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## Teachers/Tradition and Trusting Yourself

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I want to begin today with where I ended last week.

One of the things Jesus said to people was, “Go in peace. Your faith has made you whole.”

He said this to people who had made no dogmatic affirmations of faith, who did not think he was “God,” who certainly passed no moral checklist and who didn’t belong to the right group.

There were people who were willing to give up everything and follow this mystical teacher. Not because of what they saw in him. It was, I am coming more and more to see, of what he saw in them and what they trusted or had the faith to believe was true about themselves.

There is a wholeness in you and in me. We don’t have to do anything to achieve this wholeness, or believe anything, or behave a certain way, or belong to a particular group. All we have to do is have faith that this is true about us. Our spiritual work, our religious disciplines are simply designed to allow this wholeness to find freedom from the various bondages in which we find ourselves.

Many of these bondages have been put upon us by the tribes into which we were born and the beliefs they fed us, including religious beliefs. We are in bondage, most of us, to many things. Gaining freedom from many of the ways we are bound, finding light for many of the territories we try to explore while blind, coming to life in the multitude of ways where we are dead as doornails is the goal of authentic, wise and useful spiritual teaching and religious practice. Anybody, for example, who kills or who hates or who is divisive is in bondage, not free.

Jesus was a teacher of this truth about freedom, life and love. What made him a spiritual teacher is that he believed people needed to hear this “good news.” Some people heard it as such. Not everybody did. Because it messed with their system.

But, for those who did receive this news and believed, it brought new life and freedom and joy and a community of love that could not be stopped.

There are at least two things I want to say about spiritual teachers and teachings.

First, if they don't embody, express and create a space for love; they are suspect.

Second, they have to be part of a tradition. I know that the growing trend is for people to be "spiritual but not religious." I can fully understand that. I read just this week that in the United States nine churches close their doors every day. The appeal of mega churches is beginning to fade away and the failure of many churches to have much relevancy to the lives of people who are learning in their spirituality to practice what Brian McClaren calls "a more generous orthodoxy" is causing churches to lose multitudes of people. Who wants to go to a gathering that does not embody what it says it believes? I understand all the reasons people step outside of a tradition.

However, one cannot be "religious in general" any more than one can speak a language in general.

And, if you are in a religion, you are in a tradition. And, if the tradition is wise and useful, it will tell you to trust yourself.

The title of this talk today is: "Having Teachers and a Tradition and Trusting Yourself." This talk is my reaction to and reflection on the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are up to for today.

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

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His students said,  
We know we cannot  
hold on to you,  
so who will lead us then?

Jeshua said,

"Wherever it is that you find yourselves,  
turn to James, one of the Just  
for whom heaven and earth have come into being."

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Clearly Jesus was a good teacher. If not we wouldn't be studying his teachings, reflecting and meditating on them and trying to see what relevance what he had to say still has for our lives. He was in a solid tradition which he honored in his own way. He taught wisdom, he was a Jewish mystical wisdom teacher, and he taught that the answer that would lead you to freedom, life and love was already in you.

Every religion - go to the back bush of Australia, the jungles of Africa, Native American, Hindu, Zen, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim - every religion has a tradition and the majority of these, especially as the historical time line develops, has a body of material they consider "sacred scripture."

The tradition that we are in this place at this time is the Judeo-Christian tradition. Even if I were not basing these talks I offer in here on the Gospel of Thomas, I would still be speaking out of this tradition. It is as much a part of me as my DNA. I don't come here and offer you just my personal ideas and opinions. I offer you my personal ideas and opinions based on and about a tradition I have received.

Because I want to take the tradition that has been given me, like the English language has been given me, seriously I seem to many to take stands that are contrary or against the very tradition that I am a part of. I am in no way comparing myself with Jesus but that is what Jesus did as well. One of my goals in my own teaching is to interpret the tradition, interpret the Scriptures in the way that Jesus did.

My belief and confidence is that if we could just get the Jesus thing straightened out things would be better for so many people in so many ways in so many places.

I was talking about this talk I'm offering you today with my dear Buddhist friend, Dr. Joseph Rachel, this week. I was asking more about his own tradition, scriptures and practices. He asked me to summarize what I've been saying in here and he said, "I imagine some people like what you have to say. But, there are likely two groups of people who don't. First, those who have fixed, doctrinal beliefs about Jesus. Second, those who have written him off."

