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Seeing Trumps Believing

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Suppose you are out shopping. Perhaps you are at the grocery store.

I love to grocery shop and the arrangement I made with my beautiful bride before we got married is that I would do all of the menu planning, grocery shopping and cooking in exchange for doing none - I mean, absolutely not one millisecond - of the yard work. For the past few years she has been going with me. Primarily, I think, to keep my acquisitive obsessive-compulsive disorder under control.

I've had some disconcerting experiences at the grocery store over the years. Once a woman came up to me and said, "You look just like my third husband." I reflexively blurted out, "Good grief! How many times have you been married?" She quietly said, "Twice."

I still get thrown off balance when some total stranger walks toward me and says, "Hello. How are you doing?" I respond as politely as I know how only to discover that they aren't talking to me at all but on their phone via a bluetooth earpiece.

A friend of mine got so irritated at a woman who was talking loudly on her phone at a Starbucks that he went up to her and asked if she would put the phone on speaker-phone so he could hear both sides of the conversation. Nice.

One grocery store that I was very loyal to for years, even through an extensive remodel, had a misting system installed in their produce department. Before it automatically came on, you would hear the sound of distant thunder and get the smell of fresh rain. When you approached the dairy cases you heard the sound of cows mooing and got the sent of fresh hay. As you got close to the egg case, you could hear hens clucking and cackling and smell the pleasing aroma of bacon and eggs frying. The meat department emitted the smell of a backyard barbecue. The veggie department featured the smell of freshly buttered corn. I never did venture to buy toilet paper there.

Thanksgiving coming up reminded me of the woman at the grocery store who was standing looking into the case of frozen turkeys. The manager of the meat department comes over and asks, "Can I help you?" "Yes," she says. "I was wondering if these turkeys get any bigger?" He said, "No ma'am. They're dead. This is as big as they're going to get."

At any rate, suppose you are shopping and someone comes up to you and asks, "Why are you so happy? You look serene." What would you say? How would you answer them?

I have mentioned before that the thing that attracted me to my first spiritual teacher was not so much the content of his spirituality but the fact that he was always smiling. I wanted to know what his secret was.

One of the things you may have noticed about the Dalai Lama is that he is always smiling and laughing. This is in spite of the fact that Buddhism, as poet Wendell Berry says, has considered all the facts. We grow old, get sick and die. The worst case scenario is that things will go right. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of images in Buddhism of what is known as "the laughing Buddha. I have three small ones on my meditation table and one large one who sits to my left as I write these talks. He also holds a portion of my prayer bead collection. Why so happy?

Some people claim to be happy but their faces don't know it. My grandmother consistently looked as if she had been weaned on a pickle.

One cultural anthropologist I read recently says that every religion known to humanity exists in the United States. He said over two-hundred of them. There are now churches for atheists. And, there is Zen Buddhism. So everything from A to Z.

Here at St. Paul's you can walk the labyrinth - one that is an exact duplicate of the one in Chartres Cathedral in France, you can practice Centering Prayer or t'ai chi.

Several varieties of Islam practice are available in the city and a wide variety of yoga practices and different forms of meditation practices.

There is a cafeteria to feed every possible religious or spiritual appetite and unlimited American Freedom to choose whatever you want.

Yet, with all of this at our disposal it is clear that American culture lacks any sense of the sacred. We are immersed in a culture of materialism and consumerism that obscures things of the spirit. I recently was gifted with a T-shirt that summarizes our culture. On it is a drawing of God as a football quarter-back preparing to pass a football and under the drawing is a caption that says, "Sunday is God's Day." By the way, have you ever noticed how energized men can get by watching a ball move a few yards down a football field? If the money, time and energy men spend on football were directed toward growing spiritually, we would have a country of saints.

When you look at our entertainment, our politics, our social functioning it is clear a moral compass has been lost.

