

9 May 2021

Guides on the Journey: John Woolman
Isaiah 58:1-9a

The latter chapters of the Book of Isaiah contain the words of a prophet from after the Babylonian Exile. That event – the destruction of the temple and the exile of the Hebrew people to Babylon – forced those exiles to re-imagine their faith. The prophet joins that conversation in Isaiah 58, verses 1-9:

*58 Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgements,
they delight to draw near to God.
3 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,
and oppress all your workers.
4 Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
6 Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.*

*⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

As we have been examining historical models of Christian faith for the past month, we have seen some very different personalities, but all have had at least one thing in common: restricted lives. Susanna Wesley's sphere of activity was confined to church and home, Hildegard of Bingen and Brother Lawrence lived in monastic communities, and Julian of Norwich in a single room. Moreover, as we've met them, we've talked largely about personal devotion: private visions, the practice of constant prayer, and so on. All of them to some extent turned away from the world to find God within. That's not a bad thing. We *should* find God in our souls, in our deepest thoughts, in personal spiritual practices. But, as the author of Isaiah 58 declares emphatically, private devotion is not enough. Take fasting, for instance. It can be a valuable spiritual practice, but if we practice fasting as a spiritual discipline while ignoring people around us who never have enough to eat, then we've missed something. Verses 6 and 7:

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice . . .
. . . to share your bread with the hungry.*

Because our God is a God of love for everyone, then just loving God back is not enough. We must also love others. Because our God cares for the downtrodden, the oppressed, the homeless, and the hungry around us, then a private devotional life alone is inadequate, incomplete. As Paul puts it, "If I speak in the tongues of angels, but have not love, I am nothing."

So today let's take our spiritual lives into the world and talk about John Woolman. He's the first American in our survey – sort of, he lived in the American colonies before we became the United States. Woolman was a Quaker, which, briefly, is a Christian group that stresses the Inner Light of the Holy Spirit as the primary source of inspiration. Scripture is secondary. It can be used to support or test or affirm the moving of the Spirit, but the Spirit is first. Their "meetings" as they call their worship services are mostly times of sitting in silence until the Spirit prompts someone to speak. And, since the Spirit can speak through anyone who takes the time to listen, their leaders can be anyone. In Woolman's time, at least, they had no paid clergy. Instead, there were simply some members through whom the Spirit seemed to speak more clearly and consistently than others, whose words were taken more deeply into account. John Woolman, of the Quaker Meeting at Mount Holly, New Jersey, was one of those.

Woolman, above all, exemplifies integrity. He did not have an inner life and an outer life, but he was quite simply and thoroughly One. Everything he believed was expressed in his behavior and relationships, and every action he took was chosen because it would be consistent with his faith. For instance, he lived simply, avoiding luxuries, because they might distract him from the Spirit. He learned the trade of being a tailor, at least partly because he wanted to earn his living in a way that would be useful to others. And he was utterly trustworthy. By the time he was twenty-three, he had been appointed surveyor and scrivener (sort of register of deeds) for his town. Then, in addition to his tailoring and clerking jobs, he opened a dry goods store, in which he only stocked things that were useful. Woolman didn't sell perfumes or expensive cloth or jewelry, for instance, because he didn't want to be in the position of contributing to others' vanity or idleness. Now, luxury items is where the money is – you can really mark those suckers up – but Woolman didn't want to do that. In fact, when his store flourished even without luxury items, he gave it up. He was making more money than he needed, and he was afraid that wealth

would be harmful to his soul. He sold his stock, helped his customers find other places to shop, and went back to being a tailor and a clerk.

Closing the store helped him in other ways, though. Storekeepers are pretty tied down, and by this time Woolman's stature among the Friends – what Quakers call each other – was so high that he was being invited to visit other Meetings around the colonies. It was during these years that the English colonies went to war – the French and Indian War – and through the Spirit, confirmed by his study of Scripture, Woolman opposed that conflict and even declined to pay taxes that would support it. He opposed it because he saw that war as being about nothing more than wealth and power. In fact, he felt the same way about the American Revolutionary War. Although he died shortly before that revolution, he saw it coming and opposed it. This isn't about freedom, he said, but money.

