

The Time Has Come To Choose

**A Pendle Hill Monday Night Lecture
Delivered by Samuel D. Caldwell
November 9, 1998**

A Parable

Good evening. Thank you all for coming. I would like to begin tonight by reading from Matthew 25, verses 14-29:

14"For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property;

15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

16 He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more.

17 So too, he who had the two talents made two talents more.

18 but he who had received the one talent, went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money.

19 Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

20 And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.'

21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.'

22 And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.'

23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.'

24 He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow;

25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

26 But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed?

27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest.

28 So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents.

29 For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

Unlike some other Kingdom parables, the meaning of this parable is not the least in doubt. To the contrary, it is painfully clear. God has vouchsafed to each one of us, his servants, a precious spiritual treasure to keep until some future day of reckoning. Some get more, some get less, but each in accordance with his or her abilities. Regardless of how much treasure we receive, however, what really matters is what we do with it.

And, here's the point of the parable: only those who actively invest it and multiply it will be rewarded in the end. Merely conserving the original property is not enough. In fact, if we do nothing to increase the treasure—if we hide our treasure under a mattress or put it in a hole in the ground--God will take away what little we have and give it to someone else. And then we will be cast out of the Kingdom into darkness. And, just to add insult to injury, God will give our treasure to the one who already has the most; not to the one who has the least. This is to drive home the point that the Kingdom belongs to the venturesome, not the passive. If you don't do your part to invest it and multiply it, your talent will be taken away from you and you will be cast out. That's the way it is.

"But, how can this be?" we object. It wasn't like the third servant was being irresponsible or anything. He didn't sneak off and blow his master's treasure on a vacation in the Caribbean and then lie about it. His only sin was that he was a little more conservative than the other two servants. After all, it wasn't his treasure to invest. It was the other two servants who were acting irresponsibly and gambling with someone else's money. They could have lost it all. Why didn't the master yell at them for taking so many risks with his assets? No, we might say, the third servant was merely acting prudently. He may have been a bit too conservative, but at least he returned the dough.

It is abundantly clear from the parable, however, that the master doesn't see it that way at all. In his view, the servant was a slacker and a coward. He didn't even have the gumption to do the bare minimum—that is, to deposit the money in a bank and collect the interest. Instead, he hid it in the ground; buried it and ran away. That made the master mad, really mad. The inescapable conclusion, corroborated in many other scriptures, is this: when it comes to the Kingdom, God hates the timid and loves the bold. There is no room for cowards in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now, Friends, I have come tonight to tell you the truth—Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends is the unfaithful servant in this parable. Over 350 years ago, our master entrusted a great spiritual treasure to our safekeeping. At first, our forebears took it and invested it zealously, and it grew and multiplied. But, during the last few decades, we have become cautious, even cowardly. Instead of risking our spiritual capital to increase it, we have buried our treasure deep in the ground and run away and hid. The capital is still there, but it's earning no interest. We risk nothing and gain nothing. We have become like the servant the master despises.

And, now, the time of reckoning is upon us. It will do us no good to dig up the talents we've hidden and return them to their rightful owner. Excuses and explanations will not suffice. God is not pleased. Mark my words, Friends: unless we do something radical soon, what treasure we have will be taken away from us and given to those who have invested their five talents and made five talents more. It is already happening. We have only to look about us for the signs of the times.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to size up our situation. Our numbers have dwindled to a few. There aren't enough Quakers left even to effectively govern our institutions. Many of our meetings are struggling just to survive. Our voice is no longer heard--at least, anywhere that matters. We have become petty and peevish. We bicker about what is Quaker and what is not. We are totally

distracted by issues of organization, structure and budget. Let us not deceive ourselves. We have become a pathetic, irrelevant cult. Like the servant in the parable, we're so afraid of losing the original principal that we're losing all our opportunities, too. We have become ardent conservators of an arid tradition, not ambassadors of a living faith.

And that, Friends, is the crux of the problem. On the one hand, we have the Quaker faith—a precious treasure given to us by God. On the other hand, we have Quaker tradition and culture--the ground, if you will, in which we have buried our treasure. The first spells life; the second spells death. Like the servant in the parable, if we merely conserve our traditions and culture, what faith we have will be taken away and given to others. And, this is precisely what is wrong with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting today--we are focused on conserving our culture, not venturing with our faith. What's worse, we are confused between the two. The time has come for us to choose. And, this is what I want to talk about tonight.

