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THOMAS KELLY: AT HOME IN THE BLESSED COMMUNITY

HOWARD R. MACY

WHEN THE PLANNING COMMITTEE INVITED me to participate in this conference, I wanted to say yes immediately. I was eager to hear the other presenters and those who had known Tom Kelly personally. I was also eager to meet for the first time Richard Kelly and Lois Kelly Stabler and members of their families. So this has already been a treat.

I don't remember exactly when I first met Tom Kelly in *A Testament of Devotion*—maybe in seminary. My marked copy cost only two dollars then, so it's been a while! I first came to know *The Eternal Promise* in the 1970s and love it as much as *Testament Talks* and essays like "Hasten Unto God" still catch my breath and sear my heart. I'm grateful to Richard for his vision and labor in producing it.

I was first asked to speak on the biblical roots of Tom Kelly's spiritual vision. I was glad to do that, but as I pondered it, that topic seemed a bit narrow. It couldn't take full account of Kelly's approach to Scripture, and it couldn't adequately convey the importance Kelly accorded to the Holy Fellowship, the Blessed Community. The passage that clarified that for me is in *A Testament of Devotion*

In the Fellowship cultural and educational and national and racial differences are leveled. Unlettered men are at ease with the truly humble scholar who lives in the Life, and the scholar listens with joy and openness to the precious experiences of God's dealing with the workingman. We find men with chilly theologies but with glowing hearts. We overleap the boundaries of church membership and find Lutherans and Roman Catholics, Jews and Christians, within the Fellowship. We reread the poets and the saints, and the Fellowship is enlarged. With urgent hunger we read the Scriptures, with no thought of pious exercise, but in order to find more friends for the soul. We brush past our historical learning in the Scriptures, to seize upon those writers who lived in the Center, in the Life and in the Power. Particularly does devotional literature become illuminated, for the Imitation of Christ, and Augustine's *Confessions* and Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God* speak the language of the souls

34 • HOWARD R. MACY

who live at the Center. Time telescopes and vanishes, centuries and creeds are overleaped. The incident of death puts no boundaries to the Blessed Community, wherein men live and love and work and pray in that Life and Power which gave forth the Scriptures. And we wonder and grieve at the overwhelmingly heady preoccupation of religious people with problems, problems, unless they have first come into the Fellowship of the Light.¹

This vision joins the biblical, the historic, and the contemporary in the same Life. It breaks down all boundaries so that men and women from all times and places and stations “can know one another in that which is eternal.”² It is a Fellowship in which we do not merely honor tradition, whether biblical or theological. It is, instead, a Fellowship in which we keep company with those who have lived in God deeply and authentically.

Kelly talks about discovering others in the Blessed Community, but we should also note that we can be introduced. Elton Trueblood occasionally talked with me about the ministry or gift of introduction in which two people who need to know each other are brought together. He did that for me—with some contemporaries and with people whom I would never meet face to face because their witness remains only in books. Tom Kelly did this for his students as well. I have long enjoyed hearing Canby Jones talk about the excitement with which Kelly introduced the small band of students at Haverford to Francis of Assisi or Brother Lawrence or Jean Nicholas Grou. The ministry of introduction was also exercised for Tom Kelly by his teacher Rufus Jones, no doubt also by colleague Douglas Steere, and by the very tradition in which he grew up and had his vocation.

I want to let Tom Kelly introduce you to some of the members of the Blessed Community as I tell you of his company of friends. I will first discuss his use of the Bible and then turn to the formative works from the devotional classics.

First, a word of caution. Kelly’s familiarity with and use of these sources do not mean, in my judgment, that his work is derivative in any direct sense. Sometimes he cites them directly, but often the connection is less clear. These men and women were Kelly’s soul friends who confirmed what he knew as well as showed him still new possibilities. They often shared language and experience. Kelly’s work grows out of this, not as a properly documented term paper, but as a testimony to lived experience.

THE BIBLE

Kelly's approach to Scripture is rooted both in Quaker heritage and in experience. It is an approach in which Kelly contrasts "the closed revelation of a completed canon" with "the fresh upspringings of the Inner Life." (TD 33) In an essay, "The Quaker Discovery," Kelly writes of it thus:

Quakers make a special approach to the Bible. Not merely by exegesis, not merely by grammar and Greek lexicon do we squeeze out the meaning of the texts, not merely understanding the historical setting of a book like Amos or Hosea or Isaiah do we find its meaning. We can go back into that Life within whom Amos and Isaiah lived, that Life in God's presence and vivid guidance, then we understand the writings from within. For we and Isaiah and Hosea feed on the same Life, are rooted in the same holy flame which is burning in our hearts. And we speak, each for his day, out of the same center, in God. "But I brought them Scriptures and told them there was an anointing within man to teach him, and that the Lord would teach His people Himself." (EP 68-69)