However, though our culture lacks a sense of the sacred and is indifferent to the mystical, you are here. Whereas most people are both spiritually and religiously illiterate, living unaware that life is a spiritual journey and that everything and everyone are part of and a manifestation of Sacred Mystery, you are different. You try to be the answer to the prayer I offer in here before every one of these talks and you go into the world aware of your identity in Sacred Mystery and with a commitment to manifest that in the places where you go when you leave here.

Someone notices this and asks the question: why are you so happy? How do you answer?

You likely wouldn't say, "It's because we have a moral obligation to be happy! Dammit."

You probably wouldn't say, "Because of my Sunday School class." That likely wouldn't make sense to the demographic you move in outside of here.

Nor would you likely say, "I've been attending these lectures on The Gospel of Thomas."

If you do have growing patches of serenity in your life, and I hope you do, how would you explain it?

I had the good fortune to attend a retreat recently. It was called "The Poetics of Faith" and the two speakers were Eugene Peterson, author of numerous books and the translator of the version of the Scriptures I most frequently read in here. And, Christian Wiman, author of, among other things, "My Bright Abyss."

It was a relatively small retreat with numerous opportunities for personal exchanges. Christian Wiman mentioned a book on non-dual mind that I was most interested in. He said it was very hard to obtain as it had been out of print for a long time. He said it was a small book but that reading it could change your life. At a break I got on line on my device and found I could get a copy for \$147. Wow! Should I really spend that much to change my life?

When I later told him this he said, "Just check it out of the library." Like, sure, my library is likely to have a copy of such a book. As I was observing the debate I was having with myself about making such a purchase, I thought about many of the teachings of Jesus and of episodes from the Jesus' story: the pearl of great price which, when found, one would give anything for; the treasure buried in the field that the one who found it was willing to sell everything in order to have.

As did some of you, I grew up in a church where I frequently heard about the rich young ruler who asked what he might do to inherit the realm of reality he heard Jesus talking about. Jesus told him to sell all that he had, give the proceeds to the poor and come follow him. We were taught to look down on this man for his reluctance to do this. Yet, here I was hesitating about whether to part with \$147 for a book that was going to transform my life.

A couple of days later as Christian Wiman and I sat together having a meal he said, "Oh, by the way, I have that book in a pdf. I'll just send it to you."

Now that's grace.

I thanked him and said that I hoped the book would be helpful to me in the talks I gave. His response was, "What do you lecture about?" He now teaches at Yale so

he would think of “talks” as “lectures.” “What do you talk about? What do you give the hours of your precious life to create and to teach?”

So here we are back to the scene in the grocery store or any place for that matter where you are asked about the source of your joy, optimism, hope and gratitude. What do you say? If you want to invite someone to come here, and I hope you do, what do you say about what all of this is about?

Though you probably would not pick the population at the supermarket to have your deepest soul conversations with, it isn't the place, it is an excellent place to work on what I first heard described as “your elevator speech.” The elevator doors open and you have thirty seconds to give an answer to this question and you want to do it in such a way that the person who hears you doesn't shut you down or off but responds by saying something like, “Wow! That sounds interesting. Tell me more.” Or, “I want some of that.”

I think it is an integral part of growing spiritually that we grow in our capacity to talk about our deeply held spiritual values, especially to people we know and trust and love. If we don't talk about them there, how important are they really to us?

I have a dear friend who cannot tolerate more than two or three minutes of any talking that does not proceed from and go to the heart, the Soul, the Self. And, of course, we cannot talk about these matters if we cannot first define and explain them to ourselves. How committed am I to something I can't or won't talk about?

So, what would be your elevator speech about why you are so happy - if you are? Or, about what this gathering is about? Or, about what you deeply value?

Several things headed me down this particular path we are wandering today.

First, was Christian Wiman's question. “What do you talk about?”

Next has been the work some of us have been doing on finding ways to describe the offerings that will be made in response to the newly stated vision and mission of St. Paul's.

Then, of course, as you either expected or feared there might be, there is the selection from the Gospel of Thomas we are up to for today.

