

A Vision of Love

I want to thank you for this opportunity to share my experience of love. It has been a joy to wait in worship over the past months seeking the message I was to bring to Baltimore Yearly Meeting. Out of that worship, I feel led to share from John's Gospel Chapter 15, verses 12-17. This is the foundation text of the Religious Society of Friends, and it has helped me understand my own experience of love.

Now you may be thinking, "Oh no, a Bible thumper!" Let me assure you that I am the opposite of a Bible thumper. A Bible thumper says, "I read it in the Bible; it must be true." But I say, "I know what is true for me in my experience, and the Bible helps me interpret that experience." So please bear with me, even if you are not especially fond of the Bible, as we examine the text that gave us our name.

As you first consider this passage, I invite you first to focus not so much on the words, but seek instead the Spirit that gave forth the words. Later, we will consider each verse in detail, but right now let the spirit of the passage simply wash over you.

Jesus said:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may

love one another.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Several years ago, I was sitting at my kitchen table eating my breakfast and reading the newspaper. That morning, the paper seemed to be filled with stories of violence resulting from people doing ignorant, stupid things – killing one another for ridiculous reasons both locally and globally. Raising my head from the paper, I cried out in despair, “Why are people so stupid? Can’t they see that violence begets violence?”

Suddenly before me, I saw the brightest, purest light I had ever seen. This wasn’t the sun; it was in the morning, and my kitchen window faces west. This was **the Light**, coming directly to me, pure and piercing. It filled me with a sense of Love like I had never felt before. And I felt a healing power flowing through me. Now, I had never practiced a Trinitarian theology, but I understood immediately that this was the Light of the Creator, the Love of Jesus, and the healing power of the Holy Spirit.

The love of Jesus I experienced was absolutely different from any love I had ever before felt. What I had called love before, I now had to call human affection – that warm, fuzzy feeling. There was nothing warm or fuzzy about that Divine Love of my vision. It was piercing and consuming. Don’t get me wrong; it felt good, but not warm and fuzzy.

Now I understood Peter’s encounter with the resurrected Christ in the last chapter of John. Jesus asks Peter, *agapas me*; “Do you love me?,” using the Greek verb form associated with *agape*, the highest form of love. This is Divine Love, God itself, for as Scripture asserts, God is love (*agape*). (1 John 4:8). But Peter, having experienced divine love by knowing Jesus first-hand, knew that his own love couldn’t measure up. So he responded, *philo se* – “I love you,” using the verb associated with *philos*, meaning affection, or friendly love. That was me after this experience: nothing coming from me could ever measure up to that piercing, consum-

ing, awesome divine love.¹

And yet, Jesus commands us to love one another as he loves us – with divine love.

I couldn't speak of this experience to anyone for about a year. Finally, I shared my story with a Friend visiting from far away and eventually was able to talk more freely about my encounter with pure love. As I have shared this story, I have discovered that my mystical experience is not so rare. I have heard similar stories from others, and probably tonight after the program, one or two of you will tell me that you also have had such an encounter.²

When Peter tells Jesus that he has affection for him, but cannot bring himself to use the word for divine love, Jesus tells Peter to feed my lambs, tend my flock, feed my sheep. Though Peter feels hurt that Jesus asks three times, Jesus is gentle with Peter, urging him to pastoral care, so that through this work Peter may find and love the Christ in others. So too with all of us, we are all like Peter. We all understand that pure divine love is intimidating. Who among us can say that we love with the perfection of Jesus? But each of us can invite the Divine to love through

1 Technically, *agape* may not necessarily mean divine love. Admittedly, the verb associated with *agape* is used in John 3:19 to describe people loving darkness, an evil, human love, not at all divine. Moreover, the verb associated with *philos* is used in the context of divine love in John 5:20, when Jesus says that the Father loves (*philei*) the son.

In the conversations between Peter and Jesus, the writer of John may not have intended to make a distinction between *agape* and *philos* as I have done. He simply may have been making a stylistic variation; we cannot know. What I do know is that based on my own experience of pure, divine love, there does exist a real difference between divine love and human affection. Interpreting the conversation between Peter and Jesus to make this distinction is consistent with my vision and helps me to understand that vision. Based on my mystical experience, I have to believe that the New Testament writers encountered divine love as I did and, for the most part, used the forms of *agape* to express that love as distinguished from human affection. *Agape* was not in common usage in Greek before Christian times. I have to believe that early Christians latched onto this formerly obscure word and elevated it to mean a higher love because they needed some way of expressing their own encounter with the Divine. Of course, I am projecting my own experience onto this Biblical story, and in so doing I invite the Spirit to reveal to me the Peter within myself. This is what I love about the Bible. We cannot know what the writers really intended, so we must invite the Spirit to reveal the deeper meaning intended for each of us personally. Reading the Bible is a personal spiritual journey.

