

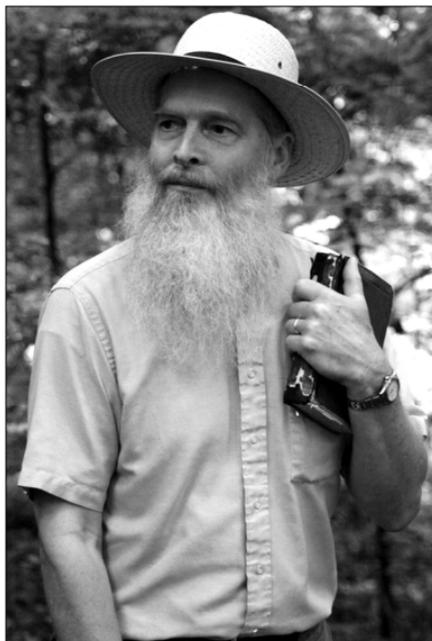
Max Carter

Hailing from Indiana where I grew up in Western Yearly Meeting of Friends, I now reside in Greensboro, North Carolina, with my wife (Jane) of 38 years, two dogs, and a garden. Now a member of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (FUM), I serve at Guilford College as director of Friends Center, campus ministry coordinator, and adjunct faculty in religious studies.

This set of devotions for *Fruit of the Vine* is based on the life of Levi Coffin (1798-1877). He was born into the New Garden,

North Carolina Quaker community, near what later became the campus of Guilford College. In 1826 Coffin left the Tarheel State for Indiana as part of the mass migration of Quakers leaving the slave culture of the South. He went on to become known as the “president” of the Underground Railroad (UGRR), and his home in Newport (today’s Fountain City) was dubbed the “Grand Central Station” of the UGRR. Levi Coffin and his wife, Catharine, used their home to host between 2,000 and 3,000 fugitives from slavery over a 20-year period. Information for these devotionals is drawn largely from his autobiography, *The Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*. (An online source may be found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/coffin.html#p12>.)

In the photo by Tamrah Dills (above), I am holding a battered copy of Levi Coffin’s *Reminiscences* down by the tree mentioned in the Saturday devotional.



BIBLE READING: Luke 4:18-19

Levi Coffin writes in his *Reminiscences* that his “conversion” to the cause of abolitionism came at the age of seven when he saw a “coffle” of slaves, chained in couples, being driven along the road past his family’s farm. His father asked one of the slaves why they were chained, and young Levi heard the response: “They have taken us away from our wives and children, and they chain us lest we should make our escape and go back to them” (p. 13). In the little boy’s mind, he thought of how terrible he would feel if his father were taken away from him.

From that moment on, Levi Coffin began developing a sensitivity to the beliefs and institutions that enslave us, sometimes literally in chains. For most of his life, he worked to end the “peculiar institution” of slavery.

In announcing the beginning of his ministry, Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and noted that among his commitments was “letting the oppressed go free” (paraphrase, NRSV). His words have often been interpreted as an intent to liberate people from their spiritual bondage—and that is certainly important—but many, including Levi Coffin, have taken this to be a message that God’s intended peaceable kingdom is a place where all manner of oppression is to be ended.

Whether we are chained to addictions and evil principalities or literally fettered by unjust systems and powers, or whether we have the power to help others be freed from the chains that bind them, we follow Jesus when we engage in loosing those bonds.

SONG: What Though I Cannot Break My Chain

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, help us recognize the chains that bind us and those around us. Empower us to remove them.

—Max Carter

BIBLE READING: Matthew 25:35

As a boy one of Levi Coffin's chores was to carry sacks of corn used to feed the hogs that his father let run loose in the woods. During the sows' time of raising their young, they needed supplement added to their foraging. While searching out the mothers' nests, Levi sometimes discovered fugitive slaves who, he writes, "used frequently to conceal themselves in the woods and thickets...waiting opportunities to make their escape to the North" (p. 20). Levi would take bacon and cornbread in his sacks for the slaves, sitting with them while listening to their stories of suffering.

