

What Is a Holy Day?

by Philip Gulley

When I began attending a Quaker meeting, after being raised Catholic, I kept waiting for Pastor Taylor at the Danville Friends Meeting to announce the holy days of obligation when we would be required to attend church, those eleven extra days of the year commemorating various saints and events in the life of Jesus.

I didn't care for holy days of obligation when I was a kid. I'd be outside playing with my friends and my mother would call me into the house.

"You need to take a bath and put on your nice clothes, we're going to church," she'd say.

"Why?" I would ask. "It's not Sunday. Why do I have to go to church today? Please don't make me go."

"We have to go. It's the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is the day Mary died and ascended into heaven."

"How do we know that? We can't possibly know that. Please don't make me go."

But there was no talking her out of it. August 15th The Feast of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom I never met, but every year had to go to her funeral.

I don't know why they called it a feast. There was never a feast. If they had fed us something, maybe I would have liked it.

So you can imagine my delight when I was told Quakers didn't believe in holy days, which cut my required attendance from 63 church services a year to 52, a 17% reduction in church attendance, which, when you're a teenager, is nothing to sneeze at. It's like being handed this big present. So I felt led to become a Quaker and as a result freed up 11 days a year. I wasn't interested in why Quakers didn't believe in holy days. I just liked that they didn't.

Then I turned 19 and began attending Plainfield Meeting, where I took a class in Quakerism, and discovered the Quaker take on holy days was more nuanced than I had been taught. It wasn't that we didn't believe in holy days. It was that we believed every day was holy. Like everyone else, we met on Sunday, but we didn't believe Sundays were any more sacred than Tuesdays or Saturdays. For that matter, Christmas and Easter were no more holy than any other day. We were to live as if each day were holy. This meant that while I only had to observe 63 holy days as a Catholic, as a Quaker I would have to observe 365 holy days, which I feared would lead to an 83% increase in church attendance. I almost went back to being Catholic.

But I stayed a Quaker, and now every day is holy. Not because I'm a Quaker, but because each day is a gift that comes wrapped with a bow and every morning we get to open that gift. And if we have the right frame of mind, if we decide to be loving that day, if we let ourselves be moved and inspired that day, if we are grateful that day, then it becomes a holy day.

Days aren't holy because the calendar says so. Calendars don't determine whether or not a day is holy. You determine that. I determine that. So every day can be holy.

A few years ago, I participated in a retreat at Mundelein Seminary in Chicago and was discussing the idea of holy days with another pastor, this idea that every day is holy. And he said, "When every day is holy, eventually no day will be holy."

He compared it to a banquet, saying if every meal were a banquet, eventually no meal would be a banquet, implying that the regularity and frequency of something would jeopardize the value of it.

I pointed out to him that I breathe oxygen every minute and have since I was born, but that it hasn't lessened my need or appreciation for it.

Calendars and church officials and frequency don't determine whether or not a day is holy. You determine that. I determine that.

"This is the day the Lord has made. . .," god makes the day.

". . . I will rejoice and be glad in it." You and I determine whether or not it will be holy.

God makes the day. You and I get to decide if it will be a holy day.

What is a holy day?

A holy day is a day that starts with enthusiasm and ends with gratitude.

It is any day apathy and indifference are laid to rest. It is any day the hungry are fed.

And a day the last become first.

A holy day is any day a child is educated, a song is sung, a picture is painted.

It is any day a Muslim, Christian, and Jew walk into a bar, not because it is a joke, but because they are friends. It is any day black lives matter.

Any day a police officer protects and serves every last citizen, and is treated with dignity in return.

A holy day is any day our anger and frustration inspire us to mend the world, not destroy it.

It is any day women don't fear for their safety.

It is any day the poor and the elderly are well-housed, and not warehoused.

The calendar doesn't determine whether a day is holy. We do. God makes the day, but you and I make it holy.

Philip Gulley is a pastor at Fairfield Friends Church, and author of Living the Quaker Way, The Evolution of Faith, and numerous other books. The above article is a message given at Fairfield Friends Church and was published with other messages on his website as Grace Talks.