Let's take these matters in reverse order.

One way of answering Christian Wiman's question is, "I give talks based on my understanding of the Gospel of Thomas." I can hardly imagine him, or very many other people for that matter, responding with, "Wow! That sounds exciting."

To be sure, the discovery of the ancient writings of which the Gospel of Thomas was a part caused a fermentation among scholars interested in the Jesus Movement and early Christianity. It even inaugurated what scholars call "the third quest for the historical Jesus" and you see that reflected in things like the Jesus Seminar, the writings of Marcus Borg, Bart Ehrman and a host of others.

What this quest has led to, however, was something likely not anticipated. Because the Jesus that was found by looking through the newly discovered lenses of archeology, developments in linguistic skills and the recently discovered manuscripts was not the view of Jesus as God's representative who had or would come to pass judgment on the world; a view that is still enormously popular among a huge number of people who call themselves Christian. Nor was the Jesus found that of the more liberal point of view: Jesus as a champion of social justice and the teacher of high ethical insights.

What was beginning to be understood is that most of all, beyond those two understandings of who he was and what he taught, was that Jesus was an incomparable wisdom teacher and he was a Jewish mystic. This is the emphasis that many people in this world are hungry for. This, I think, is why you are here.

It seems that so much of religion, ancient and modern, quickly loses its original intent, which is to bring things together. In our time religions have tried to function under the curse of certitude. This has been one of the results of so-called Enlightenment. This is why most organized religion has an inability to transform people at almost any level. Consequently, we have been in a religious/spiritual/theological crisis for the last four hundred years. Religions have either been co-opted by the culture - hence the "prosperity gospel," "the gospels of success," the

“entertainment gospels” etc. - or religions have become contentious in their assertions that they have the truth that other religions don't. As a person with one foot in the world of psychology, I can tell you that there is a huge amount of anxiety under the need to be right. Just notice how rude and unkind a lot of religious people can be in and with their certitude. Some people cannot get past their need to be certain.

It is clear that a lot of people who are largely invested in their religion have not allowed their religion to change them. Their views on politics, race, inclusivity and a host of other matters remain the reflections of their tribe and tribal consciousness and do not reflect a growing spiritual intelligence. As a matter of fact, religion has made some people rather rigid and, in many cases, downright mean, vicious and violent.

Thomas Merton said that a good litmus test for how we are doing with and on the spiritual journey is how we treat others in the specific, concrete relationships we have with them. Are we more compassionate, more present, more real, more open? Or, are we aloof, are we judgmental? I would add, what is the quality of the concrete relationship we have with ourselves, that you have with you?

In the Gospel of Thomas there are 114 sayings of Jesus and I have been using these as stimulation for my own thinking and teaching. These sayings are not in any order nor do they tell a story of the life of Jesus. They are sayings that some of Jesus followers collected and held close to themselves. They probably weren't written down for years. People remembered them.

By the way, Christian Wiman, brilliant man and gifted in several languages, could stand and recite a poem from memory that went on for nearly ten minutes. He said that when you memorize a poem like that, you own it; it is yours. There is something to be said, he said, about learning something “by heart.” He said that Russian poets at the time of Stalin never wrote their poems down. They were so powerful that people remembered them.

Just so with what Jesus taught.

Here is the saying we are up to:

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His disciples questioned him: Should we fast? In what way should we pray? Should we give to charity? From which foods should we abstain?

Jesus responded: Do not lie. If there is something that you hate, do not do it, for everything is revealed beneath heaven. Nothing hidden will fail to be displayed. Nothing covered will remain undisclosed.

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Let me say this as clearly as I can say it. The Gospel of Thomas is not a book about Jesus. Rather, it is a set of spiritual exercises. Here we have a set of sayings that are both, at the same time, significantly obscure and significantly challenging that the effort we make to understand them will contribute to our spiritual growth. Remember how the Gospel of Thomas begins:

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Whoever finds the correct interpretation of these sayings will never die.