Definitions

Let me start with definitions. When I speak of "Quaker culture," I am referring to the totality of commonly held, socially determined, largely unreflective assumptions, attitudes, customs, habits, and behaviors that have become normative or predominant in this Yearly Meeting over time.

When I speak of "Quaker Faith," I am referring to that particular set of foundational theological beliefs, principles, and experiences which, taken together, form the basis for our spiritual life and practices as Quakers today.

Five Theses

Now, let me nail my five theses to the wall. Here is what I believe about our current situation in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting:

First, Quaker culture and Quaker faith are not the same thing. In fact, they are often directly at odds with one another in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting today.

Second, although it originally derived from and was consistent with Quaker faith, contemporary Quaker culture in this Yearly Meeting has evolved into a boring, peevish, repressive, petty, humorless, inept, marginal, and largely irrelevant cult that is generally repugnant to ordinary people with healthy psyches. Contemporary Quakerism, as a culture, has become a backwater of misfits, recalcitrants, ne'er-do-wells, and malcontents who practice a rigid code of cultural conformity instead of a living faith.

Third, contemporary Quaker culture has long been the dominant force in the spiritual life of Friends in PYM, not Quaker faith, and Quaker culture has largely replaced Quaker faith as the primary test of faith and practice on a daily basis.

Fourth, Quaker culture has now become the single biggest obstacle to the progress of Truth and the survival of Quakerism in this Yearly Meeting today. If we try to preserve our Quaker culture,

instead of following the leadings of our Quaker faith, we will most certainly be cast out of the Kingdom and die.

Fifth, in contrast to contemporary Quaker culture in this Yearly Meeting, our Quaker faith is based on one single, simple, powerful, universal and transforming spiritual principle that is capable of transforming anyone and everyone who comes into contact with it. If we ventured forth and invested this faith, it could transform the world as it once did generations ago.

Quaker Culture

Let us talk first about Quaker culture. Being a Quaker in Philadelphia is a lot like living in California- the longer you stay there, the less likely you are to see how bizarre the culture really is. While I love Quaker faith, I must confess that, after years of struggling with its eccentricities, I have come to detest many aspects of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting culture. As I mentioned before, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting culture has become boring, petty, peevish, repressive, humorless, irrelevant, and generally repugnant to healthy human beings.

Think about how petty and ridiculous our culture has become. We are the only religion I know of where...

- everyone is required, almost as a matter of religious principle, to reuse their styrofoam cups;
- where people who earn a good living are regarded as suspicious and marginalized from the spiritual life of their meetings;
- where fun is a potluck supper where you bring your own silver;
- where absolutely everyone is underpaid, and no one is ever fired for incompetence;
- where non-conformity and anti-social behaviors are consistently praised;
- where the pursuit of a free lunch is developed to a high art;
- where no-one is ever properly thanked or recognized, no matter how much they have done or achieved;
- where the typical family tree goes in a circle;
- where women always wear sensible shoes;
- where men never wear neckties;
- where indirectness and obfuscation are virtues;
- where fuss budgets and reactionaries are automatically appointed to high office;
- and where volunteers who attend important meetings are charged for their parking and meals.

Why, I ask myself, would any sane person want to become a member of the Religious Society of Friends? We've elevated a thousand petty biases and unreflective prejudices, most of which have absolutely nothing to do with our foundational religious principles, to the status of the Ten Commandments. Think of all the "Thou Shalt Not's", stated or unstated, that dominate our perverse culture:

THOU SHALT NOT...

- drive fancy cars (unless, of course, they are dark in color or have redeeming safety features);
- wear expensive clothes (unless, of course, they are of modest color and cut, and then it doesn't matter how much money you spent on them);
- make too much money (although you are allowed to inherit as much of it as you like)
- get angry or exhibit too much emotion;
- proselytize or evangelize (unless, of course, it's to admonish others about petty transgressions against the culture);
- sing, play music, applaud, or have prepared messages in meeting for worship;
- censure fools or disruptive persons;
- challenge bizarre or obnoxious behavior;
- argue about theology;
- solicit meeting members for money;
- vote Republican (or at least admit it publicly);
- defend capitalism;
- trust the government;
- decorate the meeting house or move the benches;
- watch football or drink beer;
- talk about Jesus Christ in meeting;
- put people on the Board who have money, power, or influence.