I experienced reactions from the first group the very first time I said in here that "Jesus did not die for your sins." I don't know what to say about the second group except to repeat what I said last week: most of us do not talk about nor likely think about Jesus outside this space as we go about our daily lives.

I think the primary reason for this is that somewhere early in the process "imperial Christianity" made Jesus "exclusive." You couldn't get to God without Jesus. That is to say, the truths Jesus taught were not universally true without Jesus. Really? Jesus lifted up truths that anybody can embrace if they are willing to make the journey inward and have the faith to find the wholeness he teaches. Without in any way disparaging any other religious path or practice, I believe that the truth Jesus bore witness to, when embraced with faith, can birth new people and a new world.

To be clear: it is not in talking about Jesus or knowing about Jesus but embracing the truth Jesus taught that introduces us to our healing and wholeness. If we could just get this Jesus things straightened out.

So, how did Jesus teach?

I want to teach like Jesus. How did he teach? We've moving into paradox now - contradiction, non-duality, an attempt to embody and not just talk about. (Which I'm talking about . . . )

Let me put it this way: I am not just offering you my personal ideas an opinions in these talks. I am offering you my personal ideas and opinions about what I have received. What I offer is based on a tradition.

A huge number of people in this world have received their religious traditions and have related to them literally. You see where that has gotten us. Literal interpretation of any tradition is the lowest level you can get.

Jesus inherited a tradition and he consistently ignored or denied the exclusionary and punitive parts of it. This is why he was said to teach as one having authority and not as the scribes and Pharisees, or the religious leaders of the time.

I want to read you something from the writings of Richard Rohr:

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I have to risk writing, as every spiritual writer does, and I must be willing to be judged wrong by others more intelligent, wiser and holier than I. But this is the leap that I and all others must also make in order to communicate that bit of the Great Truth of the Gospel to which we each have our own access. Paul also reassures me when he said that this Body of Christ is “groaning forward in one great act of giving birth.” Should we call it evolutionary Christianity? There is no other kind if the Spirit is still active and speaking.

[Remember, please, what Ilia Delio has said about the definition of God and the cosmos being the same: expanding, creative, evolving and friendly.

Back to Rohr.]

John the Baptist did it early on with his daring and new river ritual and with no temple priesthood to support him. Paul did it with his independent letters, when there was no apostolic authority to assure or reassure him. In fact, they even fought him. Jesus did it with the Judaism of his time and place. This is the only pattern available to us . . . This is how we all live in the faith of our own moment in time, and must always hand ourselves over to God’s always larger future, just as Jesus did in Gethsemane.

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The big point I want to make here is that Jesus was a teacher who was in a tradition. The tradition he was in was that of the Jewish prophets who were self-critical and inclusive. That, I believe, I have faith, is the tradition to which we must be committed: that of being self-critical and inclusive.

There were people who believed as true what Jesus said about them. In a summary way too brief it was:

“God and I are one and this is true about you too. Having faith that is true brings wholeness into your awareness. God is love. You can’t have love as a concept or idea. Love is always relational. This realm of reality is right here, right now. By the way, it is likely to set you back to live the truth of all of this.”

There were people who followed this guy. Communities of people grew up around the truth of his teaching - Communities of joy, generosity, fearlessness and love. And anxiety. What would happen when he went away?

Again, the Gospel of Thomas is not only not a narrative but also like the other scriptures of the early Jesus movement, both those that came to be considered “sacred” and writings like the Gospel of Thomas, they were all written after Jesus was dead and gone. What we have in all of these writings are what Marcus Borg calls “memories” and “traditions.” Because the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of mystical wisdom sayings they must be interpreted that way and not as linear historical descriptions. So we don’t look at this saying today as something that literally happened. It is a mystical teaching.

I’m fairly confident something like it did happen. Jesus is confronting the authorities, political and religious, and his followers who had left everything to follow him and were dependent on him said, “Hey guy! Tone it down. You’re going to get into trouble. What are we going to do without you?”

In every life in every era in every group anxiety immediately follows the feeling of “Ah! things are so good.” We sense it is not going to be this way forever. So, what are we going to do?

Let’s look at the text again.

First I want you to notice that whoever put together the Gospel of Thomas doesn't recommend people to look to "a risen Jesus" but to human being. And not because he is the brother of Jesus but because of his "righteousness," his goodness.

From a historical point of view James was considered the head of the Jerusalem church and became a major leader in the early days of the movement Jesus had started. Know what happened to him? He got executed. Most of the leaders of the early church movement got executed.