So you can see why he would speak of how "we brush past our learning....to seize upon the writers who lived in the Center." (TD 82) The learning he speaks of is the sophisticated critical scholarship of his time—theories about the Synoptic Problem, the intricacies of the Documentary Hypothesis, and much more (EP 66). He wants to know the writers. "We read the Scriptures," he says, "in order to find more friends for the soul." (TD 82) And when we succeed in this, "now we know, from within, some of the Gospel writers, and the prophets, and the singers of songs...."³ It does not surprise me that Tom Kelly and Abraham Heschel should have become instant soul friends at this point, for Heschel read the prophets in precisely this way.

So we read the Bible, then, to be joined to part of the Blessed Community and to feel our way back to the source, so that the same "Living Spring" may bubble up within us. This approach is in striking contrast to receiving the Bible as a codified repository of truth delivered to pious scribes centuries ago. Kelly's approach is characteristically Quaker, of course, but also was quickened by his own experience.

It may be that Kelly's approach to the Bible also explains his patterns of use. As nearly as I can see, Kelly is not very exegetical. He doesn't take a text and open it out with linguistic and historical tools

36 • HOWARD R. MACY

and other implements of technical, biblical interpretation. Instead he takes up phrases, images, and stories which express the freshness of life experienced. In using their words, he joins the writers' experience and witness, for he knows the life they know and he shares it.

Though his essays have relatively few specific chapter and verse citations, Kelly is steeped in the Bible and uses it generously. Some of this, I presume, comes out of his midwestern Quaker heritage. Some comes from his professional studies and much from continuing personal practice. Let me share some of the patterns I see.

Kelly's use of the Bible strongly favors the New Testament and in the Old Testament leans to the Prophets and the Psalms. Clearly Kelly knew the Old Testament narrative, but he mined it mostly for allusions and images. For example, when he writes of "walking serenely with God in the garden," (EP 152) he takes up the creation narrative of Genesis 2-3 to talk of the intimacy of the presence of God. He uses other narrative portions in similar ways.

When Kelly writes about "that volcanic upheaving, shaggy power of the prophets," (EP 127) we see how much he loved and admired them, though direct references to prophets other than Isaiah are few. He uses the "call narratives," in which God initiated contact with the prophets, to speak of how God takes the initiative to encounter us (cf. Amos 3:8, Isaiah 6).

Kelly draws heavily on the prophet Isaiah for messages of hope and encouragement. For example, he uses restoration language about how the desert will bloom like a rose (Isaiah 35) or about the voice crying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," (Isaiah 40) to raise hope. He also quotes soaring passages of encouragement: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31) Or: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee." (Isaiah 26:3)

Tom Kelly also cherished the book of Psalms. They gave him words to express longing, reassurance, and, above all, joy. He writes:

[In the book of Psalms] we come into contact with souls who have risen above debate and argument and problem-discussion, and have become singers of the Song of Eternal Love. We read the Psalms hungrily. They say in words what we try to express. Our private joy in God becomes changed into a fellowship of singing souls. The writers of the Psalms teach us new songs of the heart. They give us great phrases that go rolling through our

minds all the day long. They channel our prayer of song. Religious reading ought not to be confined to heady, brainy, argumentative discussion, important as that is. Every profoundly religious soul ought to rise to the level of inward psalm-singing. (RSW 378)

In addition to psalms of praise, Kelly often notes psalms which express invitation or longing for God. “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.”(Ps. 34:8) “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.”(Ps. 42:1) Perhaps among his favorites (he once refers to it as a “haunting verse” [TD 59]) was: “Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.”(Ps. 73:25, cf. also 73:26 and 84:1)

A third group of psalms which Kelly cites are those which instill confidence in God. They include Psalm 23, in which God as Shepherd leads, guides, and comforts. Among them, too, are Psalms 90 and 91 where God is referred to as our “dwelling place”; a rock, refuge, and fortress; and the One under whose wings we may seek safety. With other Friends, Kelly also appeals to the reassurance of Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Tom Kelly uses the New Testament much more extensively. All portions of the New Testament are well-represented in his work though several favorite passages and images appear often: the Bread of Life, springs or rivers of life, coming home, Christ knocking at our heart’s door, being built on the Rock and being hid with Christ in God. Among the Gospels, Kelly seems to have been especially fond of Luke and John, the so-called “Quaker Gospel.” He also uses Paul often, and frequency of use suggests special interest in Philippians and 2 Corinthians. The portions Kelly uses again show characteristic themes.