The problem with all of these cultural rules and prejudices is not that they are silly—although many of them are—but that we have raised them to the level of religion. They have become the icons we worship. What's worse, there has arisen in the Society of Friends a whole posse of self-appointed culture mavens—I call them the "Quaker Enforcers"--who diligently police our behavior and regularly pronounce on what is "Quaker" and what is not based on these cultural norms. You know the sort. They're not interested in whether something is faithful or well led; they're interested

exclusively in whether we've ever done it that way before. "That's not Quakerly," they say. Self-appointed conservators of an empty tradition. Losers, not entrepreneurs.

These are the cowards that the master in our parable excoriated. Instead of trying to figure out how we can actively invest our principal for the Kingdom's gain, these people are busy protecting the treasure. What's more, they keep the rest of us from investing, too. Decent people, maybe, but cowards all. The fact is, they don't really trust God. They would rather hide the dough than sow the seed. They will never see the Kingdom. If we let them govern what we do, we will never see the Kingdom either.

So, what does all of this have to do with Quaker faith? Absolutely nothing. And, that is precisely my point. The dictates of Quaker culture have very little to do with the tenants of our faith. In fact, if we were to examine them closely, we would find that they are often at odds. Quaker culture is all about customs, not leadings. And customs, like old habits, die hard. Make no mistake about it. It is not because our faith is too obscure to understand or too difficult to practice that we are declining in influence and numbers; it is because our culture is so silly, so off-putting, so pedantic, so irrelevant and so inflexible. Let's be clear. Quakerism in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has become a pernicious backwater of social and cultural conformity, not a vital, living faith that convinces and wins others. And, remember the lesson of our parable: there's no such thing as a holding operation in the Kingdom of Heaven. We're either going forward or we're going backwards. We can't stand still. Merely conserving the principal is not enough.

And this is the key point I want to make tonight: the time has come for us to start moving forward again. We have to start investing our spiritual capital again, or we're going to lose it all. We have to start putting Quaker faith before Quaker culture if we want God's treasure to increase. We must stop asking the question "Is that Quakerly?" and start asking the question, "Is that what God really wants?" If what God really wants us to do does not happen to be consistent with our cultural norms, then so be it. We have to get over it—soon. From now on, we can have only ONE litmus test: Faith.

Quaker Faith

But what is that faith, the treasure we have received? I'm glad you asked! This is where other religions may stumble, but Quakers need not stumble here. It is as breathtakingly simple in its formulation as it is powerful in its expression. And, it is simply this:

God gives to every human being who comes into the world—regardless of race, religion, gender, or station--a measure of the divine spirit as a living witness and an eternal Light to be inwardly guided by on a daily basis. That Inner Light is supernatural, personal, universal, saving, eternal, persistent, and pure. The chief end of religious life is to learn to listen to and act upon the promptings of this Light under the authority of God and within the bonds of human community. Those who learn to heed the promptings of this Light come to be "saved"--that is, they come into fullness and wholeness of life and right relationship with God, themselves, the universe and one another. Those who resist, ignore, or otherwise deny the workings of this pure spirit within them, though they profess themselves to be religious, are "condemned"--that is, they become alienated from God, from themselves, from the universe, and from one another.

That's it. That's the whole enchilada. There is no other requirement or belief that takes precedence over this core belief in the Religious Society of Friends. It is absolutely foundational. Some of our evangelical brothers and sisters will argue that Jesus Christ comes first, not the Light. I would not

argue with them if by that they mean that Christ IS the Light and that it is He who witnesses universally in every human heart, whether He is known by that name or not. Unfortunately, that is not what they usually mean. They trample on the Truth and hide the treasure that has been received if they do not see that Christ is the Light and preaches the gospel in every human heart.

It is from this core belief of the universal, saving Light that all other beliefs and practices derive in the Religious Society of Friends, including our beliefs about human nature, the universal ministry, continuing revelation, the nature of true prayer and worship, the right conduct of business, the place of the Bible, God and Jesus Christ, the universal church, and our historic testimonies.

