

## *The Blessed Community*

Carole Treadway

There are two dimensions in this program [*On Being a Spiritual Nurturer*], the spiritual growth of the individual and the development of his or her gifts of spiritual nurture, and the spiritual growth of the meeting community as it is nurtured by its members, especially those with the calling to spiritual nurture.

This morning I want to speak about the meeting community as it is and as it could be in the fullness of time.

The word translated as “blessing” in the Bible can also be translated as “good fortune,” or as “happy.” In some translations of the Bible the word is “happy” instead of “blessed.” We all know from our experience that “happy” in either sense is not the word that describes the totality of the experience of being in community. It can be painful and challenging at times, even threatening to the very sense of self. This can be said of every kind of community that we are part of, whether it be family, neighborhood, work, circles of friendship, or especially religious bodies.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lists the conditions of blessedness. Among them: “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted”; “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”; “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” We don’t think of suffering as a blessed condition. But the message is that when suffering is faced and endured, especially when it is for the sake of Truth, the blessing comes—not in a worldly sense, but in the eternal or spiritual sense. So it is with the rewards of the

blessed community. The blessing comes with the faithfulness, persistence, and sacrifice of the members.

There are five words, or phrases—metaphors—that reveal several ways of looking at the blessed community. Lloyd Lee Wilson, in his *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, reflects on two of them: Covenant Community and Gospel Order. The others are the Body of Christ, the kingdom of heaven, and *koinonia*.

The meeting or church community can be called the Body of Christ, as is the entirety of the Christian church. Look back at Paul's extended metaphor in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. The body of Christ has many parts with distinct functions and roles. Each is necessary for the health of the whole. Paul says, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." In the blessed community of a Friends meeting or church we must name and claim for the meeting the distinct gifts of each member, avoiding the common misinterpretation of the testimony of equality to mean that all are the same. True equality in the blessed community comes when all are equally valued and all are doing and being exactly what God has called each one to do and to be.

The metaphor of the Body of Christ also suggests that, like our human bodies, the parts are interdependent. None has value or life by itself but only in cooperation, coordination and harmony with all of the other parts. When all members know and are functioning in the various roles, there is less room for rivalry and political maneuvering. When particular ministries are lifted up and claimed for the community, everyone feels valued and included. All have in common the building up of the body of Christ.

Lloyd Lee Wilson writes at length about the blessed community as a covenant community. There is a sacred and intentional relationship of the meeting with God which is, as Wilson states, “. . . initiated by God and to which we as members respond in faith.” (*Essays*, 61) The covenant relationship is rooted in God’s promise to the Israelites that, “I will take you as my people and I will be your God.” (Ex 6:7 NRSV). The meeting that keeps to this fundamental basis of its existence will experience Equality, Simplicity, and Harmony. We defer to this relationship when we are seeking to know God’s will for the meeting and it makes it possible for us to lay aside our personal preferences and prejudice which interfere with our coming to unity with the divine will.

The blessed community is in the Gospel Order, which Lloyd Lee Wilson defines as “. . . the order established by God that exists in every part of creation, . . . It is the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator. . . . It is the harmony and order which God established at the moment of creation, and which enables the individual aspects of creation to achieve that quality of being which God intended from the start, about which God could say that it was very good.” (*Essays*, 3) Our structures of organization and procedure promote Gospel Order but only if they arise out of Gospel Order in the first place. When we judge an event or decision in our meeting to be in “right order,” are we saying that it follows correct procedure, or are we saying that it is in right relationship with the Creator of order? Our meetings rarely experience the harmony of Gospel Order in its fullness, but we do know it in part and to the extent we know it and experience it in our meetings, we witness to the world the possibility of Gospel Order.

The good news that Jesus proclaims is that The Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It is not far off in the future; it is right now. The communities of our

meetings and churches, when they are rightly ordered, are building that kingdom. The right ordering is in our honoring of the two great commandments: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all of thy heart, mind, soul, and strength. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” These two commandments are the foundation of our relationships in our meetings, and indeed, the whole Society of Friends and it is that foundation that we share as Christians with the larger Christian community of which we are a part and with our Jewish brothers and sisters. The full realization of that kingdom, or if you prefer, community of God, is not yet, but it is in part and the promise can keep us working for God’s peace and justice in the world as well as harmony within our meetings. We remind ourselves of this possibility and hope every time we pray the Lord’s prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The prayer also reminds us in the plea, “Give us this day our daily bread,” that God sustains us in our efforts and if we rely on ourselves, we fail.