This direct encounter with "the other" further solidified Levi's commitment to do whatever he could to end the oppression of these fellow human beings. It must sometimes have been frightening to a young boy to encounter strangers whose appearance and demeanor were so adversely affected by their situation and who, on occasion, were armed and ready to shoot rather than risk being taken captive. Yet seeing them, too, as children of God led Levi to overcome his natural fear, reaching out to feed the hungry as Christ commands.

Do we intentionally seek to hear the stories of those who are different from us? Whom might we help along the way as we go about our daily chores? How might our own "sacks of corn" also carry nourishment to others?

SONG: Give Yourself to Love

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: God, enable us to carry, along with our own load, whatever we might be able to use in loving others.

—Max Carter

BIBLE READING: Acts 5:29

It was illegal to aid enslaved Africans in their flight to freedom, to give them harbor, or even to educate them. They were viewed as property and thus “stolen” if spirited away. And because they recognized education as the first step toward liberty, owners intentionally kept their slaves illiterate. Penalties for violating laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act were severe.

Levi Coffin, however, lived by the promptings of the Light in his conscience. As he writes in his autobiography, “The dictates of humanity came in opposition to the law of the land, and we ignored the law” (p. 25). In 1819, his cousin Vestal Coffin became the first known “conductor” on the Underground Railroad in the New Garden Quaker community of North Carolina, and Levi joined in the activity enthusiastically. In 1821 he joined with others in the Friends meeting to open their little brick schoolhouse as a “Sabbath School” where slaves learned how to read the Bible—a backdoor means of teaching literacy.

Nearly all who served as conductors or as teachers in the Sabbath School eventually had to migrate to free states which meant leaving family, friends, and property behind—the price paid for fidelity to conscience. What price are we willing to pay when the “dictates of humanity” contradict the “laws of the land”?

SONG: That Cause Can Neither Be Lost Nor Stayed

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, help me recognize those eternal verities which sometimes come in conflict with culture and custom. Give me the strength of conviction to stay true to my Guide in choosing rightly between Christ and culture.

—Max Carter

BIBLE READING: John 8:32

David Caldwell was in his mid-eighties and one of the most revered and important men in North Carolina when Levi Coffin was a young boy. A Presbyterian minister, founder of the state's first college, and noted patriot, Caldwell was also a slave owner. He gave one of his slaves, Ede, as a gift to his newly married son who was about to move to a distant community with his pregnant wife. After hearing this news, Ede ran away with an infant child to the New Garden woods, hoping for a change in her circumstances.

The change she got was coldness, sickness, and hunger. Desperate, Ede sought out the Coffin family farmhouse where she was taken in and given hospitality. Upon hearing her story, young Levi was convinced that a grave breach of Christianity had been made and told his parents he had to confront the Caldwells. To do so would subject them to possible prosecution for violating fugitive laws, not to mention pitting the little boy against an icon of the state! But Levi knew he had to “speak Truth to power” and was given the blessing of his parents to go to the Caldwell plantation, a five-mile walk from the Coffin farm.

Levi did confront the Caldwells—and they relented! Ede was not sent away. Sometimes it's not by human might or power that victory is won. Truth can be mightier than “the sword,” even when wielded by a David before a Goliath.

SONG: Once to Every Man and Nation

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, give me the strength and wisdom to recognize when to stand against those powers which violate the Truth of a higher order. Grant me the courage to “speak Truth to power” in love.

—Max Carter

BIBLE READING: 2 Corinthians 4:7

Once while transporting two fugitive “guests” in his false-bottom wagon (a specially built wagon with a compartment used to conceal slaves), Levi Coffin was stopped by a bounty hunter who was seeking runaways. Knowing that truth-telling was a vital testimony of Friends, he figured that Levi would have to respond honestly to a direct question: “Tell me, Coffin, what are you *really* carrying in the bottom of that wagon?”