I am still a Quaker today because of this faith, not because of our culture. The doctrine of the Inner Light is the most powerful, transforming, and universal religious insight I have ever encountered anywhere. It is the treasure we have received, and it is the only treasure that really matters. If we actually took this message out into the world, instead of burying it in the ground, there is no end to the increase we would see.

It's Time To Choose

But we are about to lose that treasure. And when we do, so will the rest of humanity. If it happens, we deserve to be cast out. Why? Because, like the slothful servant, we continue to cling maniacally to the idea that our job is to preserve our culture at all costs, even when it's killing our faith. This is the kind of stuff that must have made the master nuts in our parable. The investment is going south and all we're worried about is preserving the principal. Geez. How stupid can you get?

Think about it. Even though our numbers are steadily declining toward zero, we are still willing to continue to cling to the silly, culturally-determined notion that Quakers don't proselytize? Who in the world told us that? The same person who told George Fox? Well, someone must have gotten it wrong because he certainly proselytized. So, why not us? Is that what the Lord really wants? For Quakerism to disappear because we're too stubborn or lazy to change a cultural norm in response to religious leading and the exigencies of our time? Would it really be a sin if we invested in a first-rate evangelism program, and actually succeeded in convincing thousands of the Truth and tripling our numbers in ten years? The unfaithful servant would rather lose the dough. Can you hear the master rolling over in his grave?

And, what about worship and ministry in our meetings? Even though our sick do not get visited and our souls are rarely fed in worship, are we still willing to cling to the silly notion that Quakers don't have prepared messages or paid pastors? Is that what the Lord really wants? Can't you just hear the master kicking himself in frustration? Are we really willing to lose the whole investment because of some cultural taboo? Which comes first, the culture or the immediate leadings of the spirit? What are we afraid of? Making a mistake? If we are to believe our parable, that's precisely what the master wants. A little entrepreneurial gumption. A little risk. Something ventured, something gained.

What if we were to adopt the semi-programmed approach of team ministry in our meetings that has worked so well elsewhere: a paid pastor who coordinates the team; ministry team members from the body of the meeting who serve on a rotating basis for a year at a time? A brief prepared message or song from a different ministry team member each week, followed by unprogrammed worship? Even music and children's stories, if we're led! And visits to the sick? What's the goal here, anyway—to preserve an outworn culture or feed souls?

And, what if our meeting lacks sufficient funds to underwrite its programs and expenses? How about taking the unusual step of asking our members for it? I can hear their screams now. "That's not Quakerly!" But, where exactly is it written that "Thou shalt not solicit members for money?" If, after asking once, there still is not enough, how about asking them twice? In fact, how about using the tried and true principles of fundraising that work everywhere else, and develop a comprehensive fundraising program that actually succeeds in raising the funds needed in your meeting? Would this be an unpardonable sin?

And, what about our Yearly Meeting structure and programs? Are we willing to let go of our mania for preserving our favorite programs and let something new emerge? Once again, what is the Holy Spirit really telling us? Is Quaker culture getting in the way?

What I'm saying here is that push has finally come to shove in this yearly meeting. We've been hiding from the truth too long. A lot of what we are doing is simply not working. The truth is, it hasn't been working for a long time. Now, the master is returning and he wants his investment back with interest—and, we're still sitting on the original merchandise. It's time to get off the dime and make some serious investments. If we keep listening to the culture mavens, Quakerism in this Yearly Meeting will surely die, and what treasure we have will certainly be taken away. The time has come to choose. What's it going to be? Quaker culture or Quaker faith? Everything is up for grabs. Everything must now be held up to the scrutiny of the Light. What doesn't pass muster must go. It's time to dump the ballast.

I do not say these things lightly. There are many precious things in our Quaker heritage and culture that ought to be and deserve to be preserved. What I am recommending is that we begin to put the leading of the Spirit first, and the requirements of our culture second. We need to ask new questions and find new answers. We need to be creative and entrepreneurial with the treasure we have, even if it means assuming some risk. After all, that's what the Kingdom is really about.

In closing, maybe we can take a page from another servant of God, Jonah. You may remember that, when he finally came to terms with his mission of delivering the bad news to Niveveh, Jonah sat down on a hill and waited for the city's destruction. But, there was an unexpected surprise: the whole city got busy, repented, and changed their sinful ways. Seeing this, God changed his mind. Boy, was Jonah mad. Well, that, too, is what the Kingdom is really about.