

MEETING FOR WORSHIP

AUGUST 9, 2026

MUSICAL PRELUDE

WELCOME

HYMN

READINGS

From the philosopher William James, in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

“Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that there is an unseen order, and our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”

My next reading is a poem by Ron Padgett, titled “For a Moment”:

It’s funny how
if you just let go
of things they

will come to
you. That is to say
sometimes. So what

good is such a
generalization?
Ah, it makes you

feel good to say
such things from
time to time,

as if you actually
and really and truly
knew something!

My third reading is a quote attributed to the founder of the denomination I was raised in, Methodism. It is sometimes referred to as “John Wesley’s Rule”:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,

To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.

JOYS & CONCERNS

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

MESSAGE

SILENCE

HYMN

CLOSING WORDS

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.
And remember, everybody is doing the best they can.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

INTRODUCTIONS

ANNOUNCEMENTS

MESSAGE

Let me explain what I had in mind with those three readings, and how they might fit together. The first, from William James, seems to me such a good way to think about religion, something that is hard to define. It might be better not to define it, but some of us like to try. What are those people (including us) doing, and why are they doing it? Raise the question up into consciousness for a bit, then let it sink back down into just doing it. Many answers have been given. William James seems to me to articulate the basic situation very well: “one might say that there is an unseen order, and our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.” “Unseen order” pretty much covers it, from Orthodox Christianity to Taoism to the laws of physics, with Quakerism somewhere in between.

What are the ways or methods that we have to adjust ourselves? There are many. Here in Poplar Ridge Meeting three basic elements are used in our services: words, music, and silence. On any given First Day, as Quakers used to say, the proportions vary. You never know exactly what you are going to get, but there is a basic recipe.

All are important. I feel fortunate to be in a Quaker meeting that has music. There’s an irony to that, since our Quaker forebears thought music was a distraction, and maybe even sinful. But, fortunately, we have music, provided by gifted musicians, and present in the hymns we sing. Even if the hymns are not always your favorites, even if the words may not fit your individual taste or theology, even if sometimes you can’t stand a particular hymn, at least we are singing—which can be a spiritual practice. I feel fortunate to have found a tradition that values silence—a silence for inwardness, silence generally not encouraged in our world today. And we’re fortunate to have the opportunity to speak our own minds—“What can’st thou say?”—out of the silence.

Another element that helps us adjust ourselves to the unseen order is this building—you could call it a sacred space. Others have spaces with much more decoration, with statues and beautiful stained glass windows as a way to make the unseen visible. But personally, this place suits me. I love the plainness, the clean lines, the clear windows. Think of the symbolism of it!

And then there are the gathered people who sit with us—what we call community. For some, I think, that’s the most important element of all.

And of course, another way to try to harmoniously adjust to the unseen order is how we live our lives. That's where the John Wesley reading comes in. Trying to do as much good as we can. Some people seem to be better at doing good than others, and they seem to be able to do a lot more of it. This can make some of us feel inadequate or a little guilty. Personally, I like to add to John Wesley's Rule one more line, what my daughter calls "Jennifer's Rule": "Remember, everybody's doing the best they can."

Some religions set up creeds as a way to mediate between humans and the unseen order. They tell people what they should, or even must, believe. The early Quakers had an aversion to creeds and eliminated them, as they eliminated music, sacraments, steeples, and paid clergy. They eliminated a lot. The absence of creeds is one of the things that drew me to Quakerism. Required recitation of the Nicene Creed might have been enough to keep me away, to prevent me from implanting here. I think it's good if you can find a religious space where you're not required to say things that you really don't believe.

The little Ron Padgett poem was meant to suggest the spirit of agnosticism. "...as if you actually and really and truly knew something!" I thought that in my message today I would speak the language of agnosticism, the language of not knowing. In case any of you have tendencies toward the I-don't-know position, the more-questions-than-answers disposition, know that you are not alone.