2 Later, two Friends who heard this talk separately described to me their own similar encounters with the Divine Light.

our imperfect selves, just the way we are. And each of us can seek that of God in others, for in tending God's flock, we also encounter divine love.

Let me say just a little about human affection as distinguished from divine love. Human affection is a biological, natural part of being a human animal. These warm, fuzzy feelings involve hormones and neurotransmitters, and we can understand how affection has evolved as an adaptation of human biological survival. When we see a baby, we naturally feel warm and fuzzy, and this has insured our survival, for who would take care of a screaming, drooling infant otherwise? As social animals, there is an affection that comes from reciprocity – I feel good about doing favors for my next-door neighbor because she does so much for me.

Another aspect of warm, fuzzy human feeling is sentimentality; humans are animals with memories, a sense of history, so when something triggers an emotional memory, it pulls our sentimental heart strings. I don't want to belittle these feelings, they are genuine and they keep us in touch with our personal histories and our traditions, but it is important not to mistake sentimentality for God's love. I have found it important to make this distinction in working on the membership rolls of my meeting as part of its Membership & Spiritual Care Committee. We had a number of Friends on our rolls who were at one time active in Sandy Spring Meeting but who had moved on in their spiritual journeys. Technically, they were still Quakers but we would hear through the grapevine, "Oh he's become a Catholic, she's become a Methodist." For me, it was about telling the truth – how could we say our membership numbers are truthful when they count such folks? But, when our Committee would contact these folks about possibly resigning their memberships, their first reaction would be, "Oh, no. I love Sandy Spring Meeting." even though they hadn't crossed the threshold of the Meeting House in years. We discovered that we had to affirm their good feelings about the Meeting, but help them recognize that their connection to the Meeting had become sentimental rather than spiritual. Then they were able to resign knowing that we wish them the best wherever the journey takes them.

Understanding the distinction between sentimentality and love also can help in discernment when changes are proposed, for example, when

new building plans are made – is it sentimentality (or is it the Spirit) that is standing in the way of unity on a building decision? Of course, we must not callously dismiss the strong sentimental attachments of Friends to the buildings where they attended First Day School or got married as “Oh, you’re just being sentimental; get over it.” We need to affirm that these are legitimate feelings, and a building change may involve some grieving. We must be tender with each other as we identify these human emotions.

But, it is important to distinguish between these warm, fuzzy, sentimental human emotions and divine love, because we are commanded to love one another with divine love. Of course, there is nothing wrong with loving one another with the human emotions too. Human affection softens us, opening and preparing the way for divine love to enter. I’ll walk into the Sandy Spring Community House and see that someone has been busily setting up tables for potluck lunch, and I will feel warm and fuzzy and loved and cared for. Then I go into worship beginning with this feeling of being cared for and open myself up for God’s love to flow through me out to the others in worship and out to the world. Where does the human part of it stop and the divine start? It doesn’t matter. God works through our human emotions, too. But remember, we are called to a love **beyond** human emotion. Because only through the power of divine love can we walk cheerfully over the earth answering that of God in everyone, tending God’s flock.

As I said before, the immediate encounter with divine love that I experienced is not that uncommon, and a similar mystical experience must have been part of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. And then in spreading the word and tending the flock, Paul learned the nuances of divine love. So that when the Christian community he founded in Corinth was breaking under the strain of many conflicting egos – community members in conflict over who possessed the more important spiritual gifts -- Paul wrote to the Corinthians encouraging them to envision themselves with their variety of gifts as different, but essential, parts of one body. But, says Paul, there is a still more excellent way: *agape* – love. Without this love, even the voices of angels sound empty, like noisy gongs or clanging cymbals. Without this love, faith strong enough

to move mountains is nothing.

And it is of this divine love that Paul writes, clearly speaking from experience, his famous words that we often read at weddings (and it is nice if spouses can feel this way about each other) but Paul was not at all referring to love between committed partners. He was not writing a wedding hymn. Paul was speaking of the divine love within a spiritual community when he said:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Then, Paul goes on to say that just as when you grow up, you put an end to your childish ways, so when you join a community based on this commandment to love one another as Jesus loves us, you have to put an end to your old self-serving, self-aggrandizing, “What’s in it for me?” ways. We are called to lay down our old ego-centric selves and be born anew as one who loves as Jesus loves.

