

Bring a Big Bucket

I had written this talk when I was found by a quote from St. Bernard of Clairvaux. (You can read about him here if you wish - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_of_Cclairvaux](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_of_Clairvaux)) He was born in 1090 in France. After his mother died when he was young he sought admission to a Cistercian monastery. That's the order Thomas Merton was part of. He became a major reforming voice in the Catholic Church at that time and later moved to Clairvaux, from which he gets his name, where he did monumental work and where he died in 1153.

Here is the quote that found me by him and I want to put it as an epigram at the beginning of today's talk:

“Spiritual life is like living water that springs up from the very depths of our own spiritual experience. In spiritual life everyone has to drink from his or her own well.”

The Ordinary Life Logo, created by Stephanie Warfield, has as its subtitle: Inhabiting the Kingdom Within. Wise and useful spiritual work first begins as an inside job. Though, sadly, for most of its history most versions of Christianity have focused not on the essential inner transformation that is required to bring new creation into the world but on outward appearances, all of the items on the “do you belong to the right club?” list; and also on a time somewhere off in the future that is hoped for after death.

There is no question that Jesus focused on an awareness of and expression of what Thomas Merton and other teachers of mysticism from all traditions have referred to as “The True Self.”

To paraphrase Jesus, “You see the Kingdom within you before you see it around you.”

In 1970 I bought and devoured a book by Jungian analyst, John Sanford, titled “The Kingdom Within: The Inner Meaning of Jesus’ Sayings.” It is one of those books that sits on that special bookshelf that is reserved for tomes I pick up and refer to on a very frequent basis.

Sanford died in 2005. He wrote, by my count, almost 20 books. One that I recommend to clients who are open to exploring their inner lives by doing dream work is, “Dreams: God’s Forgotten Language.” It was Sanford who said, “Having a dream and not honoring it, is like getting a letter from God and not reading it.”

I want to read quite an extended passage from “The Kingdom Within” because it puts forward a most useful and insightful metaphor about spiritual work, about the mystical approach required for the wise and useful spiritual work I aspire to offer you in here.

“When I was a boy, we spent a month each summer in an old farmhouse in New Hampshire. The house was 150 years old when it first came into our family’s hands and had never been modernized. As my father was the minister of a modest-sized Episcopal church, we were always short of money, and so for a long time we lived in the house quite simply, without the benefit of modern plumbing or electricity. Our water supply during these years was an old well that stood just outside the front door. The water from this well was unusually cold and pure and a joy to drink, and the well was remarkable because it never ran dry. Even in the severest summer droughts, when other families would be forced to resort to the lake for their drinking water, our old well faithfully yielded up its cool, clear water.

“Eventually the day came when the family fortunes improved, and it was decided to modernize the house. Electricity now replaced the old kerosene lamps, an electric stove took over from the ancient kerosene burner, and modern plumbing and running water were installed. This necessitated a modern well, and accordingly a deep artesian well was drilled a few hundred feet from the house. No longer needed, the old well near the front door was sealed over to be kept in reserve should an occasion arise when for some reason the artesian well would not suffice.

“So things stood for several years until one day, moved by curiosity and old loyalties, I determined to uncover the old well to inspect its condition. As I removed the cover, I fully expected to see the same dark, cool, moist depth I had known so well as a boy. But I was due for a shock, for the well was bone dry.

“It took many inquiries on our part to understand what had happened. A well of this kind is fed by hundreds of tiny underground rivulets along which seeps a constant supply of water. As water is drawn from the well, more water moves into it along the rivulets, keeping these tiny apertures clear and open. But when such a well is not used and the water is not regularly drawn, the tiny rivulets close up. Our well, which had run without failing for so many years, was dry not because there was no water but because it had not been used.

“The human soul is like this well. What happened to the old well can also happen to our souls if the living water of God does not flow into us. The same is true for the Church; it too can dry up if it does not constantly draw from the living water of God. When this happens, we may suppose that God is dead. God is not dead, and there is living water in abundance, but we are dry, barren, and spiritually dead if we have covered over our souls and ceased to draw up into our consciousness what is contained in the inner depths.