But none of this is what Woolman is known for, so let me back up. While still a young man, in his role as scrivener, another Friend brought him a bill of sale to write out, and Woolman saw that one of the items the man was selling was a Black slave. Yes, this was that time in our history. Woolman hesitated over the document, but the seller was from his Meeting. He told the man he was not comfortable with slavery, but he completed the bill of sale. Once he had done that, though, Woolman realized that his actions had belied his words. If he truly opposed slavery, he could not profit by it or contribute to its continuation. Words that are not confirmed by action are simply lies.

John Woolman never wrote another such document, and the rest of his life was a living testimony against slavery. Now that feels obvious to us today, but it was not at that time. Slavery was widespread in the colonies, especially in the South, but not only there. As we've seen, even some Quakers owned slaves. Moreover, much of the economy, both north and south, was based on the unpaid labor of slaves brought from Africa, and when something provides your livelihood or enables your standard of living, it's easy to not think too hard about it. John Woolman did though. He wrote and published a pamphlet, *Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes*, in which he dealt systematically with all the arguments that were being used to justify chattel slavery in the colonies, then made his argument for the end of slavery entirely. His first reason was simply that the Africans were children of God, as beloved to God as any other human being, and therefore were the colonists' brothers and sisters. But his second reason was concern about what owning slaves would do to the slave-owners. Remember, this man gave up a successful store because he was afraid of what wealth would do to his soul; he was horrified at the thought of what owning slaves could do to the souls of the masters. What might such casual cruelty and indifference to the welfare of a child of God do to a Christian soul? And if that cruelty became institutionalized, what might that do to the soul of a society?

Woolman has been called the Apostle of Freedom, but he has also been called the "most quiet radical in history," because of the methods he used. He did not condemn, he did not attack. He believed in the brotherhood of all people, and his own integrity would not let him behave in a way that would belie his words. He made his point in quieter ways. As I said earlier, he declined to write bills of sale or wills that included slaves. Once a good friend was near death and asked Woolman to write his will. Woolman took down all the information, recorded it and took a document back to his friend, saying, "I did not finish. I cannot in conscience write the part concerning your slaves, but here is the rest." Before he died, Woolman's friend set his slaves free. Woolman often traveled in the South, where his traveling party would be taken in as a

guests in homes that had slaves. If he knew in time, he would decline to stay there, but if he discovered it after he arrived, he didn't make a scene. Instead, before he left the next morning, he would take the homeowner aside privately and give him some money, asking him to give it to the slaves as Woolman's payment for their service. One time, he realized just before they arrived that there were slaves, and so he quietly slipped away from the rest of his party and camped in the woods instead. The story goes that the next morning, that slave owner set his slaves free, "Or I shall never have John Woolman stay with me." Woolman was capable of arguing against slavery point by point, but he chose to do his arguing primarily one-on-one, seldom to groups, and never to crowds. His primary testimony was his life.

One reason for Woolman's quiet method is simply his nature, I know. He was just a mild man. But part of it also is his own humility. He didn't see himself as the leader of a movement, but rather as one small part of the working of the Spirit, who could accomplish her goals with or without him. Once the Philadelphia Meeting, met to discuss slavery and invited Woolman to join them. At that meeting, a plan was presented to exclude those who trafficked in slaves from the Meeting, but the plan stopped short of calling for those who owned slaves to free them. Woolman spoke at the Meeting, urging them to go that next step, but they settled on the half-way measure. Woolman writes in his journal that he accepted their half-measure decision, because it was a step forward, a sign that the Spirit was at work, who could be trusted to continue working.

By Woolman's death, largely through his towering influence, the Quaker Meetings had nearly all abolished slavery, and in later years Quakers would lead the abolition movement. But for all that, Woolman's quiet one-on-one approach is not enough by itself. His gentle persuasion did not end slavery in America; that would require a brutal war a century later. In the same way, waiting for the Spirit to move did not end the aftermath of slavery – Jim Crow; that required the boycotts and protests and disruption of the Civil Rights Movement. There is a time for action. But on the other hand, action alone is not enough. Wars and movements can change laws and social structures. But we need Woolman's gentle persuasion and testimony of integrity and the movement of the Spirit to change hearts.

And here we are again in America. Woolman was right: the harm done by slavery was not restricted to the slaves. Even now, a hundred and fifty years after abolition, and fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement, we are still discovering how much damage institutionalized cruelty and dehumanizing children of God has done to our national soul. But Woolman has also given us a path forward, a path of integrity, of respect to all, of living our convictions without compromise in society. The Spirit is still working and changing hearts. Listen.