Building Bridges

Keynote address for North Pacific Yearly Meeting 2020
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When I received the invitation from North Pacific Meeting to give this message, I had a time of waiting for the Holy Spirit to show me what to say and then I felt inspired to speak about Building Bridges. As that beautiful hymn says:

“Building Bridges between our divisions,
I reach out to you …
Won’t you reach out to me?”

This topic is very important for Quakers in Cuba. For many years we have helped to build communication bridges among the Christian denominations in our country, through ecumenical work; also between the church and the government, among individual people and also among Yearly Meetings. About this last effort, our Yearly Meeting and New England Yearly Meeting created a ‘Bridge of Love’ that has connected us for almost 30 years. Even though we Cuban Friends have not been able to visit them for nearly four years, we have stayed united in the love of God, through their visits here and through electronic communication with them. It has been a wonderful relationship in which love and respect for the individualities of each Meeting have prevailed. We have learned so much about each other’s personal experiences of the Divine and especially how to worship in the same Spirit, in spite of our differences.

“More than walls, we build bridges,” is the slogan we have been using for about three years in reconstructing Wilmington Friends School, a property of our Monthly Meeting in Puerto Padre. This school was founded by Wilmington Yearly Meeting, with the support of the Friends Board of Missions (FUM), in 1908, but in 1961 it was expropriated by the revolutionary Cuban government and transformed into a public school. The time passed and the lack of repairs and the effects of hurricanes transformed the school into ruins, but the land was returned to the Meeting around four years ago, after a lot of insistence on behalf of the Yearly Meeting and through many Friends’ prayers. Through this constructive process we have received working teams from New England Yearly Meeting, Wilmington Meeting and FUM, so our bonds with those Friends have been strengthened. In one of the visits by those Friends, we had a time of reflection on the biblical verses of John 17:20-23, the words of Jesus to
his disciples the night before his death. Jesus spoke to them about unity; he said that we should be all one so that the world will believe. Some Friends talked about their personal experience. One of them said that if we told any person in the secular world that Cubans and North Americans can have a close friendship, they would tell us that we are crazy. But through our faith, through projects that we do in common, through Christ’s love, we can feel united with each other, although we may have different points of view about certain things, and we may have been damaged by political differences among countries. This is a way of building bridges.

What are bridges? Bridges are not improvised constructions; they require studies, technique, to study the underpinning where they will be set the bases, keeping in mind the flow of the river next to the foundations, the strength and durability of the materials used. Some of them need to be flexible as suspension bridges, for example. They need to be resistant. They are built to unite two places that for some reason were separated. They facilitate communication in two directions. While many people build walls, there are other people that build bridges. It is not an easy task to build over water or an abyss.

What is a bridge in the spiritual sense? It is a way to establish communication between two or more people or communities that were apart and without dialogue. A relationship agent, of mediation, reconciliation, something that facilitates the exchange, that unite people and facilitates lives. The fundamental component of these bridges is love, which is like the steel that brings strength and stability. An infinite ocean of love which George Fox talks about, can be the material from which bridges are made.

There is an old story of two brothers, each one had a farm next to the other. But one day there was a disagreement between them, it was the first serious conflict in 40 years that they had lived working together, sharing machinery and exchanging crops. They argued and didn’t speak to each other for weeks.

One morning, somebody with carpenter’s tools called at the older brother’s door. “I am looking for a job, maybe you have need of my services,” he said. The older brother answered “Yes, I have a job for you. My brother lives on the other side of the creek. Last week there was a flat land between us, but he moved the bed of the creek, so that it is now between our two properties. But I will do something about it. Take all the wood that is in the barn and build a very high and strong fence, like a wall, I don’t want to see my brother again.”
“I believe that I understand the situation,” the carpenter responded. “I will do the job so you will be pleased.” The carpenter spent the day measuring, cutting, nailing and that night he continued working. Next day, what a surprise for the farmer! There was no wall; instead there was a bridge over the creek that connected the two farms! It was a fine piece of art! In that moment the younger brother came running from his farm, he passed over the bridge and hugging his brother, told him: “You are a great person, you have had this beautiful bridge built in spite of everything that I have done to you.”