We can also think of the blessed community as “*koinonia*,” the Greek word used in the New Testament for the early Christian communities. Its translation carries with it the meanings of communion and fellowship. My Bible dictionary also points to Paul’s use of the word to denote our relationship with the Holy Spirit when he says at the conclusion of his second letter to the Corinthians, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” This seems to say that our human *koinonia* is grounded in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit if it is to be a truly blessed community. In our *koinonia* groups here we will build little blessed communities. Over the course of the two years together we will discover the unique gifts that each of us brings to the group and we will discover the diversity that will challenge us. Through our Spirit-centered listening, prayers, and love we will become “church” for one another, a model of blessed community.

What has my own experience of community been? What have I observed?

I was born and grew up in a Quaker community. I don't mean that we lived communally but we lived in the same larger community and were in the same Friends meeting—a Conservative Friends meeting in Ohio. Most of the people in the meeting were the third or fourth generation in that meeting and their roots in the wider community were even deeper. Furthermore, most of them had gone to school together in the yearly meeting boarding school. There was intimate knowledge of each other and lifetimes of shared experience and an inherited culture. It was not a meeting marred by interpersonal tensions to any great degree as far as I could tell, although I was very young and would have known about it only later, and it was not a meeting that was particularly challenged or sought challenges that would threaten its solidarity. Perhaps the greatest external challenge came with the Second World War when each man of draft age had to decide if he would uphold the peace testimony. Most of them did and most of them were called up to serve in Alternative Service. A few went to prison rather than register for the draft. The meeting rallied around these men and their families, much as folks in other churches rallied around the men who served in the military and their families. There was an extra dimension to this solidarity because the meeting faced the disapproval and even condemnation of the surrounding community. In this way, the generations of Friends who were adults during this time experienced to some degree the persecution that brought those early Friends together in supportive communities, not only for worship but also for survival.

Few of our meetings these days experience the kind of external threat that forces people to come together and to transcend the differences that strain their meetings, sometimes to the

breaking point, in easier times. In our day we face an internal threat that can tear us apart rather than bring us together. We don't have the shared experience and knowledge of a faith tradition to the extent that earlier Friends did. We bring into our meetings our psychological and emotional baggage, our prejudices and our false hopes. We bring a wide diversity of religious experience and understanding of what it means to be a person of faith. These factors can be life threatening, if not to the outward life of the meeting, certainly to the spiritual vitality and unity of our meetings. If we are able to be open to one another, to look for the work of the Holy Spirit in each of us, and, to use the words of Paul to the Ephesians, "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," we can survive and thrive. (Eph. 4:3)

My first conscious experience of community was at the yearly meeting boarding school. The school was governed by Quaker principles of right order. Each day began and ended with half-hour or so of worship and hour-long worship was held on Fourth day (Wednesday) and First day. The student government made decisions on the basis of unity. The school was inclusive for its time: students from families with a fairly wide range of resources and children with a variety of racial heritages comprised the student body. The work of maintaining the buildings and campus was shared by all. There was a wonderful mix of a challenging academic program, physical development through a program of athletics and exercise, spiritual nurture through daily worship and guidance from faculty, staff, and our friends. And it was all leavened with a lot of fun and humor, planned and unplanned. Those are some of the elements of the school life, but the sum total was much more. When, as an adult, I looked back on those years I was aware that my experience there left me with a longing for such a community. Aside from the fact that there was such a good mix of spiritual, academic, and physical nurture, there was a clear understanding that the spiritual was the basis of the rest. I don't mean to paint an ideal situation.

There were many tensions, disagreements, heartaches, and instances of resistance to the school's expectations about behavior. But I had a glimpse of what I think the blessed community is.

