

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **My Kingdom is Not from this World**

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the temple authorities... I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” **John 18:33-37**

This morning, by way of thinking about the kingdom of God, I want to tell you the story of John Woolman. Woolman was born nearly three hundred years ago, in 1720 near Philadelphia. He was a member of the Society of Friends (the Quakers), a small Christian group which would have an influence far surpassing its numbers, and Woolman became one of its more influential members. Friends emphasize the “inner light,” the idea that the Holy Spirit will provide believers with inner promptings and leadings which individuals then have the responsibility to share with other believers through “holy conversation.” Those other believers have the responsibility to carefully consider the leadings given to some among their number and evaluate whether what some consider to be the promptings of the Holy Spirit are indeed from God, or not.

As a young man, Woolman began work as a clerk for a merchant. When he was 23, his employer asked him to write a bill of sale for a slave. Though he believed at the time that slaveholding was inconsistent with Christian beliefs he wrote the bill of sale. But the episode nagged at his conscience.

Woolman came to realize that his sense of the incompatibility of slavery with Christianity was a leading, and in keeping with Quaker practice, he shared that leading with other members of his community. While most Quakers at the time were opposed to trading in slaves, many of them were still slave owners, and so Woolman’s leading was a challenge to them.

Quakers are pacifist and renounce all forms of violence. Because they believe that a majority imposing its will on the minority is a form of violence, they make all their decisions by consensus. But they could reach no conclusion about the morality of owning slaves until there was full agreement among them. But because Woolman was also a part of their community they could not simply dismiss his convictions either. Most groups might simply divide into camps and fight about it, or splinter into factions. Instead, they agreed, as is Quaker practice, to continually examine their views about slavery and submit their views to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They engaged in holy conversation about the subject that divided them.

In the meantime, Woolman, found himself struggling to be true to his convictions. By the age of 26, he had become an independent and successful tradesman. He refused to write the part of a will that included disposing of a slave and, in that case, convinced the client to set the slave free.

At about the same time, Woolman gave up his business so he could have more time to preach and thereafter he worked as a tailor. He had received another leading, that he had a calling to preach "truth and light" among Friends and others. Especially, he felt called to oppose the practice of slavery more broadly. He took that leading to his Quaker meeting, and they agreed to support Woolman and his family financially. Let me pause here to highlight how remarkable this was. Woolman was opposed to slavery, and many of the other Quakers not only disagreed with him, but they themselves owned slaves. Even so, they agreed to support him while he travelled the length and breadth of the colonies, depending on that financial support, teaching that their practice of slavery was wrong! And they did that for eighteen years! But his arguments were passionate and compelling. Gradually Woolman won over more and more Friends to the anti-slavery cause.

Woolman's travels introduced new challenges. When he travelled, if he was waited on by a slave, he insisted on paying them for their work. But even this involved some ethical challenges. He knew that many slave workers in the dye industry were poisoned by the toxic substances they used, so he refused to use or wear dyed fabrics. Concerned about treatment of animals, he stopped riding in stagecoaches,

because he had witnessed too many operators being abusive of their teams of horses. As you can imagine, all this generated many opportunities for holy conversations.

In 1772, Woolman travelled to London, where he convinced the yearly meeting of the Friends to renounce slavery in all its forms. While in England, he contracted Smallpox, and died at the age of 52. By the time of his death, due in large part to his efforts, Friends had become firmly committed to the anti-slavery cause, twenty-five years before slavery was outlawed in Britain, and nearly a century before the American civil war put an end to the practice in the United States. As a result, Quakers in the United States became leaders in the anti-slavery movement, including the Underground Railroad that brought many escaped slaves to Canada. The recent film about Harriet Tubman is in part about that movement.

I tell that story because it illustrates a couple of things about what we are exploring this morning. In inviting people to respond to the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand, Jesus was offering an alternative to the kingdom of Caesar. In that he was doing two things at the same time: he was inviting individuals to commit to a radical obedience to God their king, but he was also establishing a community whose way of life was based on kingdom principles. The kingdom of God is therefore both intensely personal and strongly communal. The first point about personal commitment is illustrated by Woolman's deep personal commitment to following through on his convictions about slavery, ethical practice in his trade and animal welfare. The second point about an alternative kind of community is illustrated by the Quaker emphasis on non-violence, consensus decision-making and staying in community in spite of differences. Without Woolman's deep personal commitment he would not be remembered today. Without the community of Friends of which he was a part, his efforts would not have been nearly as effective as they were.

In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus is asked if he is a king, and answers only that his kingdom is not from this world, because kingdoms from this world are established and maintained by violence and force. Jesus' authority is not, in other words, an authority which is imposed on people and maintained by force. It is an authority which is given voluntarily, out of gratitude and love. It is an authority grounded in his commitment to truth, and those who share that commitment to the

truth will recognize it in him and give him the devotion he deserves. In the gospel according to John, Jesus is enthroned as king at his crucifixion. His kingdom is not from this world, because the moment of his greatest vulnerability is also the moment of his greatest strength, the moment when he pays the final price for his commitment to truth is also the moment when his authority is revealed in its fullness.

I first heard the story of John Woolman at the Courage and Renewal retreat I attended a few years. It was at that retreat that I first encountered the Circle of Trust process that we have been using in SoulSpace, Geography of Grace and the Soul of Aging programs that we run.

Courage and Renewal is an organization devoted to helping leaders in various fields “reconnect who you are with what you do.” In other words it is about helping people recover a sense of personal integrity, to get in touch with their deepest sense of the truth, their deepest moral and spiritual impulses, and then to find new ways to live that out in the practical, day to day grind of community life.

The founder of Courage and Renewal is a Quaker named Parker Palmer, and his mission is to help people connect with the inner light and share holy conversations. Those are deeply Quaker ideas, but not just Quaker ideas. The goal of this work is not to get people to become Quakers. There are Buddhists and Taoist, Jews and Christians and Unitarians that are committed to it. Just as Jesus came into the world to bear witness to the truth, so all these traditions exist not for their own aggrandizement, but to bear witness to a truth that none of them possess in totality, but that surpass them all. Just as God transcends any particular faith tradition, so truth transcends any particular witness to it. All these traditions bear witness to the truth that there is a spiritual dimension to life which is calling to us, calling from the deepest recesses of our own spirits. If we are committed to seeking truth, if we open ourselves to the light of the inner teacher, we will recognize that call, recognize the other voices testifying to it, and Jesus will reign on the throne of our hearts. Amen!