“In order to lift water up from a well, it is necessary to have a rope long enough to reach the water.”

I am using the teachings of Jesus as just such a rope. Not teachings as usually talked about in a church setting but teachings found in a collection of sayings known as the Gospel of Thomas. Because they are, for the most part, unfamiliar to us and because all of these sayings are not part of a narrative, they require us, if we take them seriously not to take them for granted or, because of a familiarity some of us might have with the Jesus story, to let them roll over and off of us like the proverbial water on a duck's back.

Though I am a huge supporter of regular participation in Christian liturgy, one of the risks of that is to lull people into the false belief that we know the story and have no more to learn from it. When one looks, however, at the crudeness present in our society, the racism, the xenophobia, the sexism, the homophobia and the treatment given to Jesus' favorite group of people - “as you have done unto the least of these you have done it unto me” - it is fairly apparent that we have a fair distance to go in implementing his plan for a new world.

Though I have found it incredibly important to approach the teachings of Jesus in a manner like is found in the Jesus Seminar, and we'll do a smidgen of that today, that approach still leaves one functioning at the dualistic, academic level and does not reach the level of personal transformation.

The more I have worked with the teachings in the Gospel of Thomas and with the works of teachers who teach various aspects of mysticism, the more convinced I have become that one of the greatest needs of our time is for a way that will lead more and more people into the conscious awareness of their true identity. We certainly need to do this before we merge our individual identity with a collective organization - be that organization relatively benign, like most churches for example, or malignant, like some form of nazism or fascism. If one of these -isms moves in to fill the vacuum in the Self, the more desperately people will seek it to find it outside themselves. This amounts to what Jesus referred to as "gaining the whole world but losing yourself in the profess."

The teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are up to for today is this:

It is a prayer:

Yeshua says,

O Lord,
many have gathered
around the fountain
but there is nothing in the well.

One of the fellows of the Jesus Seminar has written a very engaging book imagining how what we refer to as "The Lord's Prayer" was created by the early followers of Jesus. That it is a creation becomes clear when you realize that there are two different versions of it in the Christian Scriptures, just as there are different versions of what we call "The Sermon on the Mount," in the Christian Scriptures.

This biblical scholar imagines that this itinerant Jewish mystic who lived like most of his followers on the edge of the system, one day out of his frustrated hunger cried, "Lord, bread! Give us bread."

Perhaps something similar happened here with water.

The climate being what it was in ancient Israel, references to wells and water are frequent both in the Hebrew Bible and in Christian writings. There were only two rivers of any size, the Litani and the Jordan. Brooks and ponds were very scarce and, outside of the rainy season, were dry.

So wells were major landmarks in Palestine. Abraham dug wells that are talked about. Jesus is described sitting on the edge of Jacob's well talking to a Samaritan woman. An angel found Hagar at a well in the Sinai.

To own a well was also to own the land surrounding it. There are serious disputes about the use of or claim to a well in several passages in the Bible. If the approach of an enemy was feared, his progress might be seriously hampered, if not altogether blocked by destroying the wells along his route. On the other hand, the enemy could reduce a city to starvation and submission by cutting off its water supply.

The image in this teaching is clear. A well exists which is meant to be a source of water. Many have come to the well to draw from it and quench their thirst. But, when they get to the well, they find that the well is empty. The water has disappeared. It has dried up and now holds nothing - no water, no refreshment, no life. So the people around it are left bereft and wondering what to do. So Jesus prays, "Lord, look! What needs to be done?"

In Jungian psychology the symbol for the unconscious is water. In the Hebrew creation myth the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters and brought forth creation. We spend the first nine months of our lives in water. The waters of the Red Sea parted to make liberation for the Hebrews a possibility. Water is used in religious rituals, not only water in the Christian rite of baptism, but also in Buddhism and Islam and other traditions. Jesus referred to teachings that he offered as living water and said that the person who drank of them would never thirst again. And, on and on it goes. Perhaps the most popular devotional book ever written is called "Streams in the Desert." My mother had a copy of this when I was a child. It has sold millions of copies over the last seventy or so years.

“Lord, there are many standing around the drinking trough, but there is nothing in the well.”