They were still in reconciliation when they saw that the carpenter had packed his tools to leave, but they invited him to stay, since they already had many projects in common. But the carpenter told them, “I would like to stay, but I have many bridges that I have yet to build.” This is a story that he helps us to meditate.

The word PONTIFEX is a title given to the Pope, maximum authority of the Catholic Church. This word means builder of bridges. As Quakers we believe in the universal priesthood, that is to say that potentially all of us can be divine ministers, so I think that we all are called to be pontifex, that is to say, of bridge-builders.

In this world there are people damaged, hurt, affected in many senses. Today, surrounding us, there are people in difficult situations. We know that in North Pacific Meeting, and in many parts of the United States and other countries there have been sick Friends, some have passed away and many of us have friends and relatives harmed by the virus. It is like a terror wave. Also here in Cuba we have had relatives of our members that have been sick, some of them have died (not many, so far, thank God). And we have lived with a lot of stress. We are also living a lot of shortages of resources and food. In other countries of Latin America, it has been much worse because of the lack of medical services.

With the current situation caused by the coronavirus and other problems such as the bad administration of the governments, the embargoes and blockades; people of many countries suffer more than ever today. There are long lines, in some places people fight, they argue to obtain some food or material good, they injure and harm each other. The violence, and racial hate has increased. When we go out we see that people are more aggressive. Many feel fragile, deprived of resources, vulnerable, needy. Jesus understands the physical pain, the loneliness, the scorn, the hate, the injustice they feel, because he had to suffer it
himself. With empathy and understanding he leans toward us (we receive his grace). He takes care of the crops. Isaiah 42:3 says a bruised reed (one of the crops) the Holy One shall not break, and the burning wick he will not snuff; he shall bring forth justice faithful to the truth.” He protects the damaged people. He won’t snuff out our faith even it seems hardly a smoldering flame. He promised us that he will bring justice. Perhaps we are battered, but not broken. We are surrounded by people that suffer. What are we doing as the Spirit’s co-workers in favor of justice, peace, equality and love among people?

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles (that some of us say should be called Acts of the Holy Spirit), chapter 9, we can read about Saul’s experience with the Lord. After his Epiphany of the Lord, he was sightless for three days, but Jesus gave him instructions on what he should do and where he should go. Starting from verse 10, it speaks about a disciple named Ananias, whom the Lord called. He responded “Here I am.” Instructions were given to him so that he expected Saul of Tarsus and he prayed for him so that his sight was returned. Ananias was fearful at the beginning because he knew that Saul had persecuted the Christian; and he may have thought: “How will I get close to that man that has harmed Christ’s followers so much?” But the Lord explained to him that Saul would be his instrument to carry his news to many places; then Ananias understood and he did what the Spirit guided him to do. Ananias collaborated with God as an agent of unity, he served as a bridge so that Saul came to an understanding of God, which he needed. When Ananias went to meet Saul, he called him, “brother Saul” and treated him with a lot of love. This Saul had had an extraordinary experience with God, and he was welcomed by those whom he had persecuted before. Then Saul, from that point on with the nickname of Paul, was one of those that carried the good news to many countries and he helped to reconcile the Jews that were Christian with the people that came from other religions and countries, converted to Christianity. So that Paul was also a builder of bridges.

What can we do today to build bridges? How to be bridges to collaborate with God in reconciling, bringing people close, and uniting people?

