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Congratulations! You May Be a Loser!

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You may have noticed that the preview, and summaries, that are sent out about Ordinary Life are beginning to have a new look to them. On the banner heading, instead of the usual Ordinary Life logo, which we'll continue to use because of both its history and validity, I have placed images of the cosmos.

There are several reasons for this.

For one thing we have to move beyond words and ideas if we are to have religious understandings and spiritual practices that are useful. We have to have a God that is at least as big as our growing understanding of the cosmos.

The fact is that most of us don't have such a "God understanding" and, certainly, most of us haven't had for most of our lives. We have not had a relationship to the awesome mysterious and intimately loving God that Jesus had. We have had a problem solving God that we turned to when we needed help and, if the help didn't come in the form we wanted it, a God we gave up on or found increasingly irrelevant. Consequently, at least this has been my experience over the years as a spiritual teacher, offering spiritual direction and in my counseling practice, most people have ended up with a threatening God and most people live in a non-friendly universe.

Another reason we have to move beyond words and ideas if we are to have religious understandings and spiritual practices that are useful, is because each and every one of us, your teacher included is situated in a culture that operates at a very low level of ego

development. Consequently, we spend most of our waking hours immersed in an atmosphere of win-lose where any notion of intimate union with God - whom I am calling Sacred Mystery - is simply beyond the minds of most people.

Consequently, if we are going to inhabit and live out the spirit of the revolutionary mystic Jesus, we are going to have to move out of the world of words and ideas and into the realm of non-dual mind which can only be reached with non-dual means.

Amazingly, dual mind information and knowledge can sometimes be used to unseat dual mind's information and knowledge. Not always. Some people will defend as true things we know are no longer true regardless of the evidence with which they are presented.

For example, it was once believed that some divine being created the universe and that these two entities - divine being and the universe - are separate and static. This is the position of Classical Theism. Classical Theism's image of God is of a God who sits.

Then came what the theologians and philosophers and physicists called Process Theism. This is where Divine Being and created being share the same order of being. Now, because of the discoveries about the constantly evolving, expanding universe these same theologians, philosophers and physicists are using a word "Panentheism" which means that God is in the world and the world is in God though God transcends the world. No, you can't get your mind around that. That's the point.

At the hard information and knowledge level the universe is billions of years old, is expanding, is larger than our minds can comprehend, and is constantly

evolving. Yet, in a poll taken this year, 42% of Americans believe God created humans in their present form 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. That's shocking.

Speaking of shocking, how many of you have ever heard of Stanley Hauerwas?

Dr. Hauerwas, born in 1940 in Dallas, Texas is described as a theologian, ethicist and public intellectual. He has been a professor at Notre Dame and Duke and is currently chair in Theological Ethics at the University of Aberdeen. He is considered by many to be one of the world's most influential theologians and was named "America's Best Theologian" by Time Magazine in 2001.

(Here is a link to learn more - http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Hauerwas)

He has written many books. Most notably "Where Resident Aliens Live" and "The Peaceable Kingdom." Once several years ago he spoke here, in this very space, to a packed room and managed to offend everybody in the room some how. Dr. Jim Bankston said about him later, "He is an equal opportunity offender."

A number of us on staff here, under the leadership of Dr. Matt Russell, were discussing ways to make St. Paul's a more welcoming congregation. Something was said about parents wanting to give their children Christian values so that they would be safe in the world. Danny Yang, one of the clergy on staff here, said Christian values didn't and shouldn't make people safe and quoted Hauerwas. I asked him later to give me to full quote and he sent it to me. Here it is:

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. . . nothing is more indicative of liberalism's corruption of Christians than the assumption that we can have children who will not have to suffer for our convictions. That obviously produces a view that there is nothing worth living and/or dying for.

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I said in the very first talk I offered in Ordinary Life that one of my goals was to leave those of you who came here with molasses on one hand and feathers in the other. Meaning, I have wanted to raise issues and questions in the religious and spiritual arenas for you to think about and, hopefully, make the agony of answering them so intense that the only way we can deal with them is by a thinking that takes us outside of our usual ways of constructing our lives.

It has not been a conscious intention of mine to offend anyone. I have, of course, offended people.

