

The Inlook-Outlook Letter

Of the Prison Ministry of the St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Potsdam, NY (January 2010)

As so many of our prison members and attenders have been taken far from us or otherwise are unable to attend our prison meeting, we at St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting compose this 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' for you, to let you know you are in our hearts and prayers and will always be so. When we *look into* our hearts we see God and this benefits our *outlook*. This first edition is about 'faithfulness'.

Faithfulness

Often we think of religious people as having 'faith', however the word 'faithfulness' is better. It is in St. Paul's writings that we see a word often translated from the Greek as 'faith'; however biblical scholars have noted that St. Paul is really referring to a Hebrew word meaning 'faithfulness'. 'Faith' is an abstract concept, what the Quakers would call, a 'notion'; 'faithfulness' describes a life well lived following God's commandments.

The religious person strives to be faithful to the covenant between humankind and God. The essence of the covenant are the 'Ten Commandments' in the book of Exodus, chapter 20. Jesus' ministry reminds us we are not only supposed to know these commandments, but practice them. That is faithfulness. If we think it is easy to follow the Ten Commandments, look at the tragedy that is embodied in the history of the human race. Developing an attitude of faithfulness will transform us into true followers of Christ. We will become builders of a better world; rather than being causes of suffering, we will become among those who are overcoming suffering.

How do we proceed to be 'faithful'? It usually doesn't come all at once. Religious commentators generally agree there are 3 steps to follow.

Step 1: We come to *believe* in God as we understand God. Notice not everyone has the same notion of God, the notion is unimportant; what is important is that you believe in God. What does it mean to 'believe in God'? It means to recognize that what we see around us is not all that there is. Reality is much bigger than our senses can comprehend. Since 'God is Love' (1 John), believing in God means to love God. How can we love something that we cannot even see? How do we love God? How do we love anyone? We make time to be with them (solitude); we converse and listen to them (prayer); We are kind to them (love); we show our kindness by our willingness to believe in them and by our reaching out to them.

People often have a hard time believing in anything they cannot see, including God. If you are in this category, don't worry: Follow the maxims: 'Fake it till you make it'; 'try it till you buy it'. Consider the advantages of believing in God: i) A twenty-four hour friend always on call just for you, ii) Appointment never needed, no bureaucracy or filling out of paper-work, no Social Security number; iii) Friend God always knows what you need, no complicated explanations are required. This is the religious advice about God revealed by religious sages down through the ages in many religious traditions. Look what Moses said to the Israelites about God, how simple it was to seek his guidance and live perfect lives: *For this Law that I am laying down for you today is neither obscure for you or beyond your reach. It is not in heaven...nor is it beyond the seas. No, the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice* (Deuteronomy 30: 11-14).

Step 2: The second step to developing a faithful life is to *trust* God. To *believe* is one thing, to *trust* is another. Trust requires more effort. It means simply what God tells us to do, we must trust that it is correct. Once when I was spending quiet time with God a clear and unmistakable voice came to me and said: *Judge not lest ye be judged*. I couldn't believe my ears! I was angered at this message, because I did not consider myself a particularly judgmental person (I had always accused others of that!) and because this 'voice' was quoting the King James version of the Bible, not my favorite. After cooling down a little, I began to admit, perhaps I had a problem with being judgmental. After thinking it over I realized this loving voice was warning me about a major problem in my life! My judgmental attitude kept me from truly being with other people; I had formed an opinion of myself that I was better than others! When I trusted the words, I learned about myself, a stumbling block I was putting in the way of myself, that I didn't even know about. That God has a sense of humor is revealed in the quote from the King James version! He knew that would really get my attention!

Step 3: The third and last step is to *obey* God's advice, once it is communicated to us. Believing is one thing, trusting is another, but to *obey*, that is really difficult. Each step of the journey to 'faithfulness' is harder than the previous one, yet the rewards are greater and greater as one becomes more and more faithful. Take the example of my being judgmental. Being aware I am judgmental is not enough. My 'judgmentalness' does not go away with awareness. This problem is so ingrained in my character, even now, years after my epiphany, I must work on it daily to overcome it. Obedience means work. It is God's work we are doing.

Don't worry about doing God's work. At first it may seem too hard, but look what Jesus says about it in these beautiful words from the gospel of Matthew: *Come to me all you who labor and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light* (11: 28-30). Faithfulness requires discipline, yes (*shoulder my yoke*) but paradoxically, when we do shoulder the work of God on earth, we will *find rest for our souls*. Though sometimes it may seem more difficult to do what God asks of us, it is actually easier in the long run than living life in the dark as we do when we do not avail ourselves of God's help.

May God bless you all always. Anybody who wishes to receive the 'Inlook-Outlook Letter' may request a subscription by writing to the address below. Be sure to let us know your complete address. You will be put on our mailing list and receive a monthly copy at no cost. Also, please feel free to write us with your comments, suggestions and contributions: St. Lawrence Valley Friends Meeting, P.O. Box 292, Canton, NY 13617.