Providentially, on that particular day, Levi was carrying a load of clay pots—in addition to the two stowaways in the hidden space underneath. He truthfully responded, “Earthen vessels; just earthen vessels” (www.guilfordian.com/archives).

It was not easy for Coffin and others to juggle all the balls of their Quaker testimonies in the air at the same time. Their commitment to the equality of all humans was as strong as their testimonies of peace and integrity. They couldn’t protect their guests by whipping out a six shooter, nor were they comfortable lying about harboring fugitives. Every effort was made to honor the sanctity of each deeply held commitment of faith. But every so often, they fudged a little!

How committed are we to maintaining our values and principles, especially when the going gets tough? Are we able creatively to find a third way between conceding and compromising? Or in such difficult situations, do we turn out to have “feet of clay”?

SONG: Have Thine Own Way

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: God, grant me the strength to stand for my convictions and convict me when I prove to lack the integrity of my principles.

—Max Carter

BIBLE READING: Acts 10:9-16

One of the oddities of Quaker history in the mid-1800s was that a Friend could be “disowned” or proscribed from involvement in the affairs of the Church either for involvement in slavery *or* for joining an anti-slavery society! Quaker culture at the time feared “mixing with the world’s people” and the occasional violence and disorderliness that accompanied anti-slavery society meetings. Even Levi Coffin was proscribed from his committee work in Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1842 for his insistence on working alongside other Christians in anti-slavery society activities. In 1843, such actions led to a separation into two bodies in the yearly meeting—one abolitionist and one anti-slavery but leery of associating with the abolitionist cause. Fortunately, the separation was healed before the Civil War, but the pain remained.

It is tricky business navigating between avoiding being unequally yoked and recognizing that of God in others. There was value for early Friends—and continues to be for us—in maintaining certain standards and not conforming to the world. However, there are times when a greater cause may call on us to find common cause with those who aren’t quite like us but whom God may also bless in their efforts. In times like that, it is good to “put our sheet to the wind” and pray that God’s Spirit blows us in the right direction!

SONG: All God’s Critters Got a Place in the Choir

PRAAYER SUGGESTION: God, help me recognize when to “maintain my hedges” and when to join with others who differ from me as I further your own purposes. While maintaining the strength of my convictions, in the words of the old Quaker query, enable me to “think it possible that [I] may be mistaken.”

—Max Carter

BIBLE READING: Jeremiah 17:7-8

Throughout his life, Levi Coffin was faced with stern challenges to his convictions and well-being. In fact, *Reminiscences* was published at the end of his life to help resolve his bankruptcy that came about from insistence in dealing only with free labor goods as a merchant. Enduring the hardship of business failure, having to leave his homeland for a free state, being ostracized by his own Quaker community, and even having his life threatened—none of these things dissuaded Levi Coffin from remaining committed to his ideals.

On the land that Levi and his wife Catharine once farmed in the New Garden, North Carolina community (present-day Greensboro and the campus of Guilford College) remains a remnant of the old woods used by fugitives to hide out. Deep in those woods is a Tulip Poplar tree—65-inches wide and 148-feet tall—recently cored by a botanist and determined to be 350 years old. That tree was a silent witness to the events of Levi Coffin’s youth and to the drama that unfolded in those woods as whites and blacks, Quakers and non-Quakers alike worked together to “speak Truth to power” and bear witness to that of God in all people.

Each new class of students at Guilford is taken to that tree and told the stories of the Underground Railroad and the values manifested in the lives of people like Levi Coffin. They too are encouraged to lead lives of integrity and, like a tree planted by the waters, not to be moved—to let their spiritual roots run deep in the testimonies that have been lived out within sight of that mighty tree.

SONG: [Like a Tree Planted by the Waters,] I Shall Not Be Moved

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God, help me to sink my roots deep in your Truth.

—Max Carter