Often Kelly refers to God’s initiative and invitation seen in “the blinding, wooing, winning, overcoming love of Jesus of Nazareth.”(EP 127) The passage Kelly used most frequently to convey this truth was Revelation 3:20, which pictures Christ standing at the door knocking, waiting to be invited in for intimate fellowship. He also refers to the “prodigal son” (Luke 15) as he encourages readers to “abandon the husks and straws to return to the Father’s house.”(EP 155) He speaks of the Shepherd seeking the sheep, and of the importance of responding, of seizing the moment “when the angel troubles the waters.” (John 5)

Another important theme for Kelly is transformation, coming into a new, abundant life. Here he refers to Paul: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17) He also uses the Gospel of John in which Jesus promises the Samaritan woman water springing up into life (John 4). Kelly elsewhere speaks of how we can "go back into the same Living Spring." (EP 119) In alluding to Jesus' changing water into wine (John 2), Kelly writes of "the water of ordinary human nature changed into the wine of creative living." (EP 143, cf. EP 106-7) Living in "Holy Obedience," he further insists, requires a change of such magnitude that one must be "born again." (John 3, TD 54, cf. EP 159)

Kelly refers to the New Testament frequently in support of his urgent theme of single-mindedness, of wholehearted devotion. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." (Mark 12:30) We must obey the voice of the Shepherd (John 10:16). We can't serve God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). We must be "pearl merchants," willing to give up everything for the true treasure (Matthew 13). Kelly cites Luke 11:34, "If thine eye is single, the whole body also is full of light," and he notes as our example Paul's resolve not to know anything among men "save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2, TD 55)

A fourth theme common in Kelly is the life of humble service. In support of this, he refers not only to Jesus' teaching about loving our neighbors, but also to Jesus' example of being obedient even to death on the cross (Philippians 2). In that spirit Kelly urges readers to accept the cross and to lead the "Calvary-life." (TD 71-2, 108-9, EP 42, 55, 127) The call is set out in Jesus' words, "As the Father hath sent me, so send I you." (John 20:21, TD 106)

A final theme common to Kelly and consistent with his Quaker heritage is of God's care and empowerment. Reminiscent of George Fox's phrase, "the power of the Lord is over all," Kelly appeals to Paul's "I can do all things through Christ" (Philippians 4:13) and Jesus' assurance, "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33) to speak of our own powerful possibilities in Christ. He also speaks of our security when he cites Paul's conviction that "nothing can separate us from the love of God" (Romans 8:38-39) and that our lives are "hid with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:3)

We see, then, that Thomas Kelly's vision and writing are deeply impressed with the words and themes of the Bible, both Old and New Testament. Perhaps we should better say that Tom Kelly was shaped by the company of friends that he knew in the Life when he read Scripture. Stated either way, we must acknowledge how much Kelly relied on biblical teaching.

THE DEVOTIONAL CLASSICS

Let me turn now to introduce you to some members of the Blessed Community that were dear to Tom Kelly outside the Scriptures.

First of all, I should say that Kelly was more interested in lives than words, in life meeting life, though the words occasioned and helped the meeting. In his sermon "Wells and Rivers" Tom Kelly speaks of lives like rivers which "[flow] down through the centuries, past many and many a life." And they "[flow] on forever toward the infinite sea of Eternal Spirit."

But it is just there that we meet and are joined: "There [at the Loving Center] stand the saints of the ages, their hearts open to view, and lo, their hearts are our heart and their hearts are the heart of the Eternal One."(TD 57) Elsewhere Kelly notes with joy and wonder that "the Fellowship in God is of all times and is eternal."(TD 85)

This discovery is what makes it possible for Kelly to claim: "...my three dearest spiritual friends and patterns, outside Jesus of Nazareth ...are Brother Lawrence, and St. Francis of Assisi, and John Woolman."(RSW 41) No doubt Tom Kelly was drawn to these friends, with true Quaker sensibilities, more by the power of their authentic lives than by the depth of their teaching. These were friends discovered and engaged in the depths of God, and the deeper Tom Kelly grew, the dearer they became.

He loved the simplicity of Brother Lawrence's teaching and practice about being aware of God's presence in all the moments of our days. In St. Francis he loved the God-hunger, the directness and completeness of his dedication to God—the young man who "ran away to God." And Kelly loved Francis' joyfulness in this full dedication, commenting that he would "rather be jolly Saint Francis hymning his canticle to the sun than a dour old sobersides Quaker whose diet would appear to have been spiritual persimmons."(TD 92) Tom Kelly

40 • HOWARD R. MACY

admired John Woolman for his commitment to pure obedience and his resolve “so to order his outward affairs as to be, at every moment, attentive to that [divine] voice.”(TD 117)

If these are the closest friends, however, they are certainly not the only ones. The Blessed Community for Kelly is a very large fellowship, indeed. Beyond Woolman, for example, there are many other Quakers who joined him in the *Life*: George Fox in the *Journal and Epistles*; William Penn and Isaac Pennington in their writings are examples he alludes to directly.