Especially when I went after the Fundamentalists and biblical literalists immediately after 9/11 has that been the case. If some of the information presented by the scholars I've presented in here is not offensive it is shocking to many people, even people who have long histories attending church services of one kind or another,

We have been so acculturated to think of Jesus and Christianity in ways that we are brought up short to be reminded that Jesus was not a Christian and that he did not know the collection of writings we have come to call "the Bible." He did not take his sermons, indeed he probably did not preach sermons, from the lectionary. What he did "preach" was substantially at odds not only with the culture of his day but with his religion as well.

Even people who can accept that, which is fairly easy to do because it is right there in the narrative of his life, can easily lose a here-and-now connection with the fact that some people wanted to kill Jesus from the very beginning of his public ministry and, of course, succeeded in doing so in the end.

What is more difficult to get our minds around is that what Jesus had to say is also at odds with our culture and our religion as well. Stanley Hauerwas is offensive because his message is very close to that of Jesus.

Here is some Hauerwas quotes:

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Never think that you need to protect God. Because anytime you think you need to protect God, you can be sure you are worshipping an idol.

* * *

Jesus is Lord, and everything else is bullshit.

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A social order bent on producing wealth as an end in itself cannot avoid the creation of a people whose souls are superficial and whose daily life is captured by sentimentalities. They will ask questions like "why does a good God let bad things happen to good people?" Such people cannot imagine that a people once existed who produced and sang the psalms. If we learn to say "God," we will do so with the prayer, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me."

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Peace is a deeper reality than violence.

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Free is not how many of our citizens feel - with our overstocked medicine cabinets, burglar alarms, vast ghettos, and drug culture. Eighteen hundred New Yorkers are murdered every year by their fellow citizens in a city whose police department is larger than the standing army of many nations. The adventure went sour.

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One more:

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I think no one knows what humanitarian intervention means. If I were a person who was non-American, I would think humanitarian intervention is just another name for United States imperialism.

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Now, there may be some of you who are more offended that I, actually he, used the word "bullshit" than what he said about wealth, violence, freedom and American imperialism.

He is offensive.

So was and is Jesus. That is lost on most of us. We want the teachings of Jesus to function in our behalf, for our well-being as we define "well-being." We do not want to be upset or offended. I don't.

Years ago, I read what I think is the perfect example of the functional mentality of much of contemporary Christianity. Dom Helder Camara, Roman Catholic bishop in South America, said not long before he was assassinated for his stand on social justice: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

A dis-empowered people will hear and respond to the message of Jesus in a much different way than those who are in positions of power. If we can't acknowledge that, we are going to defend ourselves from what Jesus has to say to us. A fact is that some people read and interpret what Jesus has to say as support for the status quo and some see what he has to say as a recipe for social change. There are groups who support each position. What is good news for some is bad news for others and vice versa.

I find being on a consciously chosen spiritual path, as I believe does everyone who takes it up, so exciting and enlivening. The e-mails I get that I subscribe to that support my spiritual practice, the books I read for this purpose, the people I talk to or offer spiritual direction to, the spiritual teachers living and dead I learn from are, I am absolutely convinced, constitute one of the major things that keeps me young in body, mind and spirit. If you have ever, even for a second, set foot on the path from ego to Self, you know what I am talking about. It is one of the most rewarding things you can ever undertake.

It is also one of the most frustrating. What path do you choose turns far more difficult than you first thought. Doesn't matter what it is. It is difficult and disappointing. And, after a while, you learn that the teacher you have chosen to learn from is full not only

of spiritual wisdom but also of a substantial amount of pure crap.

Recently someone who attends this gathering by e-mail and podcast sent me a news article of a minister in Montgomery, Alabama who, though he knew he had full-blown AIDS, had sexual relations with a number of women in his congregation. In the church building!

There are many problems I have as a spiritual teacher. One is my my failure to embody what Jesus teaches.

At the conference that so juiced me up recently one of the presenters was Rob Bell. I remember clearly listening several years ago to a sermon of his I had recorded. In it he was talking about his decision to move his family to the inner city in Detroit, move to having only one car and other things he thought were more in line with the issues of social justice as seen in the teachings of Jesus. I thought: "That's admirable. I'm not sure I'm up to that."