At any rate, the people who first followed Jesus had staked their lives, which meant their future, on him and his teachings. Without him, what would become of them? Of course, by the time any of this was written down they knew. That's one of the reasons we know this is not to be taken literally.

There are two phrases from this text I want to lift up:

First is the question of who will lead us? And the response: wherever you find yourselves.

Besides me at the moment, do you have a spiritual teacher?

Spiritual teachers come in all forms. Some of my best spiritual teachers are dead. And have been so for a long time. In going through some stuff to get rid of this past week I found a photograph of my first spiritual teacher that I didn't know I had. I stuck it up on my desk so I could see it every day.

If you are really gutsy, you might consider engaging a teacher or spiritual director to whom you can submit your self image for correction. I got that phrase years ago from another teacher and colleague of mine, Carlyle Marney. He said everybody ought to have somebody to whom they can tell the truth about who they are, how they live, about the concerns they have, about what makes them cry in their pillows at night, the secrets they don't want anybody else to know.

What Jesus taught in many places was the importance of "coming to" or, in this text, "finding yourself." Perhaps the most famous place is in what is known as the

Parable of the Prodigal Son where the son, lost as hell, “comes to himself” and decides to go home.

Whenever you come to yourself, get on a path that is trustworthy because it is “righteous.” “Righteous” in this sentence means - not rigid, nor moralistic, not doctrinal, not exclusive, not judgmental - but one that can lead you further toward the realization of freedom and love and realizing your already wholeness.

One of my hopes for all of us when these times in here are concluded is that we leave here wiser and more compassionate; more empowered to love a world so in need of it.

The thing is that the teacher can’t do it for us. A one-on-one spiritual director relationship can keep you honest but no one can live our lives for us.

I mentioned in the preview that went out about this time together today a Zen saying that I frequently use as a tag line in Ordinary Life e-mails: “We follow the path no one has walked before, following the guideposts left by others.”

I love this teaching because, among other things, it embraces paradox and contradiction. To me it is an amplification of the teaching in Thomas. We have to have a teacher and we have to do it ourselves. We have to find our own way to the truth but we can't do it by ourselves.

Many, many years ago at the very beginning of my professional life, I was very fortunate to get to do some training with Ira Progoff. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ira\\_Progoff](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ira_Progoff) )

Progoff, who died in 1998, was a psychologist best known for the development of the Intensive Journal Method as a psychological tool for spiritual growth. He was what was known at the time as a “depth psychologist” and adapted the ideas of Carl Jung to his work. Progoff had studied personally with Jung. One of my early teachers had put me onto his work and I made it a point to go and work with him. This was decades ago. (I encourage you to follow up on the link above and read about him.) His guidance and wisdom about using a journal as a spiritual tool has been something that has affected every single day of my life since then.



Progroff founded what he called Dialogue House in New York City where people went to study with him and learn his methods of applying Jungian teachings and insights into tools for growing in self and spiritual awareness. (I have mentioned before that I have so lucky when it has come to have really great teachers.)

We would gather, I don't remember how many of us - 25 or 30 - in a room for our seminar studying about the application of depth psychology for clinical practice and personal application. There was instruction but very little dialogue between the students. When somewhere along the way someone raised a question about this, Dr. Progroff responded with a line that has stayed with me like something tattooed on the inside of my eyelids. He said, "This solitary work we cannot do alone."

There has to be a balance: Teachers and Tradition - Trusting Yourself.

One of the teachers I'm pushing is Jesus. The tradition is his.

Many people who call themselves "Christian" rigidly honor a tradition that is less than two-hundred years old. Let's dig deeply into the tradition and be true to it.

Many people who call them "modern" or "post-modern" or "with it" or "new age" or "spiritual but not religious" or whatever the current label might be, follow more what feels good than what might be true.

It is not Teachers/Tradition or Trusting Yourself.

It is Teachers/Tradition AND Trusting Yourself.

Not one or the other.

Not one at one time and one the other.

Not what suits our whim or feels good.

It is both at the same time.

Huston Smith, the great scholar of religious history said, "Pick a tradition and go deep within it for it is better to dig one well sixty feet deep than to have six wells ten feet deep."

You are whole. I hope you have the faith to see that.

You can't see it by yourself.

And though it can be seen by somebody else, when it comes to you, only you can see it.

I hope you do. The world needs your wholeness.

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