And that brings us to the next part of our text.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Jesus calls us into a willingness to lay down our lives, and he did literally lay down his. Some people are given the spiritual gift of martyrdom, to give up their lives for God’s purposes. Before he left on his last trip to Iraq, Tom Fox worshiped at Sandy Spring, and out of worship he spoke of feeling clearness and of being willing to die. Tom received God’s gift of the willingness to literally lay down his life. Mary Dyer also received the gift of martyrdom. Refusing to accept banishment from Massachusetts, she was hanged in 1660, and as a result, persecution of Quakers in the colony eventually stopped. And many others have received the gift of willingness to bear suffering or death to serve God’s will.

Not all of us receive the gift of martyrdom, yet we are all called to lay down our lives in another way. For the love of one another, we are commanded to put aside our own prejudices, agendas, self-interests, arrogance, shyness – everything that stands between us and the ability to be God’s pure vessels of love. We are called to a radical humility, to a radical simplicity of spirit fully able to receive and transmit God’s love.

This is hard. Just think about how hard it is to really listen to another person. You sit down with someone who has something really important to tell you. She begins to really get into the story, and you know just how she feels because something similar happened to you. So you interrupt with, “Yeah, I know what you mean, same thing happened to me ...” Pretty soon, you’re the one doing the talking. I know what I am talking about here; I do this. Now sharing our stories can be helpful, but sometimes people really need to be heard, deeply, without interruption. Think about letting someone really share a story while you get yourself out of the way and let God love through you. Then you become the perfect vessel for God’s love and compassion because you have had a similar experience. Sometimes there is no greater gift you can give someone than to listen on a very deep level, in a way setting aside or laying down your own life for this friend.

In the BYM Spiritual Formation Program, we invite participants to lay down their lives for their friends in another way – of course, we don’t say it that way or no one would join the Program. When we form small groups in which Friends share their spiritual journeys, we start out by setting an expectation of spiritual hospitality. We ask Friends to welcome others with whatever beliefs they have and invite others to use whatever language they feel comfortable with. We know that use of language may rub people the wrong way, but we ask Friends to see this as an opportunity for spiritual growth rather than taking offense.

One group this past year, really took the spiritual hospitality message to heart. A member of the group, Tony, felt drawn to that group and joined it even though he lives about 30 miles away from the others. Tony has a strong Christ-centered faith. An important verse to Tony is John 14:6, “Jesus said, I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to

the Father except through me.” So it is important to Tony to bring others to Jesus for their salvation. Needless to say, not everyone in the group agreed with Tony on this point of theology, but the group welcomed Tony nevertheless. Then Tony lost his car so he couldn’t get to the meetings. He told the group he would have to drop out. Now the others might have breathed a collective sigh of relief – thank goodness, we are sick of your preaching on salvation. But they didn’t. The group said, “No, Tony, we made a commitment to one another and we are not letting you drop out over a transportation issue.” So the group either all drove out to meet at Tony’s house, or someone from among this group of busy people would drive out and get Tony and then take him back home after the meeting – over a hundred miles of driving. The whole situation really impressed Tony – that the group would do this for him, even though they did not particularly agree with his theology. Tony felt loved and cared for in a very special way.

At the closing Spiritual Formation retreat, a Friend gave a message that the way of the Cross is through suffering and brokenness, and then the light bulb came on in Tony’s head: He realized that if the way of the Cross is through suffering and brokenness, then anyone who suffers can become transformed through suffering and find God, even those who have never heard of Jesus. What a revelation for Tony. But Tony never could have come to this point without the willingness of his spiritual friends to lay down for him their own busyness, and their own desire to associate only with like-minded people.

Each month when we Friends hold worship with a concern for business, we have the opportunity to practice Jesus’ commandment to lay down our lives for our Friends – to put aside our own agendas and opinions – to really worship together while attending to business. A few years ago, I served as the Clerk of my monthly meeting, and I loved that job because I just couldn’t do it on my own. I had to have divine assistance. Often, especially when the issues seemed difficult, I would feel God’s presence with me, as if God’s hands were right on my shoulders holding me.

