

When I attended a Friend's meeting several decades ago, a man in the Meeting passed away and left the Meeting a sum of money. Not a whole lot, just enough to get us mildly excited. The meetinghouse was pretty tired-looking, so the man, in his last dying, gasping words, requested we use it on the meetinghouse. Being Quakers, a committee was appointed to discern how best to use the money, and I was asked to serve on the committee. One committee member, the owner of a carpet store, suggested new carpet. He happened to have some at a reasonable price. Another person suggested painting the meetinghouse. Coincidentally, his son was a painter, was between jobs, and could begin that very week. It was a sign from the Lord, the man said. I suggested a water fountain, because whenever anyone wanted a drink they had to go downstairs to the kitchen sink for a lukewarm Dixie cup of tap water. "How about a water fountain?" I said.

Unfortunately, no one on the committee had a relative in the water fountain business, so the idea was shot down. One lady, named Frances, even took umbrage with my idea. "Water fountains aren't Quakerly," she said.

I hadn't been a Quaker all that long, maybe three or four years, and I thought, "I didn't know Quakers were against water fountains, but they must have a good reason." So I didn't push it.

But a couple years later, when I was leaving there, I reminded Frances of that conversation and asked her, “What about a drinking fountain isn’t Quakerly?”

She said, “A drinking fountain? I thought you meant a water fountain like they have in hotel lobbies that you throw pennies into.”

It seemed funny at the time, and I laughed about it. But what I also remember was that when Frances said, “Water fountains aren’t Quakerly,” it stopped the conversation. Everyone was perfectly willing to let her define what it meant to be Quaker, and no one was willing to challenge her definition, lest they appear unQuakerly themselves.

Consequently, there are now four other Quakers walking around who think drinking fountains in a meetinghouse are unQuakerly. One of them came to our meetinghouse dedication and said to me, “I see you have water fountains.”

“Three of them,” I said.

He said, “It’s a good thing Frances is dead.”

Floating around in our heads is an image, a stereotype, of what it means to be Quakerly. But that image is often a caricature of Quakerism, based on archaic perceptions and idiosyncrasies about what it means to be a Friend.

Our idiosyncrasies were once powerful statements about our beliefs, they were meaningful long ago, but have since lost their significance. Our Quaker peculiarities are no longer seen as relevant protests against injustice and inequality. They have become affectations, a Quaker secret handshake, if you will, to show who is in the Quaker club and who is not.

I was speaking at a conference last summer and a Quaker approached me. She introduced herself, then said, "I've never met a Quaker pastor before." I said, "Well, now you have." She said, "Pastors aren't Quakerly, you know." When I pointed out that today the majority of Quakers belong to pastoral meetings, she said, "Nevertheless, they aren't Quakerly."

The genius of early Friends was their ability to respond boldly, decisively, and creatively against the injustices and excesses of their day. They did this by laboring mightily against war and vanity and unbridled power and abusive religion and classism. They spoke and dressed simply to protest the classism that elevated the rich and denigrated the poor. They went to jail rather than support state religion. They worshipped in simple meetinghouses to show that finery and wealth meant nothing to God. They rejected pastors because they believed no intercessory priest was needed to approach God. Before long, an image of what it meant to be Quakerly began to emerge. But those images, those symbols, were never intended to be tests of Quaker orthodoxy; they were intended to be testimonies about what it meant to be the people of God.

What is a testimony? A testimony is our response to the misplaced priorities of the world, especially when those priorities demean and diminish other people. I heard of a young couple who live together as husband and wife. They stood in their Quaker meeting and vowed their love for one another, but refused to get a wedding license from the state. Neither do they file taxes together or take advantage of any financial benefits they would otherwise enjoy as a married couple. They have said they will not financially benefit from marriage until gay and lesbian people can enjoy those same blessings. That is a testimony.

I know a Quaker who one year figured the percentage of his taxes that paid for war, then informed the IRS, his congressmen, and the President that because he would not wage war, neither would he pay others to do it on his behalf. Instead, he donated that money to the cause of peace. First, they seized his bank account, then his car, then threatened him with jail. Then it occurred to him that if he didn't earn much money, his paying for war would be a moot point, so he reduced his work hours, let his income fall below the poverty level, and began living simply, volunteering the time he used to spend working for money to helping the poor. That is a testimony.

Our feeding the hungry, our visiting the sick, our comforting the hurting, our encouraging the meek and lowly--those are testimonies.

Quakerism is not adherence to a set of historic peculiarities that have lost their relevance. It is not about rejecting stained glass windows or steeples or seminary-trained pastors. At one time, those were useful and powerful testimonies, but I know of no one today who still believes God prefers stained glass over clear glass, or steepled roofs over plain roofs, or red silk over gray cotton, or white people over black people. Mindless adherence to battles we've already won is not Quakerism. Quakerism is a way of life informed by the justice and grace of God and the immediacy of Jesus Christ. It is made relevant by our effort to speak powerfully and truthfully to today's injustices, not yesterday's, and by our commitment to resolving them.

I see no need to testify against yesterday's injustices, nor to raise my voice against wrongs already righted. I want to do today's work, sow today's seed, reap today's harvest, right today's wrong, speak today's prophetic word.

Flee, Friends, flee, from any religion that requires you to fight a battle already won, that demands your mindless obedience to yesterday's passions. Instead, move thoughtfully, faithfully, and creatively to wherever ugliness, prejudice, and hatred have soiled the hearts of men, and to those hearts bring enlightenment, healing, justice, and peace. That, my Friends, is Quakerly.