

Transgressing Toward Transformation

Calvin Coolidge, was the 30th president of the United States. He was in office for six years, 1923 until 1929. He was vice-president under Warren G. Harding, who died in office, thus making Coolidge the president. And, he was followed by Herbert Hoover. (1872 - 1933) Coolidge died a very young man at the age of 60.

Coolidge, among other things, restored confidence in the office of the president and in the White House after a series of scandals. He left office a very popular president. He developed a reputation as a man who said very little and who had a wry sense of humor.

He said so little that once at a White House reception a reporter went up to him and said, "Mr. President, I have a bet with a colleague that I can get more than three words out of you." Coolidge responded, "You lose." And walked off.

One of the best known stories about him, at least best known to me and often used by preachers over the years, is that one Sunday Coolidge went to church. His wife did not go with him. On his return to the White House she asked him how the church service was. "Okay," he said. "What was the sermon about?" she asked. "Sin," he said. "And what did the preacher say about it," she inquired. "He's against it."

I would imagine that most people think of the various expressions of organized Christianity as being, in one way or another, in the sin management business. Who knows where this began. It is not the purpose of this talk to trace that history. Perhaps things got off to a bad start with the horribly mistranslated first words attributed to Jesus, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Repentance for many some litany of confession of things they think they have done wrong. Usually, according to what tribe you grew up in, this list consists of rather petty and, for the most part, sexual things. Or, things that lead to sexual things.

There have been a couple of periods in the history of this country that have been labeled times of "great awakening." The term came from a group of Puritans who were nicknamed "the new lights" and one of their primary spokespersons was a Congregational preacher by the name of Jonathan Edwards. In 1741 he preached a

sermon, you can go on line and read it, called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It is said that people would literally quake during the sermon and shout out during it, “What must I do to be saved, to avoid this?” The graphic imagery that Edwards used was that of God holding the sinner by the strand of a spider’s web over the burning pit of hell ready, if not eager, to let the sinner go.

I’ll read to you part of the sermon. You can determine for yourself whether you would ever go back to hear someone like this again:

“The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing less but to be cast into the fire. He is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times as abominable in his eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours. . . . O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in! It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath that you are held over in the hand of God . . . You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of Divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder.”

It is a result of horrible theology like this that most people to this day, even in this room, reflexively think of religious beliefs as being things that if believed just so will guarantee them a place in heaven which, in usual depictions, sounds like the most boring of all places.

This is so sad to me. It is so far from the teachings of Jesus and of all the great spiritual traditions.

As you know, Roy Moore of Alabama was just elected to be in the run-off in the election to fill the senate seat vacated by Jeff Sessions. Moore was elected to be chief justice of the supreme court of Alabama in 2001 but removed in 2003 for his refusal to remove a monument containing the Ten Commandments, which was commissioned by him, from the grounds of the Federal Building in Alabama. He was elected again to the same position in 2013 but was suspended in 2016 because he directed probate judges to continue to enforce the state’s ban on same sex marriage even though that had been judged unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court. He has also stated that 9/11 was the result of God’s punishing the

Unites States from becoming ungodly. Not far from the theology of Jonathan Edwards.

During the 2003 debacle Bishop John Shelby Spong had accepted an invitation to speak to a church in Alabama. I'm sure this was arranged a couple of years ahead of time.

Spong is a much braver man than I am. He kept his commitment to speak at that church. He asked the people there if they supported Roy Moore or not. The crowd was, as is the case today, divided.

"But no one," Spong said, "opposes the Ten Commandments. Don't you all believe in the Ten Commandments?" Every hand in the place went up.

I would have stopped there. Spong didn't. He went on, "Who would like to stand and recite all ten of the Ten Commandments?" No hand went up. "Well, he said, "maybe collectively we could come up with them." That crowd got six. I'm sure you'd do better.

My point is that some people with fervent religious convictions say they believe things that they are absolutely ignorant of. By the way, there is a difference between ignorance and stupidity.

(In case you are not aware of this, there is not just one listing of the Ten Commandments. There are two and there are different.