That is one of the problems I have as a spiritual teacher.

Here is another: Though I do believe with all my heart that there is good news for us in the teachings of Jesus, how can I offer that without being offensive? How can we get at the "good news" for us and, at the same time, be open to hearing the radical nature of what Jesus said and says?

People who sincerely call themselves Christians and followers of Jesus are full of judgmental hatred toward people whom God created as homosexuals. Jesus never said a word about the matter and what Paul said is either horribly taken out of context or simply dead wrong. But, if you don't have an evolving conception of

Sacred Mystery, being able to see and say that is simply not an option.

Further, we have the momentum of a really bad history. By that I mean that for centuries Christianity has focused on preaching and teaching about Jesus and not on the teachings of Jesus. Jesus didn't preach himself! He pointed to something beyond him.

You know one of the things Jesus talked the most about? Money. What is the primary religion of America? Consumerism. Jesus' teachings about money were heard one way prior to Imperial Christianity and another way afterwards.

"Blessed are the poor" was heard as such good news when people literally prayed "give us enough food for today, our daily bread." But, after the church came into power that very teaching of Jesus was seen as such a hard saying that surely he couldn't have meant that. Let's tone it down a bit and make it, "Blessed are the poor - in spirit." Continuity has become more important than change. Conformity has become more important than transformation.

Did you know that there was a time when the earliest translators of the Bible, those mostly responsible for putting the Bible in the hands of the public were put to death for their efforts? Go and read about William Tyndale and John Wycliffe. They were considered heretics because it was argued that if people could read for themselves what Jesus said and did and compared that with the behavior of the bishops and priests who preached to an ignorant population, there would be trouble, perhaps even a social revolution.

Here is the dilemma we face:

If we take the teachings of Jesus seriously, we risk it all.

If we make the biblical message conform to our wants and needs, we rick our Selves.

I do not think it is any easier for Jesus to get a hearing now from those in power any more than it was then. It is difficult for me. I'm assuming it is for you as well.

One of the ways out of this dilemma is to begin thinking metaphorically, mystically, with non-dual mind. When we think of the poor, the blind and the lame, we usually think in literal terms. What if we were to think more metaphorically, mystically, with non-dual mind. That way we might begin to see that we could be much poorer than those who have less money than we do. We might be blind to the true nature of things. If being in the realm of reality Jesus talk about means seeing the world and others as God sees, then most of us are blind as bats - and without their radar ability. If we are trapped in our loyalty to the god of consumerism, we have less mobility than someone who is quadriplegic.

The words of Jesus were heard as "good news" by the people who most responded to him because they had no good news. They were - and I'm speaking metaphorically now - sick, captive, weak and deprived. He talked about healing for their sickness, freedom for their captivity, strength for their weakness and justice for their deprivation. Read the story: he gave away free medical care. His message was clearly for those whose worldly circumstances stood in need of improvement. His message consisted of words of encouragement for those who were discouraged. His words of "be not afraid" were for those whose anxiety was what they would have to eat

at their next meal, not for those who were fearful that what they had would be taken away from them.

As I said, my goal is not to offend anyone. Not to upset. You didn't come here for that kind of a teaching. I know I don't like to be confronted with the gap that exists between what I say I believe and how I actually behave. Most people who go to church on a regular basis would likely admit, if they told the truth, that a "good sermon" was one with which they agreed, one that supported their current political and economic views, not one that made them feel guilty and ashamed.

A true saying of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, has been turned into an apocryphal story. Wesley said, "Make all the money you can!"

"Amen!," shouted the congregation.

Then he said, "Save all the money you can."

"Preach on, brother!" came the response.

Then he added, "Give all the money you can."

To which someone said, "Now he's gone from preaching to meddling."

I've been basing these teachings on sayings of Jesus found in the Gospel of Thomas. The one we are up to today is, I think, not only one of the most puzzling but also one of the most offensive, at least to our sensibilities, as anything Jesus ever said. Here it is:

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For their are many who are first who will become last.
They will become a single one.

