

Transforming Lives

August 4, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: Exodus 16: 2-3, 11-14

John 6: 24-35

Our gospel reading for today follows last week's healings and the feeding of the 5000. One verse popped out, verse 15: "When Jesus realized that they (the crowds) were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." Jesus doesn't want them to make him king, so leaves. And then the disciples leave too, in a different boat. The crowd finds him anyway and he works to shift their attention from the bread that fed them to the power of God.

It's not easy to shift from the tangible to the intangible. And yet it is this shift that gives Christianity "the power to transform lives eroded by poverty and despair."¹ Hold that thought. Because that poverty and despair has provided the turning point for many moments in our history. A lot of things happen when people are – to use a more contemporary word -- hangry.

I've been thinking of a few different threads this week. The Olympics and the celebration of sport, seeing the community of athletes congratulating their opponents for their performances. The power of diplomacy to quite literally bring prisoners home. The day-by-day shifts in our national political dialogue. Against this backdrop: another new vocabulary word. It appears that we'll be needing to know the word "semiquincentennial" as we approach our nation's 250th.

If you're my age, the bicentennial seems pretty recent, and yet a lot has transpired in these intervening 50 years. Sometimes we think that the 250th is the anniversary of one date: July 4, 1776, but that independence actually dawned slowly until it cascaded into conflict and ultimately a new nation. Heather Cox Richardson pointed out in her July 28th Letter² that in 1763, American colonists were very happy to be a part of the British empire. But then the Stamp Act changed that. Taxation without representation. The colonists were not happy.

When the Stamp Act was passed by Parliament, this church was 130 years old – led by its ninth minister, who had been the minister for 46 years, and would serve another twenty, spanning the years from 1717 to 1784. If you look up Nathaniel Appleton on Wikipedia³, you'll see that the first piece of writing attributed to him is "A Thanksgiving Sermon on the Total Repeal of the Stamp Act"⁴ in 1766. Who says that religion and politics don't mix? All in all, it was 23 years from the Stamp Act of 1765 until the Constitution was fully ratified in 1788. A lot happened in those years that birthed a new nation, with a new philosophy, new ideals, new laws. Revolution can take a while. Meanwhile, people lived their lives, raised children, farmed, and attended church.

¹ Nardi Reeder Campion, *Ann the Word: the life of Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1976

² <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/july-28-2024>

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Appleton

⁴ Nathaniel Appleton (1766). *A Thanksgiving Sermon on the Total Repeal of the Stamp-Act*, preached in Cambridge, New England, etc. Boston: Edes & Gill.

But not everyone was a part of the established church. 250 years ago today, in early August of 1774, the ship *Mariah* was sailing along our southern New England coast after a 2-½ month voyage from England. Among its passengers were Mother Ann Lee and eight of her followers who sought to establish a Shaker community in which they would be free to live simply according to their beliefs, and without persecution.

Ann Lee was from Manchester, England, raised in the Quaker tradition. At age 22 she joined a sect of Quakers whose charismatic chanting and dancing earned them the nickname Shaking Quakers, which was soon shortened to Shakers. Or as one of their dance songs says, “Come life, Shaker life, Come life eternal, shake shake out of me all that is carnal.” They believed that the shaking was caused by sin being purged from the body by the power of the holy Spirit. They also emphasized gender equality in all aspects of life, providing education and leadership for all.

Ann Lee kept getting in trouble for breaking the Sabbath by dancing and was imprisoned. There she had visions that further strengthened her convictions. So eight of them decided to escape the persecution and set sail from Liverpool on May 19, 1774. The next day, King George III and parliament passed two more of the five “Intolerable Acts” to punish the colonies for their defiance. You can imagine that things were a bit unsettled around here in those years. After 150 years, the colonists were turning away from England and their King.

Their first years were especially difficult for the Shakers, who had settled near Albany. They were hungry and exhausted, sleeping on nothing but bare floors. On top of that, they were pacifists, and they remained neutral, not taking a side in the conflict, which meant that just about everyone was upset with them. Their first public testimony was six years after their departure from England, on May 19, 1780. That happened to be what is called the “Dark Day of 1780” when the sky darkened completely at 10am for the rest of the day, which of course the religious people understood as an omen.

It turns out it was Canadian forest fires, but it encouraged more people to join the Shakers in their Utopian communal living, where they held all property in common and worked and worshipped together. Since celibacy was one of their principles, the growth was all from adult converts. Once they achieved a large enough group to share the work of sustenance, they were all fed, and nourished spiritually, and encouraged to be creative and productive, worshipping charismatically, without the presence of clergy. At their peak membership, they numbered about 5,000 by the 1860s.

The number of people was not huge. And yet, the effect they had on American society and our everyday lives is remarkable. If I were one of those creative worship types, I’d have an altar arrangement that included items that they invented: some clothespins, a flat-bottomed broom, pegboards, circular saw, a have-a-heart trap, a rolling pin, and the list goes on.

However, I do have some visual images. Earlier this summer, we spent a day at Hancock Shaker Village, seeing the architecture and inventions. (It was there that I learned of the upcoming 250 th .) I had been there once before, with my singing group to record a CD of Shaker tunes. Beautiful simple tunes. We recorded in the Chapel, for the authentic sound, although we had to record in the middle of the night to avoid road noise, and had a lookout posted at the door to watch for headlights coming over the distant hilltop. You’ve heard one tune already from the choir, and we’ll close with the one you likely already know, but to give you a visual and audio experience of the Shakers, here’s another, Millennial Praise from the 1908 Hymnal, sung by Norumbega Harmony, with some of Linda’s photos.

I've always known a bit about the Shakers. My mother grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland named for the land of the former Shaker community that it was laid out on. She loved the simplicity of the Shaker furniture. And then I learned a bit more from my friend Steve Marini's 1982 book, creatively titled, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*. And I learned a CD-full of Shaker tunes.

But when these ideas come up now, at the 250th anniversary of Mother Ann's arrival and of the leadup to our American Declaration of Independence, I come back to the idea that poverty and despair has provided the turning point for many moments in our history. For many of our immigrant ancestors, the hope for a land of freedom and prosperity led them to undertake a risky journey to a new place where they could earn a living and provide for their families. For the Shakers, they were willing to give up their individual aspirations for the ideals of community, in which all individuals were freed to contribute to the common good.

What does it mean for us? How do we turn the tide of poverty and despair that we see in the world around us? I have my ideas, and I'm sure you have yours as well. It is tempting to pile the responsibility on someone who can be the King and promise to fix it all, and who makes promises to feed us. We want a King, as long as we like the King and what the King does. But I don't believe that is the answer.

Jesus taught that we should not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, and which gives life to the world. He saw that if people followed him only because their stomachs were full, that kind of transactional relationship would go nowhere. Instead, focusing on the principles that endure will bring justice for all, with God providing what is needed to survive and to thrive. The early followers of Jesus believed this. The Shakers believed this in their time. And we have our opportunity to believe it in our time as well. May we each find our own ways to work for the ideals that we believe in as we journey together through this next bit of our own American and global Revolution. And may the empowering love that Jesus taught us sustain us each and every day. Amen!