

Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves

Scripture: Matthew 10:16-20

16 See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. 17 Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; 18 and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. 19 *When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*

This text is a message I prepared and brought for Whittier First Friends Church in Whittier, California on Sunday, Jan. 31, 2021. We were joined by members of Berkeley Friends Church. Both Friends churches are affiliated with the Western Association of the Religious Society of Friends (WARSF) and Friends United Meeting (FUM).

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Good morning and good afternoon from the East Coast, Friends. I am filled with joy to be here with you today in worship and community across the many miles. As a Californian, it is so good to be "coming home."

As I opened myself to the promptings of Spirit while preparing this message, I heard Matthew 10:16, 19-20 clear as day - scripture speaking to my own nervousness in bringing a message for the first time AND to my experience of Quaker advocacy: "16 See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves....do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who

“speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” So, following the thread Spirit offered me, this message is called “Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves” focusing on Matthew 10:16-20 and inspired by the work of Friend Margery Abbott.

Quakers have worked to influence the government almost as long as there have been Friends. What touchstones, teachings, and traditions can Quakers draw on to nourish and guide our outward lives and activism?

To get us into the message, I'm going to connect this passage from Matthew 10 to Friends history of engagement with government to Friends' advocacy today.

Scripture: The Coming Persecutions (Matt. 10:16-20)

In Matthew 10, Jesus commissions us as Friends (sheep) to speak the Truth regardless of the challenges we face (wolves), to be clever about how we navigate those challenges (serpents), and to maintain a posture of innocence and faithfulness in how we move forward (doves). Jesus shows we can change government by speaking our truths and the truth of Spirit to power. In doing so, we can be in relationship *with* and minister *to* politicians and power brokers that they might be changed and act beyond self interest for the betterment of the nation. That's really how organizations like FCNL and other Friends approach Quaker lobbying today.

How did he model this paradoxical charge in his life and teachings?

A touchstone of this Jesuslike approach to advocacy can be found in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one to him as well” (Matthew 5:39). Seems odd before we read deeper into the cultural and historical context of the story. In the time of Jesus, striking backhand an “inferior” was persecutors' means of admonishing them and asserting dominance. However, if the persecuted person turned the left cheek, the discipliner would be forced (logistically) to

either use their (unclean) left-hand to backhand the inferior (which would be avoided), or to punch or slap them with an open hand, implying equality between parties.

Walter Wink, a scholar and practitioner of Christian nonviolence with whom Friends may be familiar, expands this commentary in his 1992 classic, [Engaging the Powers](#).

“We are dealing here with insult, not a fistfight. The intention is clearly not to injure but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her place ... We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would invite retribution. The only normal response would be cowering submission. Why then [...] does he counsel those already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate.”

In effect, Jesus was teaching how to create something called “[decision dilemmas](#)”, whereby power brokers are forced to make a decision, and all their available options play to the advocates’ advantage. With turning the other cheek, the persecutor must decide between striking the “inferior” as an equal or foregoing the violent humiliation entirely. This deeper reading reveals a powerfully subversive teaching in turning the other cheek. [Wink continues](#), “Jesus reveals a way to fight evil with all our power without being transformed into the very evil we fight. It is a way -- the only way possible -- of not becoming what we hate...”

I see in this example a useful parable for our witness in Washington where we strive to ‘respect government and dissent respectfully’ in [the words of Margery Abbott](#). Practicing dovelike innocence gives us moral ground upon which to assert our own humanity and the humanity of the Other; while serpentine wisdom equips us with the practical and strategic tools to share power and enact change while moving like sheep among the wolves. But, it’s not easy nor simple, rather a vital discipline to practice today just as it was for Jesus, the disciples, and early Friends.

Early Friends answered Jesus' call to respect government and dissent respectfully.

They first advocated out of necessity and self-preservation, but also out of prophecy and a vision for the Peaceable Kingdom which **was not but could be**. These early Friends placed obedience to God above obedience to the state, iterating the paradox of innocence and cunning in their own times for their own contexts.

As Margery Abbott writes in "[A Theological Perspective on Quaker Lobbying](#),"

“Quakers live with paradox: They are law-abiding people, but they wrote the book on civil disobedience. An integral, but at the time highly unusual, aspect of Quaker interaction with government was an understanding that “dissent thus should be a process of persuasion and convincement, not coercion,” as the Quaker historian Jane Calvert describes it. **Thus, Friends advocated change, not violent revolution.**”

How did early Friends practice respectful dissent?

- They tended to their honesty and integrity, providing that same moral grounding in dovelike innocence, delegitimizing their persecutors' brutal actions
- They were steadfast in facing unjust laws, declaring their Truth and experience of the Spirit, and accepting the consequences of their dissent.
- They maintained a posture of respect even as they called kings and nations “to govern with the justice and mercy that were so central to Jesus' way of being and so evident in God's call to the rulers of Israel.”

There are lots of examples throughout Quaker history. One of my favorites is John Woolman enacting respectful dissent in his ministry to enslavers -- having conversations with them, refusing their hospitality, and paying enslaved peoples for their labor. It was all a part of moving from his center; acting out of integrity to disrupt injustice that was taken for granted; and spurring inner conflict, reflection, and change in the persecutors,

like Jesus in turning the other cheek and like Quaker constituent lobbyists do with members of Congress today.

As was true for John Woolman, there is value for both our inward and outward lives in claiming and continuing this tradition of witness as one piece of our faith and practice. It provides moments when we can integrate or otherwise connect the two.

My experience of lobbying with FCNL is as a continuation of our lineage of faith-in-action that connects clearly with scripture, theology, and Friends' traditions.

Today, Quaker lobbying of the US Congress might seem like sheep working to change the giant wolf of American policy and politics, practicing serpentine wisdom and dovelike innocence, respecting government and respectfully dissenting. Quaker lobbying is also a continuation of a biblical tradition of witness to realize the kin-dom of God and the world we seek.

Lobbying from a place grounded in Friends' principles holds parallel paradoxes. We constantly navigate the creative tensions between being practical and prophetic; effective and faithful; cunning and innocent; like serpents AND like doves.

I want to come back to one word from this passage in Matthew: "innocent." The Greek translation renders this word as "guileless" - more than just harmlessness. "Once again truth appears in the form of paradox. The disciples of Christ are to be at once supremely guileful and absolutely guileless."

Early Friends tended to their integrity such that they were "guileless" in motive yet supremely guileful and clever in their tactics to affect social change. Quaker advocates are right there in the tradition, and members of Congress tell us that. Last year, Rep. Jim McGovern of Massachusetts told FCNL advocates:

“What I like about FCNL is: I always feel you are speaking with moral authority....you’re always on the right side, you’re on the side of the angels. And sometimes when it’s uncomfortable you’re annoyingly right on some of these issues.”

And you, dear Friends, have been and continue to be a part of this tradition as well. Last year’s Peace Camp story of empowering Young Friends to speak their truths to members of Congress comes front of mind, as does your continued support of and service to FCNL, your lobbying at Annual Meeting, and beyond.

As we close and center into waiting worship, I leave you with my opening query, which I have responded to from my experience, to see what more the Spirit has to say to and through us today:

What touchstones, teachings, and traditions can you draw on to nourish and guide your outward life and activism?