

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
August 22, 2021  
What is a message?

Readings

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Lucretia Mott (1793-1880)

“...my convictions led me to adhere to the sufficiency of the Light within us, resting on Truth as authority, rather than ‘taking authority for Truth...’ The popular doctrine of human depravity never commended itself to my reason or conscience. I ‘searched the scriptures daily,’ finding a construction of the text wholly different than that which was pressed upon our acceptance. The highest evidence of a sound faith being the practical life of the Christian, I have felt a far greater interest in moral movements of our age than in any theological discussion.”

Anonymous

There are so many things in this world we can’t control like earthquakes, wildfires, political instability and pandemics. But there are also things we can control like forgiveness, caring and compassion. The one thing that changes the world from a lonely place to a beautiful place is love. Love gives us hope.

Scott Stabile

“And then it hit me- I don’t have to participate in these toxic conversations. But if I choose to, I can set a different example. I can bring love to the moment, regardless of the response. I can choose to be kind no matter what. My power lives in my love.”

Message

Although Paul’s letter to the Philippians dates from 50 CE, his powerful message is one we need today- “Do not worry about anything.” Its’ poignancy increases if we remember Paul was in prison when he wrote it and the first sentence can be translated: “Farewell, in the Lord always. Again, Farewell.” In “ominous circumstances Paul’s encouragement and emphasis... reflect a spirituality that is vibrant [and] in step with God’s Spirit... [Paul tells us P]eace that ‘surpasses all understanding’ ... [S]*halom* (wholeness)... occurs among authentic community... In living this out, “the God of peace will be with you.”<sup>1</sup> In one of the darkest times, Paul’s experience community and peace is his message.

Lately my query is - what is a message? We are blessed to hear messages from Friends in our meeting and around the world; especially as a gift of Light

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-28/commentary-on-philippians-41-9-4>

through zoom during the darkness of the pandemic. There is a standing invitation to all of you to bless us by bringing your message. But what is a message?

The dictionary says it is a communication of information, advice or request. It can be an underlying theme or a messenger's mission. It can even be a verb: to message someone. You know: voice mail, email, text, PM, post, tweet, "insta"-whatever the latest fad. These aren't what Quakers mean by messages.

Some might substitute the word "sermon," a lecture by a preacher, usually a clergyman, addressing a moral, spiritual, or theological topic in a church service to give religious instruction. Based on a bible passage, it includes exposition of the text, an exhortation, and a practical application. It is a serious address endorsing belief, duty and behavior. It may include encouragement, but also chastisement.

I took several classes about researching and preaching a sermon, in spite of the fact I knew I was not called to be a pastor, (Spirit's sense of humor is wonderful). I especially knew I was not called to preach the Word of God. But this "knowing" came from articles like this one; The purpose [of preaching] is to motivate hearers to affirm that before birth God formed them, and His holy Spirit has set them apart for His service. Elitist and exclusionary.

The title of that article was "How to Evaluate Your Pastor's Sermons."<sup>2</sup> I do not recommend you read it for obvious reasons, but most important is what I discovered in becoming a Friend among Friends. A message is not a sermon and it is not about evaluating. The article did remind me what I know about listening to messages. 1) Pray for the Friend bringing the message so they can speak Truth, and for your ears, mind and heart to be open to what the Spirit has to say. 2) Think about what you might learn, whether the Friend is eloquent or tells a great story, their message is important. Sharing a faith journey and experience is a gift and helps create community between us. 3) Consider if the message is for you- if not today, perhaps it is a seed, it may be what another Friend needs to hear, or it may apply to our meeting. 4) If you hear something helpful, tell the Friend- specifically what is helpful to you- to thank and encourage them.

But this still doesn't answer - what is a message? Friends bring different ideas about what they want from a message. Some want to be engaged intellectually. To learn what is in the Bible, to know the history and context, to learn the stories and about Jesus and God. To hear what is right or moral, possible or ideal. To get answers and know what to do, to be given options we hadn't thought of, or to be encouraged to find our own answers.

Some of us may want to be engaged emotionally by a good story –to empathize, sympathize or even experience catharsis as we relate to things in our lives. This reminds me of "The Living Library," a project where you can borrow a

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.9marks.org/article/how-to-evaluate-your-pastors-sermons-2/?lang=ko#:~:text=SIX%20WAYS%20TO%20EVAL>

person instead of a book to listen to their life story for 30 minutes. Listening to others' stories reminds me we miss incredible gifts if we "judge a book by its cover" and fail to listen and get to know the Friends in our meeting. Finally, some of us want to "hear a message" only to let the words wash over us and fade into the background as we commune deeply with the profound Truth underlying it all.

What is a message? It seems to me it may include these things, but in my experience the best messages are deeply personal. It is not just "telling our story," but sharing how we are struggling with life's queries, how we encounter or miss God on my journey, and how we live in relationship with God, ourselves, others and creation. Seeing messages in this way has changed what I think and feel about being a pastor and how I see my own spiritual journey.

I looked back at the sermons I preached and the messages I have brought. I try to weave in the things I mentioned, to intentionally "mix it up" with new things I have learned, stories about my experiences, and teaching what I know about the Bible. But the most important thing I am learning is how important it is for me and all of us to speak the Truth we find or the queries we have for all to hear.

This was affirmed by a podcast I heard on "Secularization." Long ago the Church taught there is a separation between the sacred and the profane and only the Church could mediate and control access to the sacred. Part of the founding history of Quakers is George Fox went to priests, preachers, esteemed, and learned men but, "saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition..."

After the Reformation the Church taught that all people were called to participate and demonstrate their connection to the sacred. Yet still the Church exercised control. Lucretia Mott wrote about the Hicksite/Orthodox split in the Quaker tradition, "...my convictions led me to adhere to the sufficiency of the Light within us, resting on Truth as authority, rather than 'taking authority for Truth...' I 'searched the scriptures daily,' finding a construction of the text wholly different than that which was pressed upon our acceptance..."

Finally, the podcast concluded, what people really seek is an authentic encounter with the Divine that engages the ambiguity of life and helps each individual to navigate the numinous space and path they are called to find. Yet, Isaac Penington who was one of the earliest Quakers admonished the Friends, "There is that near you, which will guide you- Oh! Wait for it, and be sure to keep to it..." There have always been those who knew there is no separation between God, humans and creation. From all of this I have come to understand my role as pastor is not preacher but instead empowering each of you to find your voice, your path, your Light, to live into your ministry, experience your own authentic encounter and bring your own message. What joy!

Margaret Fell wrote she heard from George Fox, "What canst thou say?" Any Friend with a leading can bring a message. If the thought makes you quake in

your shoes- remember it is not the same as speaking in public, teaching or persuading. Many Friends get nervous, but Friends interpret “quaking” quite positively. Bringing a message is much more than speaking from the “facing bench” or verbal ministry in open worship. It is sharing yourself- your trials and tears, your enlightenments and encouragements.

This past year we have experienced messages from Friends in and out of meeting for worship, in word, music, silence and action; engaging in deeper ways, sharing and giving, drawing closer to and shining brighter the Light within, between and among us. In the midst of the ominous circumstances of our lives you are “letting your gentleness be known to everyone.”

Thomas Kelly was an amazing Quaker writer who reminded us that words are simply symbols of the deeper truth that lies beyond. He also wrote, “verbalization gives way to attitudes of the soul which you mean the words to express.” Your souls’ attitude and message is love.