The image is clear: A well exists that is meant to be a source of life-saving water. Many have come to the well to draw from it and quench their thirst. But, then they get there they find that the well is dry. The water has disappeared. The well has dried up and now holds nothing - no water, no refreshment, no life.

Why did the followers of Jesus include this teaching in what they wanted to remember about Jesus? Or, from Jesus? When new people came into the movement and they were handed this teaching, what was it meant to convey?

In working on these teachings from the Gospel of Thomas and in an effort to enhance my own understanding of mysticism, as well as in the attempt to continue to find ways to convey what non-duality is about, I have been reading the literature in the area. One of the books I have gotten onto is one endorsed by Ken Wilbur who says that this book is “a wise and wonderful wakeup call to a world in shattered pieces.” The book is by a now deceased Roman Catholic monk, Wayne Teasdale. The book’s title is “The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the Worlds Religions.”

(Read more about him here <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/teachers/view/166>)

I can see why Ken Wilbur endorsed this book. It is as comprehensive a book as I’ve read so far on the subject of mysticism in the world’s religions. It goes back to prior to Hinduism.

Not long ago we were having dinner with long time friends of ours. He is a psychiatrist, and a lawyer and a psychoanalyst and, perhaps, one of the smartest people I know. Sherry asked him something she has for a long time wanted a definite answer to. She said, “There was a rumor not long ago that the committee that puts together the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (that’s the book doctors use for categorizing mental disorders) was going to take out narcissism as a

disorder because it is so common in our culture in the next edition. Is that true?" He said, "Yes."

We live in a culture of not only inflated but also isolated egos. Wise and useful spirituality, whatever path one chooses to walk, is intended to be a means to transcend the ego level of identity - the spiritually, psychologically and morally superficial fixation we have on ourselves.

We want to shrink the ego. And expand the Self.

There is no doubt we need the ego to develop personal identity. The ego, however, becomes a serious obstacle to our moral, psychological and spiritual growth when it becomes our sole motivational and volitional focus. Or, when it alone determines our decisions and actions. It is bad enough in ordinary life, but a disaster in the spiritual journey.

We in the West and particularly in the United States are blessed with having freedom of religion. We have plenty of choices in what religion we will practice and what spiritual path we will walk. But, unless you are living in a monastery, everybody in our culture, and I got this from reading Teasdale's book, is assaulted every day with the prevailing preoccupation of this culture with materialism. And, according to Teasdale, the twin pillars of this preoccupation are consumerism and entertainment.

When a scholar of Teasdale's magnitude points this out, I can see it. I don't know about you but most of the time I walk around not seeing it but being affected by it nonetheless.

Even in our religious/spiritual work we go looking for something new and novel with the attitude of "teach me something I don't already know."

Then I take my seat on my meditation bench and get a first hand experience of how distracted and distractible I am, how unaware I am, how difficult it is for me to pay attention and to be present. And, especially, how hard it is for me to be non-judgmental. Then I come here and teach about awareness and being non-judgmental. I simply invite you to consider that you, like me, might not be as

aware and non-judgmental as you think you are. At least that's true for me. I think we frequently try to drink at empty wells.

This lack of awareness not only affects us but also our relationships as well. When a boat goes across a body of water, it leaves behind it a wake. One of my colleagues says, "Most people have no idea of the emotional wake they leave in the lives of others." She is a therapist and says, "I see it in my counseling practice all the time. A couple will come in upset because of some difficulty they are experiencing. Each is hoping I will set the other straight. However, after hearing what the nature of the current difficulty is, I very often ask, 'Tell me, what has been your contribution to this situation?' It is difficult for them to do."

It is easy, because of our culture, to live with many distortions about very important matters. Or, to paraphrase the Jesus teaching for today, "To gather around an empty well and not notice it is empty."

Everybody in this room belongs to a number of different communities and we have some powerful allegiances to them. Sometimes these loyalties are invisible to us.

We see clearly the distortions others make - burning of alleged witches, the giving of racial preferences to God by white supremacists or the commercialization of God by televangelists. The distortions that hold us we don't so easily see.

