

Hi Philip —
It was good
to meet you in
Ocean Park. Here are
my sermon notes.
Tom

OCEAN PARK
Romans 12: 1-10
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
August 29, 1993

In the summer of 1774, eight members of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing landed in New York after a journey from England with their spiritual leader Ann Lee. We would have called them a bunch of religious fanatics back then. Today, however, we call them the Shakers, and we admire them for the beauty of their crafts, the simplicity of their communal life, and the spirit of their worship.

I

I speak of the Shakers today because, although they are just about to die out, they tried literally to live out Paul's advice in Romans 12. Sure, some of their beliefs sound weird to us, but their scattered communities, such as the one in Sabbath Lake, Maine, can teach us a few things and are well worth a visit.

The Shakers began in the strange and tormented life of Ann Lee. Born in England in 1736, she was a serious, pious, and illiterate woman subject to visions. After losing four children in infancy, she became convinced that the cause of all evil and sin in the world was none other than sexual relationships.

Soon a group of devoted followers surrounded her and insisted that "Mother Ann," as they called her, had a unique relationship with God. Soon they were run out of England, sailed to America, and established themselves in New York, Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. By 1800 they

had spread to Ohio and Kentucky.

As new converts were made, they were required to confess their sins, profess faith in Christ, and to accept the teachings of Mother Ann, especially her beliefs about celibacy--which readily explains why they have almost completely died out. They practiced community of goods, holding all things in common, and giving themselves to prayer and worship. They were especially concerned to pursue spiritual perfection, whether in devotion or furniture making. Mother Ann's words were their motto: "Put your hands to the work and your hearts to God."

And work they did. Up with the first trumpet at 4:30 AM, kneeling in silent prayer where the foot touched the floor, they each walked on tiptoe to their place of work. Villages were immaculate. One visitor declared: "The paint is all fresh. The planks are bright clean...a sheen is on everything; a happy quiet reigns. Every building has the air of a chapel."

They built simple, useful furniture. They were famous for the quality of their seeds which they packaged and sent all over the country. They invented such things as the common clothes pin and the washing machine. They ate little meat, drank no tea, coffee, or spirits, and were natural food proponents long before it became politically correct.

Such was the Shaker life, reaching its height in the 1850's with around 6,000 adherents. ~~Now they are almost gone, declining with the advent of the technological era.~~ Clearly they had some strange ideas, and their monastic-like life was thankfully not

for everyone, else none of us would be here! Yet the Shakers, of all people, have something to say to us today as we gather in the simple and rustic beauty of this Temple.

II

I confess that my thoughts have turned to the simplicity of the Shakers this week because like most of you, I am about to plunge back into complexity of that other world--the world of heavy responsibility, committee meetings, appointments, luncheons, budgets, and all the rest of those things from which we get a welcome break here at Ocean Park. I don't begrudge that world; it's part of the rhythm of the year, and the truth is that I love my work. But the peacefulness of these summer days is something I long to carry over into that other world.

That is the reason I have been thinking of those Shakers. However strange their convictions about sexuality, they discovered the secret that their work could be a form of worship. A beautiful piece of simple furniture, a seed which is full of life, a building built for its practicality and beauty--all of these things they regarded as a form of praise to God. And when they did meet to worship, they were caught up in a sense of celebration over the mystery of life and the all-encompassing love of God.

They are remembered especially for their dancing in worship, which they called "spiritual exercises." Men and women moved in separate groups, shaking, whirling, trembling, stamping, singing. It was the best show for miles around, and outsiders came just for the entertainment! But to the Shakers it was

worship, free and full of adoration and celebration.

Now, of course, we are in a separate world. This is, after all New England! Last year at the Andover Newton baccalaureate service which was held in the sanctuary of the church I serve, the preacher was a UCC minister from Connecticut. He began by saying that he wished sometimes he were a Pentecostalist, because then he could say, "If you love Jesus, stand up and shout." But he was not, so sometimes he wished he were a Southern Baptist, so he could say, "If you love Jesus, just step out into the aisle and come to the front." But alas, he said, "I am a New England Congregationalist, so the most I can get away with is, 'If you love Jesus, wiggle your toes.'!" *(James Kidd)*

Yet the Shakers knew and we know that a sense of celebration in Christian worship is not the same as hilarity or a pep rally. It is not putting on a smile when your world is crashing around you. People who have never experienced it have a hard time grasping the fact that when your heart is breaking, when problems are crushing you down, when there seems to be no rational answer to impossible questions--that is when when we gather to affirm that God is present even when we do not feel God's presence, even when we can make no sense out of life as it comes to us, even when we are shaking our fist toward heaven.

Rick Fox, a teammate and close friend of Reggie Lewis of the Celtics, tried to express his love and affection for his 27-year-old teammate just after his tragic death. Gasping for breath through his tears, and speaking only in partial sentences, he said, "My

thoughts the last 48 hours--questions, questions, questions with no answers."

When we speak of worship as celebration, we are not speaking of a superficial pep rally where that kind of pain is ignored or denied. What we celebrate is life in Christ, life together in the midst of struggle and sadness, singing together in the face of unanswered and unanswerable questions. This is precisely what Paul had in mind when he wrote that "...we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another" (Rom. 12: 5).

III

But there is something else the Shakers teach us that I want to remember as the leaves change and as the snows descend. In the course days of the American frontier, to abused women and children, to slaves and social outcasts, to people afraid of life and without a place, the Shakers gave the security of a family of faith.

Almost from the beginning, the NT writers described the security which the church provided for outcasts. Every church was a sanctuary church! There they were, many having been disinherited for this new faith, and with the threat of persecution as a constant source of anxiety. People who had been cut off from all their ties found a new family in the church. "Let love be genuine," urged Paul; and there, in this new community, they found a genuine family of faith.

As most of us prepare to return to that other world, we cannot escape the challenges of the year. There is no way we can bypass

pain and hurt and death: "...questions, questions, with no answers." But we are also returning to the sanctuary of the church, to a family of faith which allows us to cry out and which holds on to us, loves us, and believes in us even when we do not believe in ourselves.

Fall on your face, and no one will laugh. Cry out in disbelief, and no one will denounce you as faithless. Confess your sins, and no one will self-righteously condemn you. The church is the place where we have the security to be insecure and the help to become whole.

IV

When I stand on the beach here at Ocean Park and look out at a calm sea, especially at dusk, I can't help but contrast the quiet depth of the sea before me with the hurdy-gurdy of Old Orchard Beach to my left. The lights turn on, the music is turned up, the carnival rides are whirling, and it reminds me of the whirling life that we face in going home.

All of us stand between the serene depths of God's presence on the one hand, and the hurdy-gurdy, the loudness, even the gaudiness of life in that other world. But the serene depth of the God's presence need never be far from us.

We are returning not just to the hurdy-gurdy, but to a holy place called worship, a place where we can ask the hard questions, a place where we can celebrate in the midst of the struggle, a place of sanctuary. So let us return with confidence and a sense of joy, and in the words of Mother Ann Lee, put our hands to the work and our hearts to God.