(See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ten_Commandments])

I am the LORD thy God
Thou shalt have no other gods
No graven images or likenesses
Not take the LORD's name in vain
Remember the sabbath day
Honour thy father and thy mother
Thou shalt not kill
Thou shalt not commit adultery

Thou shalt not steal
Thou shalt not bear false witness
Thou shalt not covet

In all my years of attending churches and listening to sermons I have never once heard a sermon on the commandment not to covet. Indeed, American culture is built on it.

Every year in the United States 4,000 churches close their doors. One of the reasons is that a growing percentage of the population experience Christianity, at least their experience of what they know as Christianity, as anti-homosexual, judgmental and hypocritical. Many people think that, from the Christian perspective, sin is what happens in people's bedrooms. That is, who they should love and how they should love them. The condemnation, stigmatization, and discrimination of anyone are contrary to the inclusive love of God expressed in Jesus' ministry and teachings.

Roger Wolsey, who calls himself a progressive Christian, has written, "Jesus came to take our sins away, not our minds." The way I would say it is that Jesus was about totally redefining what people thought sin was by celebrating an all-loving God, practicing a subversive spirituality and creating a compassionate community of faith.

In working on this talk I ran across some words of Martin Luther King, Jr. I had not seen before:

"One of the great liabilities of life is that all too many people find themselves living amid a great period of social change, and yet they fail to develop the new attitudes, the new mental responses, that the new situation desires. They end up sleeping through a revolution."

We are divided. No one doubts that. Perhaps it is the human condition. Wise and useful spirituality is about putting the separated by together again. Paul Tillich, a theologian who had enormous influence on me, defined God as that which desires to put the separated together.

I would argue that most people all over the world interpret any religious or spiritual experience that they have tribally. That is, through the inherited concepts of our respective culture or history. Consequently, most people all over the world, regardless of the religious or spiritual tradition they are exposed to, imagine a god who rewards those who uphold the moral order and punishes those who transgress that order. That is our experience with human authority, so why not with God? Why wouldn't God, as the ultimate authority, be the same?

What you find, however, in the biblical tradition and especially in the teachings of Jesus is something that is radically different from this. Throughout the biblical tradition those who experience intimacy with the Sacred do so not by avoiding transgression but by discovering the extent of what they refer to as God's "tender mercies" and "forgiveness." In fact, it is hard to find a major character in the entire biblical narrative who is without some serious moral flaw or failing.

Abraham and Isaac both lie about their wives being their sisters for fear of being killed. Jacob is a deceiver. Moses commits murder. David commits both adultery and murder. In the Christian testament the Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus and of the five women mentioned in that genealogy, one is a prostitute, one pretends to be a prostitute in order to become pregnant by her father-in-law, one is an adulteress and the other two are inferred to have bad reputations. Paul, before his Damascus Road experience, boasted of his history of persecuting, even killing, followers of Jesus.

At the time of Jesus there was no more religious law-abiding group than those called the Pharisees. They were the leaders of those who tried to find favor with God by keeping the law and they were, in spite of the unearned bad reputation they have been given over the centuries, probably very good at being very good. Even Jesus acknowledged that. Jesus taught, however, that God's ultimate purpose is not that we would become holy by avoiding transgression, but that we would become holy by becoming merciful as God is merciful.

Jesus teaches that what grieves the heart of God is not our behavior but the fact that our hearts are prone to wander from an awareness of God's presence. An awareness of God's presence is the essence of prayer and Jesus was constantly aware of that presence in a way that we seldom are. Real transgression is a lack of

awareness of this presence. We, as you well know from your own personal experience, are so easily distracted.

I think one of the two pernicious evils inflicted on people, usually by a misunderstanding of the Christian tradition, is that we are somehow to become perfect. There is a horribly mistranslated passage from the Jesus narrative we call Matthew that says, in the most familiar version, “Be ye perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.” A more accurate translation would be, “Grow up. You’re children of God. Now, live like it. Live out your God-given identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

We are not to become sinless. We are to become merciful. Perfection is a mathematical concept and is useless in the spiritual arena.

In case you are wondering, the other pernicious evil inflicted on people from the misunderstood Christian perspective is that somehow Jesus did something to get us off the hook of becoming aware of who we are and how we play out our identity on this planet in the brief time that we have.

