

Good morning, Friends! Thank you for the opportunity to share a message with you today. I would like to talk about my experience with Sense of the Meeting.

First, let's think about the shared scripture from Acts. What was going on there? Essentially, it was a typical human situation. A conflict. There was a food program to support those in need, specifically widows and children. Unfortunately, that food was not making to everyone. The concern was shared to the Apostles, and they called a meeting of all the believers. Within that meeting, a suggestion was put forward to select seven other people to run the food program. The believers all liked the idea, the new seven were selected, and all was well.

That story reminds me of something. A specific something that we practice here in our Meeting House together. It reminds me of our work together in decision making and finding Sense of the Meeting.

The conflict in the scripture was the food not making it to all those in need. The calling of a meeting of all the believers, is our Monthly Meeting. And the Sense of the Meeting was found after discernment together. Not only was there unity in their decision, but that unity propelled the work of God past that community.

Now, that is a simplified, shortened version of that event. Leaving out all the nuances of who was not receiving the food, and the reasons why they weren't. Leaving out the current political and economic environment occurring. Not to mention, the personal relationships and emotions that surely were strained.

It is in those nuances and unshared specifics of the story, where we can be curious. I imagine, how I would feel if someone I loved was not receiving the care they needed. I try to imagine the reasons why they would be overlooked. Was it purposeful or a supply chain accident? Would I lose trust for those running the program and become angry? Would I be open to bringing my concern forward to the community as a whole?

Our practice as Friends- of searching together for the Sense of the Meeting, creates a space and a framework for conflict resolution and decision making. It is within that spiritual framework that we find the will of God.

What is Sense of the Meeting? Many books define it simply as a decision that reflects what God wants, achieved through listening to the Spirit together during business meeting. That is an accurate but simple definition. I will share a definition that I have found helpful.

Eden Grace in, "An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice," describes sense of the meeting like this:

"Friends commit themselves to discovering and implementing the will of God...What we call the Sense of the Meeting is not the collected wisdom of those present, but the collective discernment of God's will...Our bold affirmation is that God does indeed have a will for us, that God is actively trying to communicate that will, and that we are capable, through corporate prayer, to discover that will. A sign that we have achieved our goal of discerning God's will is the experience of Unity which is recognized and affirmed by those gathered."

So, our decisions are not made by consensus, simply everyone agreeing. Our decisions are formed and lead by the rainbow of people and experiences that make up our community, when we all seek to be spirit led.

I don't know about you, but I find great comfort knowing that we can rely on God to help guide our community. That we can tap into that universal wisdom and knowledge that transcends our own personal fears, set beliefs, and egos to find the third way.

Personally, I acknowledge that I do not like conflict. I would do nearly anything to avoid it as a child. However, conflict is inevitable in life, and we must learn to manage it. I think that is why I appreciate the Friends ways so much. Knowing that we are committed to discerning together and that we can rely on God, creates the space needed to turn a conflict into an opportunity. An opportunity to truly see each other, to learn how to deeply listen beyond words, to find that light within ourselves, and recognize that one light belongs to us all.

What I have learned through my time with Friends, with much prayer, and reading is that finding the Sense of the Meeting literally takes practice. It is a muscle that must be used, exercised, and it is not a personal activity. Think of Monthly Meeting as a group exercise class if you will. That does not mean we should not exercise and study before class. I like to practice centering down in my life and before monthly meeting. Practicing helps bring balance and peace to me emotionally and spiritually and I think of it as the door before worship.

We have talked about the Sense of the Meeting, and I wonder what preparing for and experiencing Sense of the Meeting is like for you. How does it occur for you? What do you hear? I hear the stillness of gathered prayer. What do you see? I see the beautiful faces of my Friends. What do you feel? I feel the coolness of the wood under my hands.

As we enter waiting worship, I offer and poem and three questions:
Exert from "The Meeting" by John Greenleaf Whittier,

“And so I find it well to come
For deeper rest to this still room,
For here the habit of the soul
Feels less the outer world's control;
The strength of mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs;
And from the silence multiplied
By these still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone.

What do you hear?
What do you see?
What do you feel?