A lot that passes for spiritual teaching in our world on the part of various religions and religious groups is what one of my colleagues calls "magpie theology." Magpies are those who assume a superior stance, look down on others and criticize. Jesus made it very clear that what he called the Empire of God was not a matter of above or below but, rather, around; around the table where all ate together.

One of the reasons, not the only one but a primary one, it is important to delve into this matter of awareness over and over is that often we don't simply have opinions but we are had by opinions, sometimes they are called "convictions," that actually block us from experiencing the empire of God or, to use another phrase Jesus used, "abundant life."

In his teaching and behavior Jesus was “in your face” with the religious leaders and political system of his time. This teaching could be a warning that the religion at the time of Jesus’ ministry was an empty well.

Once when I was in seminary some church scandal made it to the front page. I don’t remember what it was. In response to it, one of my professors said, “You know, the church is like Noah’s ark. If it weren’t for the storm outside, you couldn’t stand the stink inside.”

I’m in the church because, among many other reasons, the church is in me. It is part of my DNA. I would like to believe that one of the ways I follow Jesus is that, like him, I remain in my religion with the capacity to be clear about the shortcomings and wrong-doings of organized religion.

What is called the “prosperity gospel” of our time may make people feel good and even contain good advice about how to have a better life and get along with others. But, it is nowhere near the content of the teaching of Jesus. Over the years I have even heard preachers say, in one form or another, “Look, come and join our church. You don’t have to change anything. Just believe in Jesus.”

I would be dishonest if I said that I didn’t want you to leave here feeling good. I want you to be glad you came here. I want you to come back. And, I want to say in ways that we can be open to what Richard Rohr frequently says: “Be forewarned: the word of God confronts, converts, and consoles us - in that order. The suffering, injustice and devastation on this planet are too great to settle for any infantile gospel or any infantile Jesus.”

The teachings our mothers and fathers in the faith put into documents like the Gospel of Thomas were meant to take people further into the future and deeper into themselves. If and when this happens what are opened for us are springs of living water, doors of possibility and hope.

These two journeys, both made at the same time - which is why the non-dual mind is so important for this work - are not easy and do not come without price.

When we are born into this world, our survival depends on being part of some group. We find our initial identity and meaning in a group of some sort.

In both Jewish history and the teachings of Jesus the spiritual journey begins by going beyond this ancient herd instinct and establishing an individual consciousness of both oneself and of oneself in relationship to God.

It is the mystics and those willing to struggle with the issue of the non-dual mind who know the most about this. Teresa of Avila, one of the church's great mystics, put it, "You must find God in yourself and find yourself in God."

Faith is living into and trusting this relationship as the foundation for a meaningful life. The best analogy I can think of is that of two committed lovers: they have faith in each other and are faithful to each other. Faith is not a matter of believing so much as it is a matter of behaving. We have fixed it where most people who call themselves Christian have a Ph. D. in certainty. Faith is not certitude.

In talking about the importance of leaving the tribe I am not talking about being rebellious. I'm talking about doing the work we have to do to follow what Jesus called "the way." He made it clear, and the insights from psychology support this, that this inevitably will mean the separating out of oneself from the collective psychology of the group.

The Jungian analyst and Episcopal priest whose words I began with today, John Sanford, says that the principal block to consciousness comes from our being submerged in whatever group or groups we are. This is what causes us to be blind to what is. This, for most people, begins with the family. It can be one's country, one's church, one's political affiliation, one's race, one's gender, one's economic status. Please understand: I'm not talking necessarily about separating oneself from the group but, rather, separating one's identity from the group. The label is not who I am. When this separation comes the illusion of peace and security is shattered.

This is what is meant in Jesus statement, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth: it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword." A sword is that which divides and separates. What once was merged together is cut apart so that individual individuation can take place.

I've said it before and I'm likely to say it again: Who you are is who you are in God. No more. No less.

On those Sundays when we have people either baptize their children or join the church, the parents or the persons are asked a question - among others. It is:

“Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”

They say “yes” and the congregation is asked to support and join them in this endeavor. Every time I hear this ritual I wonder, “Well, how’s that going for us?”