In my twenties and even my thirties I flirted with the idea of joining an intentional community, if I could find the right one and persuade my husband to join—a doubtful endeavor. But the more I learned about them, the more I realized that I was unwilling to give up as much of my autonomy as would be required. I suffered the ambivalence that so many of us have, the longing for community in tension with the individualism that so characterizes our society. This is a choice that each of us makes when we take the claims of a meeting community seriously, to relinquish some of our autonomy and individualism, just as we do in marriage and family life.

I have been part of a meeting community throughout my life and my journey with God is linked with my understanding and expectations of the meeting community. As a young woman I was dissatisfied with the meetings I was part of. Part of the dissatisfaction came from my perception that there was not a strong spiritual foundation. Messages in meeting tended to be political or concerned with social issues—especially during the Vietnam War. Rarely did I hear the prayers, scriptural references, and exhortations to turn to Christ of my childhood, nor did I experience the deep expectant silence of the worship. I recognize now that the dissatisfaction stemmed partly from my own place in spiritual formation but there was also a certain shallowness in many meetings in those years.

Every meeting I have been part of has flirted with idolatry and every meeting I have been part of has been sincere in its desire to seek the will of God as we understood that. Idolatry has taken many forms. Two that seem especially prevalent are the worship of silence and Quaker practice and testimonies, and the substitution of our peace testimony for the Prince of Peace. Furthermore, there is often a kind of arrogance with regard to other Christian churches. There is

disregard for our cultural and religious history and heritage on the one hand and on the other hand the tendency to substitute them for deep listening to what we are called to be at this time in this place. Either of these attitudes works against the formation of a community centered in the spirit of Christ and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Every meeting I have been part of has challenged me. In every meeting there have been one or two people who seemed to me to be ‘way off beam’—misguided, unpleasant, too loud, too talkative, too dominant, too sure of themselves and their knowledge and understanding. Whatever truth there may have been in those judgments, the fact that I have had to face is that these people represent those parts of myself that I have not accepted for whatever reason. I have learned by my experiences in my meeting communities that true community depends on my willingness to give up something of my own will and preferences, not to the will and preferences of the meeting, but to the will and desires of God for me and for the meeting. On the other hand, I have seen meetings nearly torn apart by the responses to the actions or attitudes of one member who is seen by others as in some way, “unQuakerly.” These Friends have often been scapegoats for the meeting and when the scapegoat is gone, the meeting heaves a sigh of relief that we can return to our usual ways, but something is inevitably lost: the opportunity to stretch ourselves to extend hospitality to the stranger and to widen our own understanding of the limitlessness of God’s love. (Having said that, I grant that there are instances when a member or attender’s behavior is threatening or even harmful rather than just stretching and in these instances meetings have had to search for the most faithful way to maintain the meeting’s integrity and honor the offender’s status as a child of God.) I have struggled in a few instances to restore the scapegoat to fellowship with the meeting, but with limited success. I have been ashamed too often by my reluctance to speak the truth I see about what we as a meeting are

doing to one of us or to one another. Willingness and readiness to speak about what we see, to invite our meetings to look at themselves hard and acknowledge where we have gone wrong, is essential for the spiritual health of the meeting.

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There are structures and customs in our Quaker faith and practice that help us build blessed communities of faith, truth, justice, peace, and love. If we take our Queries and Advices seriously, we have an opportunity every year for thoughtful and prayerful self-examination, to help us assess our health as communities of faith. Three and a half centuries of Quaker experience provides a reliable guide, even though the specifics change.

Our collective decision-making process emphasizes seeking together to find unity in the will of God. We have less of the struggles for power and the compromises that characterize secular models of decision-making and that work against the building of community. Above all our commitment to living our lives and to conduct our meetings under divine guidance promotes unity.

So, our blessed communities, our meetings and churches, have the hope, which is partially realized, of the unity of the Body of Christ, the sacredness of the covenant with God, the harmony of the Gospel Order, the promise of the kingdom of heaven, and the fellowship and communion of *koinonia*. And it is God's grace that initiates in us the longing to be in relationship of a blessed community and it is God's love that gives us the means of fulfilling that relationship. God is the initiator and we are the responders. Both are necessary.