

Salem cemetery notes

Thank you for the opportunity to speak briefly here today on this important occasion. My name is Kathleen Wooten, and I am a member of the Religious Society of Friends, often known as “Quakers”, and a member of Fresh Pond Quaker Meeting in Cambridge, MA.

My people have a complicated history in this land, and especially in Boston and Salem. This burial ground in itself is filled with Friends who were persecuted for following a spiritual path that was not clearly accepted in their time. I am grateful that has changed.

In my prayerful reflections around this day, I was prompted to read again the stories of Cassandra and Lawrence Southwick. Their stories are a few of many related to the Quakers of Salem. They were severely punished for their beliefs according to accepted law at the time, fined and whipped and thrown into prison at advanced ages. One of their direct descendants is now a member of a Quaker Meeting in Worcester, Massachusetts.

What speaks to me most today is not the Southwick parents' story - but that of their children. While their parents were jailed, Cassandra Southwick's children were unable to pay the fines also levied against them for being Quakers. It was therefore decreed that they would be sold into slavery in Barbados, to pay off their debts. As young Provided Southwick was brought to the town's auction block, no merchant or ship's captain would purchase her. She would have made a well behaved, easy and lucrative sale. And yet, when the magistrate present asked why no one would purchase her - they were clear she was an innocent and it would be wrong to carry her on any of their ships.

Quakers have a simple saying - we believe in “letting your life speak”. This means doing what is right and that of God's world, which sometimes can be in conflict with our human laws and mandates. Those actions can set a quiet but steady and unyielding example to others. I'd love to say the Quakers were being faithful on that day at that auction - but I believe others, not only Quakers, had also heard that call to righteousness and Love for others.

How does this lesson invite us to hear that call today? In a complicated world with many questions and divisions, how are we invited to “let our lives speak” and love our neighbors at risk of being found “outside of man's law?”

Standing here in the presence of my spiritual ancestors, I hope I can live up to their example. I am heartened that many of my Quaker bretheren cannot be here today in person - they are speaking up against climate change, marching hundreds of miles in witness for immigrant rights, praying and helping those in need. They are not alone. Many people, of many faiths and no particular faith, are living into that kingdom of Love that the first Quakers in Salem hoped to create.

I'd like to end with excerpts from a poem from John Greenleaf Whittier, a Quaker from Amesbury MA, about the Southwicks and the day Spouthwick was taken from her cell to be sold. To me, it seems like a reminder of God's hope and unity that I pray carries on beyond the graves to the living souls gathered here today.

Then to the stout sea-captains the sheriff, turning, said—
'Which of ye, worthy seamen, will take this Quaker maid?
On the Isle of fair Barbados, or on Virginia's shore
You may hold her at a higher price than Indian girl or Moor!'

Grim and silent stood the captains; and when again he cried,
'Speak out my worthy seamen!' no voice, no sign replied;
But I felt a hard hand press my own, and kind words met my ear,—
'God bless thee, and preserve thee, my gentle girl and dear!'.....

And weep and howl, ye evil priests and mighty men of wrong,
The lord shall smite the proud, and lay His hand upon the strong.
Woe to the wicked rulers in his avenging hour!
Woe to the wolves who seek the flocks to raven and devour!

But let the humble ones arise, the poor in heart be glad,
And let the mourning ones again with robes of praise be clad,
For he who cooled the furnace, and smoothed the stormy wave,
And tamed the Chaldean lions, is mighty still to save!

—John Greenleaf Whittier

Let us pray:

Dear God of many names, who holds us all in Love beyond all measure and what we can imagine. Bless this place, and remember its inhabitants - not because this place is in itself any more sacred or special than any place in particular, but because the faithful of example of others who have passed before us have made it so. Give us the strength to hear your mighty call to Love in this and all our time, to protect the weak, to feed the hungry, to welcome the stranger among us. In this way might we continue to charge left to us by the Quakers of Salem Massachusetts, who lie here in peace after much earthly struggle. Amen.