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In the realm of wisdom and compassion Jesus wanted to invite people into and, at the same time, wanted people to create by the way we live our lives, everybody was on the same level. We don't like that. We want people to play by the rules and to get rewarded justly for their hard work. We especially like it when the rules favor us. It takes a great deal of courage to ask whether the rules by which we play the various games we do in the living of our lives are fair.

This teaching of Jesus which is found not only in Thomas but also in other ways in the other Gospels is counter to our cultural presupposition. It is good news to those who are in last position but not heard like that by the privileged.

I'm not offering a prescription here. I'm just pointing out how difficult it is for us to give a serious hearing to what Jesus has to say. Jesus came preaching a disturbing message. This is one reason it is easier to preach about Jesus than to preach what Jesus taught.

If the first shall be last and the last shall be first, at least in the realm Jesus taught about, what happens to those of us who put most of our waking hours into either being first or securing the places of privilege we already have?

Jesus teaches about, because he has a relationship with, a God who treats everyone alike. Further, he invites us to do the same. The way out of our dilemma is not to identify with being wither the first or the

last but, rather to relinquish those identities, and learn to see with Holy Eyes.

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, talked about the way of being Sacred and Spiritual as that of developing an I-Thou relationship to each other just as God desires to have an I-Thou relationship with us.

What is happening in our world is that we have a lot of I-It relating going on. People make other persons into things rather than persons just like themselves. Especially do we do this with people we consider strangers or people who frighten us. The stranger they are, the more frightening, the deeper into the category of "it" do we shove that person.

What we think of as "just" and "fair" has little, if anything to do with the Kingdom of God. Because of centuries of misguided religious teaching we have come to think of God's Kingdom as not only off and out there somewhere in the future but as a reward for having the right beliefs and behavior. (I don't know where people are going to locate such a place in the cosmos as we now understand it.) In reality God's kingdom is about God's acceptance of you and me and everyone. It is especially about those aspects of ourselves that not only do we not want others to see but also that we don't want to look at ourselves.

If we are lucky, and we will be if we have courageous and consistent spiritual practices, we will discover God, Sacred Mystery, coming to us over and over again with the invitation to work on and in loving the world and those who inhabit it as God does.

If we are to do this, we must be courageous enough, faithful enough and loving enough to see as God sees.

We must give up the judgment that distorts things to our liking or disliking.

I am currently reading a historical novel, "The Story Teller," about the beginning of WWII in areas of Poland Nazi Germany had overtaken. Not only does an old woman who entered Auschwitz as Jewish teenager tell her story. But so also does a man, now in his nineties, tell how he got swept up, as did many, into what became the horrors of the Nazi party.

I thought of the young men who have now been caught up in the insanity that is I.S.I.S. I also thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." He himself was executed because he had gotten involved in a plan to assassinate Hitler.

He also said, "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." But it was clear in all of his doings he was never filled with hate or fear.

I don't know about you but I am frequently so full of my judgments about what I don't want and don't like that there is often not much room for the love of God that seeks to transform me by inviting me to see the world and those who inhabit it with justice, compassion and love.

When I first allowed myself to drop once again into this counter cultural teaching of Jesus, an image came to me. It was that of Ed McMahon. He used to be spokesman for the Publishers Clearing House \$10,000,000 sweepstakes.

On a regular basis I used to get the letters in the mail that announced on the envelope, "Congratulations! You May Be A Winner!" Then you opened it to discover a maze of pages and stamps to tear out and stick in various places so that you could submit your entry to win the big prize. I actually know a couple, friends of ours, who won it. That's another story.

The message of Jesus is counter cultural. When we try to mold it to fit our culture, we have distorted it. It is tough to live out the teachings of Jesus in our culture because, regardless of what you sometimes hear, ours is not a Christian culture. The gods of this culture are not the God of Jesus. The gods of our culture are seductive and the God of Jesus does not seduce. God invites. Our world does not know what to do with someone who has power and does not use it. We have difficulty relating well to a power that respects freedom and proclaims that the only true power is love.

So, my goal is not to offend. You may not even see yourself in this teaching of Jesus or in need of it. If not, pray for those of us who do.

The invitation that God sends reads: Congratulations! You may be a loser.

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