There are also saints, if you will, whom Quakers loved—Jacob Boehme, Miguel de Molinos, Francois Fenelon, Madame Guyon. Though he never mentions it, no doubt he knew the last three through a little Quaker collection of their writings first published in 1813, called *A Guide to True Peace*. For example, when Kelly writes that “we cannot take [the Presence] by storm,”(TD 42) I am sure he is echoing Madame Guyon’s words, “the interior is not a stronghold, to be taken by storm and violence; but a kingdom of peace, which is to be gained only by love.” (*Guide* 105)

Outside of these there are many of the classic writers whom Kelly quotes or names: Augustine and his *Confessions*; Meister Eckhart who also wrote persuasively of unrestrained devotion; Thomas à Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ*; Bernard of Clairvaux, John Bunyan, William Law; and the anonymous *Theologia Germanica* and Blaise Pascal, the mathematician who described his encounter with God with only the words “Fire! Fire! Fire!” The reach is wide, but these are people in whom Kelly met authentic “life and power.”

Two precious books and their authors deserve more than a list mention. The first is Jean Nicholas Grou who is mentioned directly in Kelly’s writings only once. But I was delighted to learn some years ago that Grou was one of Kelly’s favorites. Tom shared Grou’s book *Spiritual Maxims* with the Haverford group. Grou’s teaching about “infused prayer”(117, cf. RSW 40) is not unlike Kelly’s experience of being “prayed through.” Grou talks also of the awareness of the presence of God, of simplicity, of God’s tenderness toward us. Kelly notes his teaching on “the active way.” When Kelly writes that “the fundamental religious education of the soul is conducted by the Holy Spirit,”(RSW 39) I hear echoes of Grou’s beautiful book *How to Pray* in which multiple chapters are entitled “God Alone Teaches Us to Pray.” P ere Grou was a special soul friend to Kelly in the Holy Fellowship.

One other book that the Haverford group discovered together is noteworthy, partly because the spiritual experience described in it is virtually contemporary with Kelly's own breakthrough, and partly because its enthusiasm and passion are much like Tom Kelly's own. The book is Frank Laubach's *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. In it Laubach describes a new experience of God after seminary and after some twenty years as a Presbyterian missionary in the Philippines. Listen to his letter to his father dated September 28, 1931:

When one has struck some wonderful blessing that all mankind has a right to know about, no custom or false modesty should prevent him from telling it, even though it may mean the unbarring of his soul to the public gaze.

I have found such a way of life. I ask nobody else to live it, or even to try it. I only witness that it is wonderful, it is indeed heaven on earth. And it is very simple, so simple that any child could practice it. Just to pray inwardly for everybody one meets, and to keep on all day without stopping, even when doing other work of every kind.

This simple practice requires only a gentle pressure of the will, not more than a person can exert easily. It grows easier as the habit becomes fixed.

Yet it transforms life into heaven. Everybody takes on a new richness, and all the world seems tinted with glory. I do not of course know what others think of me, but the joy which I have within cannot be described. If there never were any other reward than that, it would more than justify the practice to me. (TD 44-5)

Surely anyone who has read Kelly can easily see why he would immediately embrace Laubach as one of his dear friends in the Blessed Community. They have both been reached freshly by God's Life and Power and can scarcely contain themselves, even if it means risking their respectability.

I share these names and books from Kelly's circle of friends as part of the ministry of introduction. I don't know really at what point encountering such new acquaintances invites us to more authentic life ourselves—or at what point we must have already broken through to a new level before they strike fire in our hearts. But I will tell you that at

42 • HOWARD R. MACY

the moment of readiness, when the angel troubles the waters, you will find among them soul friends dearer than most you have otherwise known.

In his use of the Bible and the devotional classics, Tom Kelly and countless others in the Blessed Community stand as a great cloud of witnesses. They are calling us to lives of peace and power and joy that we may scarcely have dreamed possible. They assure us that it is indeed possible, and they help show us the path so that we may find our way back to the source—so that we, too, may sing and dance as we discover the rivers of life springing up in our own hearts.

NOTES

1. *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), pp. 81-82. Subsequent references will be cited in the text with TD and the page numbers.
2. *The Eternal Promise* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 2nd ed. 1988), p. 108. Subsequent references will be cited in the text with EP and the page numbers.
3. *Reality of the Spiritual World* (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #21, 1942), p. 27. Subsequent references will be cited in the text with RSW and the page numbers.