One time our Hospitality Committee and our Religious Education Committee were at odds over the logistics of the Christmas Pageant. Now lo-

gistical issues, like word-smithing documents, and other matters not really involving spiritual discernment ought to be resolved outside of business meeting. But the committees couldn't find a resolution, so I felt there must be more than logistics going on, and I put the issue on the agenda for the next business meeting. In this discussion of the logistics, Friends started sharing what the Christmas pageant meant to them personally: today's parents; the elderly Friends who as young parents started the tradition fifty years before; the adult who had played Mary years ago.

Friends shared from the heart. The discussion focus was the pageant, but what was really being shared was how much we all valued our Meeting and our children. There was a strong sense of love in that room. I don't remember how it came out, but somehow it was suggested that serving the potluck lunch in two shifts would solve the logistical problem, and that was accepted easily in this prevailing spirit of love. In that sense of love, the logistics didn't really matter.

We've been having Christmas pageant potluck in shifts ever since, and no one seems to remember it any other way. But if someone had suggested serving potluck in shifts outside of the context of loving worship, it would have seemed a crass suggestion, like killing a sacred cow: "Oh, no, we have to eat together, that's part of the Christmas potluck." But our worship took us above and beyond sentimental attachment to the "way it's always been done" to a place where we all understood how much we really love one another.

It is love that helps us find unity in diversity, whether diversity in theology or just different opinions about how something practical should be done. But we cannot find this unifying love until we are willing to lay down our personal barriers, our defenses, our need to persuade others, all of those things that get in the way of God's love working through us. If Tom Fox or Mary Dyer could give up their very lives, can't we at least put aside our own thoughts and be fully present to listen to a spiritual friend? Can't we at least put aside our desire to get our own way or to persuade others in order to be open for the Spirit in business meeting?

You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master

is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.

About 30 years ago, when I was new to the Religious Society of Friends, I had a conversation with my brother-in-law about Quakers. Now my Jewish brother-in-law had stopped practicing Judaism due in part to his feeling that it used guilt to manipulate the faithful. So when, with all of the zeal of the new convert, I spoke of our belief that there is that of God in every person, he became excited, saying, “How wonderful, a religion without guilt.”

“Oh, no,” I said, “don’t get me wrong. There is plenty of guilt to go around in Quakerism. You feel guilty if you don’t serve on enough committees, if you don’t give money to the American Friends Service Committee, if you don’t attend peace demonstrations, if you don’t write your congressperson, and so on.”

So, 30 years ago, I was clear that I had joined a service religion, and that I was called to serve. And God does call us to service; we are God’s hands. But if our work is not led by God’s love, we can expend all our time in busyness and burn ourselves out trying to accomplish good works, feeling frustrated in the process.

A few years ago, when I came onto the Membership & Spiritual Care Committee of Sandy Spring Meeting, it was a very busy committee. We had just two hours a month to take care of all membership and pastoral care matters for our 600-member meeting, and we never could get through our busy agenda. Our committee meetings felt frustrating because we had our priorities wrong. We were focusing on all the things we had to do rather than on worshipping together.

So we changed the way we worked. First, we organized the membership matters with a spreadsheet. That way we didn’t have to spend any committee-meeting time inquiring about the status of our many membership applications. Everyone on the committee could just look at the spreadsheet and see what needed to be done and who had responsibility for it. Membership clearness committees were encouraged to write and circulate a short report, so that their oral reports at committee meet-

ings could be more focused and worshipful. Then with the time saved, we began spending a significant block of committee-meeting time in worship-sharing.

Over the months, we established a base of love and trust within the committee. Building on this base, we were then able to handle routine matters (like membership transfers) and emergency matters (like coordinating meals when someone is ill) by email among our committee members. We saved our committee time for matters that really needed group discernment, but we only could do the other work by email because we had invested the time in the worship-sharing that nurtured love and trust within the committee.

As we provided pastoral care to one another within the committee, we came to see the many ways that Friends in our meeting provide pastoral care informally. Our role as a committee was to encourage this informal care and to be ready to coordinate care when needed. We did not bear the heavy burden of providing all the pastoral care; we seek to be the leaven that helps pastoral care grow naturally.

We also came to understand that membership clearness committees are pastoral care as we lovingly worked with applicants to help them discern whether the meeting is their spiritual home and to encourage their ministries among us. A few weeks ago, I went to say good-bye to a dear Friend who was dying. I first met this Friend when I served on his membership clearness committee. Before he died, he wanted me to know how much being a member of Sandy Spring Meeting meant to him and that the clearness committee and the love he felt in the membership process was important to his life.

