

# Is that Faithfulness?

## Walking with God the Path for Social Justice

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Good evening, Friends.

Thank you for inviting me to accompany you this week. It has been a profound honor to witness and celebrate Baltimore Yearly Meeting's supportive and loving community. I am deeply grateful to be here tonight, delivering the 2024 Carey Lecture. I express my gratitude both as a Friend and as a representative of Pendle Hill. I also extend my thanks to the Friends who worshiped with me in preparation for this sharing.

Every day this week, we have been invited to dance with some queries. As we open tonight, I want to spend a few minutes briefly addressing one of them. Please, turn to your neighbor and share for a few minutes on: *How does our faith respond to today's world?*

In the journey of faith, walking with God is not merely a personal spiritual venture but a profound commitment to social justice. Many of us are very familiar with Micah's exhortation about walking humbly with God.<sup>1</sup> Tonight, I want to explore with you how our faith responds to today's world, how we encounter the Divine in our history and struggles, and how we examine the meaning of love and justice in our relationships with the Divine, with others, and with ourselves. This is a humble and provocative invitation to explore our testimony of justice through the lens of faith and community, seeking to embrace the necessary call for transformation in today's world.

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:8

I would like to open my sharing with a small poem that I wrote in early March, dedicated to the American Friends Service Committee's team in the West Bank.

## **Bread<sup>2</sup>**

How easy it is to make bread,  
water  
flour  
air, and patience.  
Salt and yeast are always optional,  
but  
today  
we don't have the option of salt  
as we are not allowed to reach the sea,  
and  
yeast,  
yeast is a seldom treasure that rarely make it to the humanitarian aid trucks.

How easy it is to make bread,

water	<i>we don't have, the IDF cemented our wells</i>
flour	<i>four and a half hours in line to receive a kilo instead, 120 of us were killed as we waited in line in fear and desperation</i>
air	<i>full of dust, polluted with gas and the destruction of bombs, saturated with the sadness of dead bodies that could not be rescued</i>
patience	<i>can we be patient? How dare we be asked to wait?</i>

How easy it was to make bread  
when hands and hearts  
massaged the dough of liberation.

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<sup>2</sup> Poem written after the killing of more than 100 Palestinian while waiting in the food lines in Gaza on Feb 29, 2024.

In a world marked by profound inequalities, environmental degradation, violence, and systemic injustices, the question of how our faith responds to these challenges is more pressing than ever. Faith is not a passive belief but an active engagement with the world around us as we seek to experience and manifest the action of love.<sup>3</sup> Our faith as Friends calls us to witness and respond to the suffering and injustices that pervade our communities. This is a constant invitation to “*recognize that of God*” and to plant the seed of goodness and love in the soil of our daily realities. It is within this context that I refer to faithfulness not as a pious practice for seeking perfection but as the practice of opening ourselves to eternal love. The love that invites, transforms, and supports us as we take risks in discovering and embracing the truth.

**Faithfulness is dynamic.** It touches every aspect of our lives and guides us in our personal and collective journey as we are attentive to the movement of the Spirit. But let me be clear, being attentive and open to the Spirit can be highly compromised when we get distracted and take part in rituals or practices that perpetuate the many forms of injustice. In our post-modern world those rituals and practice are so embedded in our daily rhythm that sometimes is difficult for us to distance ourselves from them. Think about how our entire economic system is structured to support inequality, poverty, and environmental degradation. It is a system in which our consumption patterns are reflections of harmful practices that place profit before people and the common good. Detaching from these practices requires us to be truly members to one another as we humbly seek to encounter the inner Light and as we envision and make possible a better world. This is a call for community, for working together as we identify ways to bridge our barriers, and, again, seek the common good.

Let me use a short biblical passage to illustrate what I mean when I say that our faithfulness can be compromised when we engage in patterns of injustice and oppression.

In the book of Isaiah, a book contextualized in the post-exilic period between 745 – 700 BC, the people of Israel abandoned the practice of justice and pretended that their relationship with the

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<sup>3</sup> It is good to remember that as bell hooks says: “love is as love does”. *hooks, bell, 1952-2021. All about Love: New Visions. New York: William Morrow, 2000.*

Divine would remain the same. They blamed God for not listening to their prayers. They believed that fasting was a spiritual practice in which they were honoring God, but the answer presented to them in that situation is one that remains vibrant for many of us today. This is what was presented by the prophet as they channeled the voice of the Divine:

**Isaiah 58:6-8 (NIV):**

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?  
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear;  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard."

This is a helpful illustration of how faithfulness must be manifested through love and justice as fundamental to our relationship with the Divine.

**Early Friends and Faithfulness**

The early Friends, with their many limitations, understood the meaning of faithfulness as being open to the inward Light and as a radical call for inner and outer transformation. They were willing to challenge themselves as they strived for and created communities in which the seed of peace, equality, and justice could be nurtured as an act of faith. This is what we may describe today as the Beloved Community.

Our Quaker faith invites us to center down and demands that our contemplation, our encounter with the Divine, be reflected in concrete actions to address the injustice we see. This means advocating for the marginalized and working towards the common good. It calls us to stand in solidarity with those who are suffering, oppressed, marginalized, discarded. This involves listening to their stories, understanding their struggles, and joining them in their search for justice and liberation. As experienced by the early Friends, our faith should inspire and guide transformative action that seeks to change unjust systems and structures. For instance, this was very clear for many 18<sup>th</sup> century Quakers that started a campaign to boycott goods that were produced by enslaved people.<sup>4</sup> For us today, our faith calls us to engage in meaningful act of social transformation that includes advocating for policies that promote equity, supporting grassroots movements, call for nonviolence and peaceful action, and engaging in acts of civil disobedience when necessary.

