

Great Plains Yearly Meeting

September 11-12, 2020

Friends from around the country gathered via Zoom for our annual sessions on the evening of September 11, 2020. It was a joy to see friendly faces from near and far. The clerk, LaVonna Loesch, welcomed Friends and shared an opening statement as we gathered as a beloved community, even though gathering looks very different this year.

LaVonna read the epistle from our 2019 sessions to refresh our memories of when we last met. She then expressed thanks to the 'tech team' of: Michael Barrett, Cliff Loesch, Molly Loesch and Erin DeGroot for their help in getting these sessions ready and continued support throughout the weekend.

Following a selection of centering music, friends settled into waiting worship. The remainder of the evening session was spent sharing the State of Society reports from each monthly meeting. Prayers of blessings and encouragement were offered after the reports were shared followed by a benediction.

Friends gathered again Saturday, September 12 at 10:00a.m. Before starting, LaVonna shared links for the special interest breakout groups that will take place later this afternoon. She also thanked the Continuing Committee for their hard work of planning and prayerfully considering this weekend.

Laura Dungan opened the meeting with a song for gathering. Honor Woodrow, Noah Merrill's elder, made a statement of introduction for his portion of the morning.

Noah Merrill opened with a prayerful song and welcomed us from all over. He can sense a sadness, joining from southern Vermont in the river valley. Noah brought greetings from Putney Yearly Meeting and New England Yearly Meeting. He recalled the last time he was able to meet with us in 2015 in Hominy, OK. He reminded us of abundant table and hospitality, and it was remembered with fondness. We were worried about being too small the last time he was with us. He was reminded of how all this started was with 12 people breaking bread together. He wants to hold friends from Hominy and all others who cannot be with us this weekend in the light.

His monthly meeting was able to meet for the first time since March last Sunday. There was almost too much to say to share with each other, but powerful to be together again. The feelings of isolation over the past six months have caused much burden and stress, as well as the struggles of people of color amidst all of this.

He wants to speak of two stories this morning:

The first story involved imaging the best job, perfect home and family. The country you want to live in, the greatest in the earth. You can have it, this perfect life. These words were shared by - Donald Trump Jr. from Republican National Convention. There is a lot of anxiety regarding the upcoming election and the potential aftermath. In the wilderness, the tempter is waiting for Jesus and promising the perfect home, life and family if he sides with the devil. The devil offers him pride. Jesus could have chosen that, but then there would have only been one story. Jesus chooses a different way and step by step, the movement grows. Tables set and tables overturned. The stories of comfort, pride and power are shaken. Jesus reminds two disciples that their part of the story is important. They understand that the resurrection has already happened and recognize and respond to the truth and love has taken over the world. They run to share this new story with the world. They set another table and another story is nourished.

This first story is obsessed with what is large and great. The second with small and simple. The first of pride, second humility. Shouting and listening. There is no room, keep out vs. there is always a place at the table; fear vs. hope; easy vs. sacrifice story about us vs. God with us, purity power & control, vs. imperfection, sameness vs. diversity, acclaimed and adored by millions vs. being known and welcomed in the sanctuary of our heart. If we trust the second story, it doesn't mean there isn't work to do. We become able to participate in the ongoing healing of redemption. The first story knows the threat of the second story. The devil himself masquerades as an angel of light.

We are seeing many examples today of the many troubles in the world. The movement of black lives after 400 years is such an example. The second story was there before the first and will be there in the end, yearning to be chosen. Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God and our savior Jesus. This time of turning is an opportunity to live faithfully now as our ancestors wanted us to do. We can choose, in the small things and humble impractical acts. The choice is at the threshold of our hearts. Which story do you want to tell and which will live?

He sees us responding to the original story, the fruits of the spirit. We have welcomed more to our yearly meeting and setting the table for more F/friends to join. Embracing the whole tapestry of the community. This is work of Christ among us, in the small and marvelous things that we do as communities of Friends, either as monthly or a yearly meeting.

Followed by silence – friends shared as they felt led in response to Noah's message.

Following a 10-minute break, we will break into small, breakout groups to get to know each other better then break for lunch at noon. Each person will have about 4 minutes to share from two prompt questions: (1) Jesus was tempted by comfort pride and power. Think of a time when you or your meeting were tempted and how did you respond? Are there ways you can learn from that experience to help us to be faithful, in the days and months to come?

(2) What small thing is God inviting you or your meeting to nurture now? What table is God asking you to set?

Following the groups, Noah gathered us back together and asked if anyone would like to share about what they discussed in their group.

Lunch break

Friends gathered back after lunch and Molly Loesch shared on her violin to bring us together.

Noah reminded us of the miracle it is that we can gather across the miles in this manner under the circumstances of our world. He visited with some elders during break to see what else might need to be shared. They came up to the suggestion that we spend time in open worship and offer up prayers for each other and listen together towards the end of this session.

He wanted to speak to comfort, which is one of the temptations of Jesus. There are two kinds of comfort: the work of the holy spirit to comfort the conflicted and to conflict the comfortable. Another word for God is 'the comforter'. The image of his light holding us is a kind of comfort. Another kind of comfort can keep us from seeing something God wants for us, from seeing a new direction, comfort can keep us sleepy and disconnected. Margaret Fell said the light can be comforting, but the light of God will rip you up and lay you open when you let God work in your life. Our tradition calls for two types of comfort and requires discernment. Sometimes we must walk away and seek refuge in the arms of the spirit. He invites and encourages us to ask in prayer if we're feeling uncomfortable. Is this the moment to turn towards God and ask for rest or to ask God to help you grow and help you see? Open your eyes and ears to what God would have you be.

He asked that we set the table for one another to have a time of sharing and comfort for each other.

Friends then divided in the small groups to discuss the following query: Describe a time you have stepped into discomfort. What was that like? Where did you find guidance? How do you lean into trusting God, in the midst of uncomfortable times?

Prayer can be comfortable for some and uncomfortable for others. We are going to expand our circle, and settle into a time of worship and prayer and friends are welcome to verbally pray or share a prayer through the chat feature for the next 15 minutes or so.

Noah expressed thanks for the opportunity to be together with us this weekend and we again settled into a period of worship. Friends shared in word, song and prayer during this period.

LaVonna shared about the seasons of discomfort that often shine on the things that heal us and move us forward. It is hard to exist in the tension and stay and deal with what is in front of you. Reconciliation that grows out of troubling times can be more rewarding after living in an

uncomfortable place. The disciples did move forward after they realized Jesus lived in a different way and they had to move forward in a difficult way. The beloved community that we are spurs us on, knowing we are loved by each other and God.

Many thanks were expressed to Noah for sharing with us today and Honor for walking alongside him with encouragement. Thank you to the tech crew for all of their help. Sara Scribner has been working on our epistle during our time together and shared what she has prepared so far. The epistle was approved with gratitude to Sara for her work on this project.

LaVonna gave instructions on how to move on to the special interest groups for those who are interested. This concluded our time together for Great Plains Yearly Meeting 2020.