When we lay down our busyness, when we lay down the burden of guilt and the feeling that we have to accomplish things, and instead let pastoral care come from love, then we touch each other in meaningful ways. This is the way we follow Jesus' command to Peter to "feed my sheep."

Jesus called us to be Friends rather than servants (and in the ancient Greek the word translated here as servants is *doulous*, which really means

slaves). We are not to be enslaved by busyness held in bondage by guilt, penned in by our own arrogant sense that we know what is best. Instead, the Inner Christ, the Inner Light, frees us from bondage, lifts our heavy burdens and makes known to us divine love which is everything that Jesus heard from his Father.

You did not choose me but I chose you.

When we are able to lay down these burdens that enslave us and wait for, as John Woolman expressed it, a motion of love, then we truly feel chosen for whatever ministry the Divine calls us to. It is not an intellectual process of listing our skill set and thinking about what we think we might do with that skill set to bring about a better world. It is about opening our hearts and following the motions of divine love. This was what Woolman did. When you read his Journal, you find that he didn't sit down and make a decision about his slavery witness based on his careful intellectual analysis. No, he found that he could not participate, even to the small extent of writing a bill of sale or of using goods produced by slave labor. He felt motions of love leading him in his witness and his ministry.

Waiting for a motion of love to lead us – to choose us -- was not just for John Woolman. This is our Quaker tradition of discernment. We have to be willing to set aside the tasks, the busyness, the agendas, even the works that we think are good, and wait for a motion of love to choose our path for us – to choose us as Friends.

And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

This line may seem problematic on its face and out of context. It seems to say that all we have to do is ask God for whatever **we** want while tacking on the words, "in Jesus' name we pray" and that's it. Your wish is granted; all your dreams come true, bippity boppity boo!

But reading this in context, we understand that asking in Jesus' name is not a matter of saying magic words to achieve the outcome **we** want. To ask in Jesus' name is to be willing to lay down our lives, our own desires for outcomes so that God's will becomes our own will. We don't have to say "Jesus," we don't have to believe in Jesus, we don't even have to have

ever heard of Jesus. To pray in Jesus' name is to surrender totally all outcomes and to pray simply, "Thy will be done." As the fictional Father Tim from the Mitford books says, it is the prayer that is always answered.

Accepting God's will is not resigning ourselves to something horrible. God's will is love. In 1373, the English mystic, Julian of Norwich had a near-death experience in which she was shown God's pure love. And out of the showings came the knowledge that all things shall be well. Yes, God calls us to do good works. But we cannot discern God's true call through divine love if we are distracted by our own desires or fears about outcomes. Julian's vision reassures us that a faith in God is not misplaced. We are called to discern God's leadings and to leave the outcome to God.

This is the fruit that our ministries as Friends will bear. Not what **we** want to have happen but what God wills. We are called to do everything we do in love, trusting God for the results.

For the past several years our Yearly Meeting has been laboring with an unsolvable problem. What is our role as a member Yearly Meeting in an organization – Friends United Meeting – with a discriminatory personnel policy. While we have labored, I have had the feeling that God has somehow given us an opportunity disguised as a problem. By giving us a dilemma with no clear solution, we have been forced to put aside our usual ways of thinking things through. We have had to go deeper, to seek deeper discernment. Rather than presenting us with an answer we can easily latch onto, God is giving us the opportunity to try what love will do. Out of this seeking has come the inter-visitation program which is nurturing love among us in FUM. I do not know what the outcome of our discernment concerning FUM should be, but I do know that when the time is right, God will show us the way with a motion of love. And all things shall be well.

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

We are commanded to love one another, but what about when we do not feel particularly loving? There are so many things that can stand in the way of feeling love. We recently experienced this at my meeting. We had a member at Sandy Spring who, over the past few years, became

more and more disruptive, particularly in business meeting but also in worship and in other settings. Many Friends lovingly reached out to him in a variety of ways, befriending him and seeking to impose some limits on his behavior, but nothing we could do was effective. This member had a talent for sewing controversy and discord, and his loud, angry voice invited Friends to respond in anger and fear. Friends stayed away from meeting because they did not want to expose themselves to his abusive words or because they were afraid that he might become violent.

After years of loving efforts, we came to the conclusion that nothing we could do would heal whatever was disturbing this member as long as he was permitted to attend meeting because we were giving him a forum and enabling his disruptive behavior. We concluded that we would have to terminate his membership and order him not to come onto our property. Friends would continue to labor with him outside of the meeting, but we could no longer be enablers.