The only absolute that I know that we can count on is love. Not believing. Not belonging. Just loving. And, most people won’t/can’t get there unless they are willing to transgress tribal boundaries and enter the realm of reality Jesus talked about. Actually, we are already there. We are just not aware of it most of time. You don’t have to go anywhere to get to heaven.

The only absolute that we can count on is love. We suffer from being separated from each other. What separates us is the belief in one form or another that we are unlovable. But, it is only because we are isolated that we think we are unlovable.

If you want to see who we truly are, look at the rescue efforts after Harvey. Didn’t matter what your politics were, or your religion, or your skin color, or your economic status, or your educational background. What mattered was that we needed each other.

When that crisis goes away what comes back to take its place are the messages our culture sends us. You and I, if we want to follow Jesus and his teachings, have a

responsibility to say to ourselves and to each other that those messages are horse-
feathers. (I would use another word but it is not appropriate here.)

The only absolute that we can count on is love.

In a private letter to Robert S. Marcus on the occasion of the death of Mr. Marcus's son, Albert Einstein wrote:

“A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.”

We have to be willing to cross the boundaries that separate us. I'm calling this talk “Transgressing Toward Transformation.” If we don't transgress, we don't experience the possibility of connection.

The prefix “trans” means “to cross over.” You find it in the word “transport” and all the words related to that. It means crossing a boundary. The word “transcendent” doesn't primarily mean “up” but “across.”

Even if you were not raised in a specific religion, if you were raised in this country, you were raised in a “religious culture” that embraces legalism as a way of finding security in both the tribe, however defined, and with “God.”

The only religious holiday in this country that is also a legal holiday is Christmas. Christmas is about getting stuff. But, only under the condition that you have been good. Because, Santa Clause, who is a stand-in for God, is watching to see who has been naughty or nice. He's making a list and checking it twice. So, you better watch out. You better be good. This is the operative theology that most people have.

The teachings of Jesus, which we have been looking at in the Gospel of Thomas for months now, are an invitation for us to step out of this mind-set, to transgress,

into an entirely new territory; to step across a boundary that can feel both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time.

It was thirteen years ago that I went to my first meeting of the Jesus Seminar. I was so excited about that. I was going to be meeting people I had been reading for several year. Stephen Patterson, a member of the Seminar, had written a book on the Gospel of Thomas. Even then I was studying it. Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Shelby Spong, Robert Funk, Karen Armstrong and so many others would be there. After one of the worship services here, I was at the door assigned to me speaking to people as they left the worship service. Someone said, "See you next week." I said, "No, I won't be here next week. I'm going to the Jesus Seminar." This person looked at me and with absolutely seriousness said to me, "Really? Aren't you afraid that will disturb your faith?"

Rumi tells a story in which a sage hears someone shouting and screaming for help. When the sage gets closer, he sees a man standing in a circle and shouting, "Help! Help! I'm burning, I'm burning." the sage says, "Why don't you come out of the circle?" The man says, "I'm surrounded by fire, if I come out, I will burn and will get hurt." Upon hearing this, the sage bends down, erases part of the circle, and tells the man, "Here's a door, now you can come out."

We confine ourselves in self-made boundaries. We begin to think there is no way out. And, unless we are willing to transgress those boundaries, we begin go think that the boundaries are what we are about. To this Jesus says, "No."

In this light, and because, believe it or not, we will soon have completed our journey through the Gospel of Thomas, I want to emphasize something I've already tried to say today:

Jesus is never angry with sinners. Just with people who think they are not. It is okay to be a transgressor. I didn't just say any or everything goes. We have commitments we make to each other. The only thing that seemed to get Jesus goat was when people forgot who they were. He certainly got miffed at the religious establishment for forgetting what their work was about. What Jesus taught is that straying from an awareness that we live and move and have our being inside Sacred Mystery was and is a big deal.

We have to cultivate non-conformity. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet, wrote: “to be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

And Jiddu Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher who died in 1986 wrote, “It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”

All of which brings us to the teaching from Thomas we are up to for today.

As you know what Jesus had as a primary theme was what he called the rule of God. In this realm of spirituality the two primary features were forgiveness and inclusion. And, to describe what this experience of the Sacred was like, Jesus told stories that we call parables. You don’t find a lot of parables in the Gospel of Thomas. But here is one:

The divine Realm
is like a man who owned
a field with treasure
hidden away in it.
Unaware of it he died,
leaving it to his son,
who also knew nothing about it.
After taking possession of the land
the son practically gave
it away for nothing.
But the one who bought
it began plowing
and discovered the treasure,
and immediately started lending money at
interest to
whomever he pleased.

