, suffering inevitable defeat and the destruction of the Temple. Jesus chose the path of gentle persuasion, person by person, walking the length and breadth of Galilee.

History is not a merciful judge of those who conspire with unjust and oppressive powers. With the fall of Jerusalem, the Sadducees disappeared from history along with the Zealots whose bodies filled the Temple courtyard. Jesus, however, changed the course of history.

We live in a moment when the art of persuasion has lost its shine. Some believe persuading anyone of anything is inappropriate. Truth is a social construct. All points of view are equally valid. Some believe the "other," whoever they may be, are too stupid or too evil to be persuaded of anything.

To lose faith in the truth, to lose faith in the capacity of people to be persuaded of the truth, is to live in a land of deep darkness. The end of such darkness is violence and death.

Matthew quotes Isaiah, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” How does the light dawn? Matthew says, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”

Matthew gives priority to teaching. As Moses gave the people the law to protect, preserve and promote human flourishing, so Jesus’ teaching, summarized in the Beatitudes, preserves human dignity, protects human freedom, and promotes human flourishing.

Jesus was, among other things, a Jewish sage. Jewish sages loved hyperbole. Jesus everywhere spoke in exaggeration and metaphor, which means he spoke chiefly to the imagination. The light gets in through the imagination. The art of persuasion depends on the capacity to see imaginatively, to see life in a new light, for reasoning itself is rooted in the imagination.

With the advent of social media, face to face conversations, attempts at gentle persuasion, have given way to anonymous vitriol and angry tweets that feed on the fears and resentments and prejudices that are the very shadows of death. It is easy to despair in the face of such darkness, thinking “What difference can I make?”

We don’t have to be Jesus or John Woolman to know that what is is not what has to be. We are created according to a divine design, after the divine image, oriented toward a divine purpose. Our true happiness lies, not in colluding with or taking up arms against or escaping from the forces of darkness, but by acting in harmony with the design, image and purpose of our creation.

If this divine design, image, and purpose are not true, if all peoples are not created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, including the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, then slavery is merely the price we pay for economic prosperity for the few, the privileged, the powerful.

A hundred years from now, I hope people say, “It is difficult to imagine the economic disparity of the first decades of the 21st century. It is difficult to imagine the unequal access to quality education and affordable health care. It is difficult to imagine the homelessness and the suicide rates of veterans. It is difficult to imagine the exploitation of the poor, including the prevalence of sex trafficking.”

Sound like fantasy? No more so than ending slavery among the Quakers sounded to the cynics of John Woolman’s time. If we believe in the truth, if we believe in the power of the imagination to see life in a new light, then we have no choice but to raise questions such as: How does the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few affect the moral fabric of our society? What does the disparity in access to the means of human flourishing do to us as a human community?