When we met in worship in business meeting to consider this matter, I felt so much love in the room. I felt that our meeting was like a loving family gathered for an intervention to stop enabling the destructive behavior of one of its own. But not everyone felt that love. I am sure our disturbed member – he was there – did not. And others felt the many negative emotions he triggered in them.

Still others felt a profound disappointment that it had to come to this. We had tried the things that good Quakers do, and they didn't work. Quakerism had let us down. This was a hard lesson: that Quakerism is not always warm and fuzzy. Yes, we even have to give up our infatuation with Quakerism to feel God's love.

Our meeting matured through this process. We reclaimed a Friends' tradition of discipline and accountability among its members. Friends who have stayed away are beginning to return, and we are healing. And in the process we learned that emotions like anger, fear, and even infatuation can stand in the way of feeling God's love.

God is always teaching us new lessons of love. We may think we understand love and then we meet a person or situation that challenges us.

God is patient with us. God helps us let go of the parts of us that stand in the way of love, calling us to radical humility. If we invite the Divine to enter our hearts and to change us into more loving people – as individuals and as a community – who knows what love will do?

Lately, I've found that my own challenge is to learn to love those who belong to the religious right. I tend to see the religious right as enablers of the Republican Party, and I consider its individual members to be, at best, ignorant pawns. That isn't very loving. But a few months ago at the Zoo, I had a lesson in learning to love a member of the religious right. I volunteer at the National Zoo as a large mammal interpreter; that means I help to educate the public about conservation by talking to visitors about the elephants and hippos. Well, some kind of fundamentalist youth convention was in town and they came to visit the Zoo. The young people were great, but the adult chaperones – that was another story.

One of the adults asked me why the female elephants did not have tusks, and I started explaining that female Asian elephants tend not to have tusks, possibly due to human poaching for ivory over the years. Now I didn't mention evolution, but this woman understood what my underlying premise was, and she didn't hesitate to tell me that her group did not believe in evolution. Then she launched into an explanation of why adaptations that scientists are observing all around us are not evolution and do not prove evolution. Now, I represent the Zoo, so I was not going to get into an argument with her, and, actually, I found it interesting to hear what lengths people will go to in order to justify their beliefs.

A little while later, I was talking about Happy, the Nile hippopotamus and about how Nile hippos secrete a red substance that acts as a natural sunscreen. One of the chaperones heard this and said to the kids, "Wow! When I hear something like that, I think, how could anyone believe in evolution?" Of course, I kept my mouth shut, but in my head, I'm thinking, "How could anyone not believe in evolution when they learn that?" But in my heart, something else was going on. I could feel behind this woman's words her faith in God, her love for nature, and her sense of awe and wonder at the glory of God's creation. And in these things I could connect with her in love.

Why is God teaching me to love those who are part of the religious right? I am afraid to think about it. But I know that I can do nothing to heal the world if my heart is filled with anger and disdain, and if I consider myself to be somehow better than they because I think I am smart enough to understand evolution and they are not.

And this brings me back to where I started with my vision of pure love. I received the vision in response to the question, “How can people be so stupid? Can’t they see that violence begets violence?” My vision didn’t directly answer the question; it took me beyond it. But here I am again asking the same kind of questions: “How can people be so ignorant that they dispute evolution, or that they are against gun control?” Or any of the many other points that we liberals find absolutely supported by the facts.

If I am to follow Jesus’ command to love, I have to be willing to lay down my self-righteousness. I may be right on the social science – that violence begets violence – or on the biology – that evolution is the mechanism of bio-diversity, but being right doesn’t change hearts. I am called to lay down everything -- even being right -- and to take up that radical humility required of a Friend. It is not my job to persuade others of the rightness of these things. It is my job to love. Only then can that healing power of the Holy Spirit that I felt in my vision flow through me out to heal the world.

There is so much love in this Yearly Meeting. Every one in this room has come here out of love, spending your vacation time and budget to be here as a token of your love. All of the committee work that makes possible everything BYM does and all of the countless hours spent working with our children and Young Friends are reflections of our love. As we worship together this week, let us lay down our own human desires and our own agendas. Let us each aspire to radical humility so that we can be open to God’s love, so that we can be moved by God’s love, and so that God may love through us in our spiritual community and in the larger world.

Jesus said: I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.