Jim Wallis, the founder of the evangelical social activist organization “Sojourners,” has written, “The gospel gives us different priorities from those of the popular culture, and offers us a different agenda from that of the political economy.” For whatever reason, the so-called “social gospel” - and my personal definition of the social gospel is whatever comes into existence when individuals are in the process of being transformed by the teachings of Jesus - but, for whatever reasons the “social gospel” got identified with “liberals” and we moved into an era where being liberal was simply not a thing to be. However, I would challenge anyone: Read any telling of the Jesus story and see if you can find a blessing on or for our current national or world setup.

The next teaching in the Gospel of Thomas will allow us an even more expanded opportunity to see the importance of acquiring a clear perspective on ourselves. So we'll come back to talk about the importance of developing a moral capacity. You would not expect an evolved spiritual being to speak or behave in ways that are commonplace in our culture and entertainment. Nor to participate in violence. There is something wacky about a religion that boasts of following “the Prince of Peace” having engaged in thousands of wars most of them so-called “preemptive” in their history.

I'll say this again next week but the West, particularly the United States, doesn't grasp the importance and necessity of nonviolence. Our children grow up with the

conviction that violence is a fundamental part of life. Through constant exposure to violent entertainment, they learn little else. Jesus taught, among other things, nonviolence. Surely, that must be involved in following him.

If you are literal, linear or dualistic you will not understand the teachings of Jesus. You may enter the empire of God he talked and taught about but you will not know that into which you are entering.

Our work, our life work, is to conform ourselves to the love that is giving herself to us as our lives. It is this love from which we came and to which we return. We can't do anything to make this love conform to our lives, though that is precisely the expectation so much of organized religion has given people.

Jim Finley puts it like this: "The poet cannot make the poem happen. But the poet can put her or himself in a position to provide the least resistance for the poem to find expression through him or her."

Last Sunday afternoon I returned here to attend the choral evensong service offered by our outstanding musicians. I was world-weary. Lately, in spite of my efforts to avoid as much of it as possible, news of the world gets at me. News out of Russia, children starving in Yemen, the ongoing tragedy in Aleppo, Philippine President openly using Hitler as a role model, the state of emergency in Turkey where a dear friend works for our State Department, the conditions in Venezuela where a member of our church's mother lives, the sleazy presidential race that is going on in this country, new outbreaks of fighting now between Pakistan and India and on and on and on it goes. I think about the children growing up in these countries and wonder, if they survive, what chance to they have?

Choral Evensong is a service that has been held essentially unchanged for centuries. Whatever your form of meditation or contemplation, there is something there for you: silence, music, readings, litanies, prayers, solemnity, dignity, reverence.

When the service is over the choir processes out to an organ voluntary. The congregation stands until all have passed out of the sanctuary and then sits until the music is over. This time it was Dr. Paolo Bordignon, our music director, playing.

He has brought a new dimension to congregational music by the way he plays the organ during the hymns and the voluntaries he plays.

This particular closing organ voluntary was a Bach Prelude and Fugue. When I told Paolo earlier this week what I'm about to say to you, he said he had not played that particular piece of music in five years. It is one of Bach's more difficult pieces. As you may know, Paolo's Ph. D. from Juilliard is in organ and his dissertation is on Bach's compositions. Paolo went to Leipzig to study the original manuscripts.

At any rate, I sat Sunday listening to Paolo play. I was in absolute awe and admiration of his ability, his mastery. Then, I had this realization, something way beyond the rational or cognitive level. It was a realized spiritual experience. I became aware that I wasn't listening to Paolo play Bach. The music wasn't coming from him. The music was coming through him. He was in that moment the perfect illustration of an artist offering the least resistance for the art to find expression through him.

Further, I wasn't merely a member of an audience listening to music. For a while there was just one event - the music. One unitive event. And, yet, that experience did not diminish or obliterate the distinction between the musician and the listener.

This is, whether we are aware of it or not, the exact relationship between God, Sacred Mystery, and us. God is the musician and we are the song.

Living into that kind of experience is standing at a well that is not empty but one with life giving freely flowing water.

I pray this has been that today for you.

I hope you brought a big bucket.

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