One more way of adjusting ourselves to the unseen order is prayer. It is extremely important to some people, and I'm not speaking against it. I pray myself sometimes—quite frequently actually—though I may not be very good at it. It's something I feel agnostic about. It's a mysterious subject to me. But I do have some thoughts about it that I will share with you. Here is a little collage of some of those thoughts:

The roadside sign outside the church I drive past
on my way to the church I attend, said one day,
"Without prayer, life is not worth living."
"How presumptuous," I thought. "How disrespectful of atheists,
who are just as likely to be good people as you are."
And then I drove on to the church I attend, where there was a prayer.

Muslims pray five times a day, praising Allah, asking for Allah's mercy.
"Allah, Allah, Allah—Let thy tongue always be moist in remembrance of Allah."
I wonder why Allah wants so much attention.

I suppose it has more to do with us, promoting humility,
making us less self-centered, and keeping our tongues moist.

The minister's wife said, "I'll pray for you!"
She added, "Even if you don't want me to, I'll still pray for you!"
Should I have thanked her?

I remember my father saying, when his cousin Coyt,
who was like a brother, died of leukemia at fifty,
"My prayers weren't strong enough."

When Hank's daughter was having a difficult pregnancy, he prayed for her and for
the baby.

But he said he felt a little guilty for his prayer, so he added
"May all the pregnant women in the world be well, and their babies be healthy."
Shouldn't that be the way we pray, even if it is an afterthought?

Maybe prayer is just a form of longing.

But prayers of petition are only one kind.
A friend who was raised Catholic has many doubts
about the God she was taught to believe in.
"I don't know how God can allow so much suffering," she says.
But I know she prays.
"I like having someone to thank," she says.

When Melissa's son was diagnosed with a rare brain disease,
she asked her uncle Tom to pray for him. Tom, who was married three times
and was three times widowed, and was as intelligent
and benevolent as anyone I have ever known, said,
"Well, I am not good at praying, but I am very good at hoping,
and I will hope for him as strongly as I can."

I like watching baseball, but it always annoyed me
when a player who had hit a home run raised his eyes
and pointed to the sky, or when a batter coming to the plate
crossed himself, as if hits were gifts from God.
So who is God rooting for? I used to think.
But it doesn't bother me so much now.
Maybe hits do come with the help of a higher power,

from an unseen order we can't understand.
And it now seems to me like any other form of prayer.
Maybe I have become a little more open-minded.
It's not what I would do (if I ever managed to hit a home run),
but maybe it works for them.

Are all prayers created equal?
Are they of the people, by the people, for the people?
Who or what is listening, to so many prayers,
from North and South?
Abraham Lincoln, as he left Springfield,
getting on the train to go to Washington
for his second inauguration, to travel hundreds
of miles through cities and countryside
and the threat of assassination—said to the people
standing at the station in the chilly rain—
in a tough spot if anyone ever was, Lincoln
“drew himself up to his full height,”
“stood for several seconds in profound silence,”
“his eyes roved sadly over that sea of upturned faces,”
and he said, “Trusting in Him who can go with me,
and [at the same time] remain with you
and be every where for good,
let us confidently hope that all will be well.
To His care commending you, as I hope
in your prayers you will commend me,
I bid you an affectionate farewell.”
He never made it back to Springfield alive.
If Abraham Lincoln said something, I take it seriously.

In certain situations, praying is all we can do.

I think we pray because life has so much worry and sadness.

Among Quakers, there's a practice called “holding someone in the Light.”
Which I guess is a form of prayer. Light with a capital L.
Our good thoughts flowing out into the universe,
perhaps through our hearts, out into the universe,
and having a mysterious influence.
I wish someone would explain to me how it works.

But I guess this is not about explaining.
Instead we just say, "Please hold her in the Light."

So that's the end of my collage. Please don't think I'm trying to win an argument or persuade anyone of anything. Different perspectives can sit down together. Someone says, "Oh Holy One." Someone says, "God is change." Someone says "The Light." Someone prefers silence. We all need help from wherever we can find it. As for all those prayers going out, an overwhelming multitude, the unseen order can sort them out.

I hope that's not too many words. Now we go into the silence that we don't call silence but Waiting Worship, out of which other words may come.