The theme of a treasure hidden in a field is in rabbinic literature. You find it in the wisdom book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures. You find it in Aesop’s fables. Jesus was fond of this metaphor and used it, evidently, frequently.

It is used both in the sense of “you have something valuable you are unaware of” and “in order to obtain the treasure (which you already have) is a costly and difficult undertaking.”

I’ve said that our true Selves is what you saw in the rescue efforts after Harvey. That is who we truly are. It is a precious, priceless treasure. And, most of the time, we live not expressing this, being unaware of it, allowing it to remain hidden as we go about what some refer to as “getting back to normal.”

One of the reasons I have this passion about increasing religious intelligence is that most people who call themselves Christian have no inkling of the treasure hiding in plain sight in their tradition. Jesus was drawing on a wisdom that was in his tradition. We have to transgress a boundary to get into that tradition to see it for what it is. It was not the so-called Christian tradition. Jesus was a Jewish mystic.

There are many ways to interpret the parables of Jesus. They are like diamonds you can hold up and see different facets of truth.

Here is one interpretation:

These are not three different people but the same person. We start with a man who has a treasure in his field but he does not know about it. When he loses faith or awareness in his true identity and focuses on his ego, he is considered dead. The son became weary of the world and sold the part of the mind he controlled to the Self in exchange for peace. He began to profit by sharing his teachings with others. The first two live on the surface. We have to disturb that which is superficial to find what is deep. Richard Rohr says that the sin of our time is the sin of superficiality.

In the Gospel of Thomas the teachings of Jesus that are put forth to and for us urge us to get up, stand on our true feet, and achieve a vertical axis by which and from which to see “what is.” This journey through Thomas has not been one designed to lead us to certainty. That is NOT what Jesus was about. Jesus’ teachings are designed to lead us into deeper and deeper wells of wonder and wisdom. Our work, as I so hope you remember, is to bring forth that which is within us. Doing that

leads us to wholeness. Failing to do that leads to lostness. While the world is not our enemy, living on the horizontal axis is being asleep, missing the treasure.

Go back sometime and either listen to or read these talks or sit with a good translation of Thomas itself. You will see that it focuses on universal, not narrow, boundary confined, spiritual practices: attention, memory, mindfulness, present moment awareness. And, Jesus also focuses on the core practices of inner and outer honesty and letting go. There are some pretty rich nuggets to unearth both in Thomas and in ourselves.

The field that we have been given an opportunity to plow in our lifetime is much vaster than most of us ever imagined. And, to plow it we must be willing to transgress.

I want to begin to end this talk with two quotes. One is from Paul Tillich whom I quoted a moment ago. He said, “Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.” Then there is this by Walt Whitman, “Re-examine all you have been told. Dismiss what insults your soul.”

I understand why a growing number of people don’t want to identify as being Christian. That’s fine. The word “Christian” has come to be associated with behaviors, stances, and attitudes that they don’t want to be associated with. But I personally think our world would be a better world if we will be willing to be identified as people who sought to follow, to embody the teachings of Jesus. In our flooded world he comes with a rescue boat and never says anything about our religious orientation, political party, education background, economic status, ethnicity, immigration status or skin color. He just says, “Get in the boat.” “Follow me.” And, at our best, we behave that way.

If we are going to have a better, more peaceful world, our true loyalties must be inclusive, not divisive. They must transcend whatever we think separates us. Huston Smith, whom I was lucky enough to hear when I was at Harvard, was the authority on world religions. He died at the end of last year. He wrote these words, “Twenty-five hundred years ago it took an exceptional individual like Diogenes to

exclaim, 'I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world.' Today we must all be struggling to make those words our own."

The field that we are to plow is not just our own backyard but as much of the perennial wisdom tradition as we can find. And, keep digging. Let's commit these kinds of transgressions so that we can move more and more into transformation. My prayer for you and for me is that we be protected from the powerful temptation to build a cage of beliefs - be they religious or political - and go to sleep there.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.