We cannot give formulas; each person is a world. The Spirit speaks to each one of us. And it is in that communion that we learn from Him (or from Her, as some Friends say). S/He guides us, S/He shows us what we should do in each circumstance.
The fruits that we have received from the Spirit: the love, the joy.... (Galatians 5) are given to us to share with other people. One of those fruits is self-control. When people are in situations of crisis, it is very difficult to control our emotions, and then sometimes we let that the anger and the aggression dominate us. I think that it is a personal decision and It is something that we should model with the help of the Spirit. We shouldn’t allow our emotions to dominate us, especially when they can affect other people. Please, don’t let anything steal our inner peace. Those situations that are thieves of joy and of peace, we shouldn’t allow them to act on us. Let’s be faithful and in communion with God. This is a way that we can make ourselves into bridges. When we are full of love, joy, peace, forgiveness, patience, kindness, faith, meekness, and all those fruits, then we can be channels of God; only then can we serve as his instruments so that others can come closer to him, to reconcile, to unite, to inspire.

If we want to be bridges we should think how we can do it in small things, simple things, day by day activities. If we look around us, we may see that there are people with spiritual needs, people with family relationships broken or with friendships ruined. With respect and tenderness, we can be bridges for those that need mediation, love, reconciliation and also for those that have broken their relationship with God; those that have not recognized that there is “that of God in them.” With our lives, with our testimonies, we can be the connection that may show them the way to the Truth.

If we show with our lives that God’s Love is real, if we live so that those that surround us see that the mercy of God is forever and it is present in us, we become bridges.

We know that perfection is an attribute of God alone, but we can try to be better. This is like climbing steps, because the Spirit gives us a new measure of perfection every day. (Paul said in Philippians 3:12: “I don’t say that I have reached it, neither that I am perfect, but I continue ahead with the hope of reaching it, since Christ Jesus reached me first.”

We can be bridges showing people that we can break the chains of hate, and violence, of injustice and indifference, caused by racism or discrimination against those people that are not similar to us or that don’t think like us, either because of religion, gender or sexuality. We all are children of God. Equality is one of the Quakers’ testimonies, and we must try to make it real in our lives.
We have seen many violent acts recently in many countries. It is really painful. We feel the suffering of the victims, we are in solidarity with them, but we also pray for the aggressors so that they can be released from that way of thinking and acting.

When we don’t return evil for evil, the chain of hate breaks. Almost 2000 years ago Jesus died on a cross, a cruel and unjust death. He could use his power to destroy his enemies, but he chose the power of love that put an end to the hate and the terror. His petition to the Father for forgiveness for those that mistreated him was also a cry of hope that puts an end to the chain of hate that generate acts of violence. Jesus said to his disciples “Peace I leave you; my peace I give you…..” That peace that passes all understanding is the one that he invites us to experience today, in the middle of the most difficult circumstances, and the storms of the life. In the Sermon on the Mount he spoke to us of loving our enemies and that the peace-makers should consider themselves happy, because they will be called children of God.

In the monthly meeting I am part of, we think that the Kingdom of God is here and now and that it is a Kingdom of Peace and Justice. Also that we are sent to build that kingdom with the Holy One, as coworkers. We are God’s hands and God’s feet. How can we contribute to the construction of that Kingdom?

I share with you this beautiful hymn that Cuban Friends sing.

> Enviado soy de Dios, mis manos listas están a construir con él un mundo fraternal.

> Los ángeles no son enviados a cambiar un mundo de dolor por un mundo de paz.

> Nos ha tocado hoy, hacerlo realidad; ayúdame Señor a hacer tu voluntad.

I have been sent by God, my hands are ready to build with the Spirit a world of love.

It’s not the angels who’ve been sent to replace this world of pain with a world of peace.

Today, it’s up to us. We must make it reality….

Lord, help me do your will.

I invite you today to be part of this team of bridge-builders, of co-workers in the Kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit allows our hearts to be moved by love, peace, and desire for justice. May our wishes be to act as Ananias did, who collaborated as a bridge between Saul and God. And also may we want to act as
Paul, who helped to reconcile brothers and sisters with different points of view. May we want to be like the carpenter of the story, always ready to build a bridge of understanding wherever we go. May we always be full with the fruits of the Spirit, so that we can be channels and instruments that collaborate to help communicate, unite and reconcile. May the Lord help us today to build bridges of Love, Peace, Faith and Hope.