I want to highlight three essential characteristics of faithfulness that we can use as guide for self and collective examination as we continue opening ourselves to the inward Light:

Faithfulness is a Commitment to Love: In our willingness to walk humbly with God, we must be committed to love. Following Margaret Fell’s advice, we should “deal plainly with ourselves and let the eternal Light search us” and transform us.

In our current moment I ask: Are we dedicating time and creating space for finding the best way that we can manifest love in the world?

Faithfulness is a Recognition of the Presence of the Divine: The Divine is not distant from or detached from our world but is deeply present in our history and in the struggles of our communities. Encountering the Divine in these contexts requires us to see beyond the surface

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<sup>4</sup> A short introduction to this topic can be found in Julie L. Holcomb’s article “How 18th-century Quakers led a boycott of sugar to protest against slavery.” Available at <https://theconversation.com/how-18th-century-quakers-led-a-boycott-of-sugar-to-protest-against-slavery-174114#:~:text=In%20the%201780s%2C%20British%20and,nearly%20a%20half%2Dmillion%20Britons.>

and recognize the sacred amid suffering and resistance as well as within the possibilities rooted in active hope and prophetic witness. Our testimony of the Truth should not be hindered by our self-interests but should be guided and rooted in our practice of being expectants for Divine guidance as we walk the path that makes peace and justice possible.

Faithfulness is Active Hope and Prophetic Witness: Throughout history, communities have encountered the Divine in their struggles for justice. In our recent history the Civil Rights Movement, the abolition of slavery, and the opposition to war are prime examples of how faith has fueled the search for justice. Quaker testimonies, such as those from the abolitionist movement and the Civil Rights Movement, reflect a deep encounter with the Divine in the pursuit of justice. The life testimony of Bayard Rustin is one that I recommend looking at as he was a person that truly embraced his Quaker faith as he worked and advocated for civil rights, gay rights, and nonviolence.

It is interesting that many of the historical issues associated with violence, injustice, and inequality remain with us and have escalated to levels that should move us to solidarity. Here at home, the rise of the neo-Nazi movement and its associated political agenda represent a key challenge for advancing any initiative that promotes human dignity.<sup>5</sup> The level of poverty reflected by the more than 650,000 people experiencing homelessness in our country<sup>6</sup> or our inability to pass comprehensive legislation for gun control, for example, are just a few of the issues that we must address moved by our convictions as Friends.

In the international arena, the human displacement of more than 7 million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Venezuela, respectively, should be a real concern. I won't mention the current crisis in the Middle East, especially in Gaza, where people are constantly being displaced under extreme violent and unimaginable circumstances. These are people

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<sup>5</sup> For a quick overlook at this issue visit <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-nazi>

<sup>6</sup> The 2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Available at <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2023-ahar-part-1.Pdf>

running away from violence, political persecution, and national and local conflicts. These are people that are seeking to meet the most basic needs.

Our Quaker communities and organizations demonstrate how faith can respond to these contemporary challenges. Many of us are walking the path of such exploration. For instance, many of our communities are taking action to address patterns of white supremacy and racism in our society. Many Friends are investing energy and resources in identifying what is possible for us to heal and repair our historical injustices toward marginalized communities, and many of our communities are standing up in support of non-violence alternatives, climate action, environmental justice, and global solidarity. These are a few examples of how we are incarnating our faith in action. At the same time, our present time is showing us that we are still falling short in our commitment to honor the Divine within ourselves and others as we struggle to advance hopeful and critical actions that manifest the love we have received and the love we are capable to give.

Encountering the Divine in these contexts requires discernment. It involves prayer, reflection, and a willingness to be open to the ways in which the Divine is calling us to act. Discernment is a process that we must embrace in our life as individuals and as communities as it is the movement of listening and responding to the inner voice. In other words, discernment helps us to become active listeners and co-creators as we experiment with what love can do.

Love and justice are central to our relationship with the Divine, with others, and with ourselves. I don't pretend to enter an academic or intellectual exercise here, but rather aiming to emphasize that, both philosophically and theologically, love is understood as an unconditional commitment to the well-being of oneself and others. This love is rooted in the recognition of the Divine in each person. Similarly, justice is commonly understood as the pursuit of fairness and equity. In other words, justice is a manifestation of love as it involves creating systems and structures that promote equity and healing. Justice requires us to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression and to build a society that sustains the common good. In the Quaker

tradition, these concepts are deeply intertwined with faith. Love and justice are expressions of our relationship with the Divine, calling us to act with compassion and integrity.

There is no doubt that faith communities play a crucial role in fostering social justice. They provide support and encouragement for individuals on their spiritual and activist journeys. However, faith communities also face challenges in addressing social justice, including internal divisions and external pressures, and we Friends are not immune to this. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for growth and transformation, as our communities come together to seek justice and equity as a deep expression and articulation of our beliefs and faithfulness.

Today, I want to offer you a humble and provocative invitation to explore our testimony of justice through the lens of faith and community. As we seek to embrace the necessary call for transformation in today's world, I invite you to keep engaging with your community in meaningful ways as we work together towards a more just society.

I invite you to keep cultivating spiritual practices that deepen your connection to the Divine and strengthen your commitment to justice by standing up for policies and practices that promote and honor the sacredness and dignity of the living Light within us. In a simpler language, to stand up for policies that support nonviolence, expand rights including reproductive rights, expand equality, and nature protection, just to mention a few of the pressing issues we face.

May we all be guided to walk this path with faithfulness and determination.

And before opening the Q & A session, I invite us to sing a couple verses of *This Little Light of Mine*.

Thank you!