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Life and death in Jewish thought had little to do with physical living and dying. In the Jewish creation story Adam and Eve were told not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge for if they did, they would die. They ate. Did they die? Not physically but they did die to the knowledge of their true identity.

(Remember: its just a story, meant to make one point and not to explain all geophysics.)

There are many worthwhile translations and commentaries on the Gospel of Thomas. I own many and try to refer to them carefully as we go through the sayings found there. The one by Stevan Davies is worth having just for the

introduction by Andrew Harvey, whom I consider to be one of our contemporary mystics.

The Gospel of Thomas was discovered among some other manuscripts in 1945 and constitutes one of the most important archaeological finds in the history of Christian scripture scholarship. There were two separate and distinct archeological discoveries. This one, referred to as the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library because of where it was found. The other, referred to as The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in eleven different caves in the area of Qumran between 1946 and 1956.

It is my considered opinion that the collection of sayings of Jesus called The Gospel of Thomas is earlier than any of the Gospels we have in the New Testament. I'm going to keep sneaking information and opinion about the Gospel of Thomas in general into these talks because I think it is important we know this information.

So what are we to make of this saying?

The Gospel of Thomas, since it is not a narrative, isn't approached from the standpoint we've used in here with other aspects of the Jesus story. This writing is that which preserves the voice of the Jewish mystic and must be approached using, not the dualistic lens of history but, rather, the lens of mysticism.

This gets us back to the point where we started. "What are these talks about?"

If I had to have a label applied to me or something to describe the spiritual path I'm seeking to walk, I think it would be "mysticism." Because mysticism is less capable of being defined.

Let me see if I can describe it like this: If someone were to ask me if I believe in God, my answer would be that if I could comprehend whatever the word "God" points to, it wouldn't be God. Believing in God is, for me, believing in life. I assume the reality of God and then attempt to walk into and live into that assumption. The supernatural theism that has captured Sacred Mystery since the Enlightenment is dying - thank God.

If you go across the plaza and worship, you will be immersed in theistic language about Sacred Mystery. These are metaphors and we must never confuse the metaphor with the reality. I love the lines one of my colleagues uses often: “The older I get, the more deeply I believe. But, the less beliefs I have.”

In this particular saying Jesus is asked, “Tell us what to do.” I have such sympathy and empathy with that request. Elsewhere, Jesus responds to such. “Teach us to pray.” And, he teaches. Here, however, the response is rather curt. “You know what to do. Speak the truth. If there is something you don’t want done to you, don’t do it to anyone else. More importantly, look. Open your eyes. See.” That is to say, finding what is hidden in plain sight takes precedence over believing and doing. Or, as I have titled this talk: “Seeing Trumps Believing.”

This pushes us, if we are willing to go, into a different realm. A different kind of certitude if you will. Here is how I would put it, it is what I think this hunger is about:

We need to know more than we think we know. That is, we need to know more than thinking can provide.

If we can experience that knowing, to that degree we are freer, less frightened, more loving, less rigid, more compassionate, happier.

So, when someone comes up to you at the grocery store and asks, “Why is that?” what do you say? What is Ordinary Life about?

Ordinary Life is a crucible in which people can, if they wish, take the teachings and

deepen an awareness of who they are,

develop relationships with others,

grow in spiritual intelligence,

make a difference in the world.

That would be kind of hard to get out and say in the produce department wouldn't it?

So let me offer you a mystical story. It is from the Gospel of John.

This is not history. Hear it with non-dual mind.

After Jesus is baptized by John, and some of these words I got from Eugene Peterson's translation, "John is back at his post with two of his disciples when he looked up and saw Jesus walking nearby and said, 'Here he is!'"

"The two disciples heard him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over his shoulder and said to them, 'What are you after?'"

What a brilliant question. What do you want? What do you really want? You have been given your precious life. Most of us have been blessed with such wondrous fates. Rich beyond what most of the world could imagine. What do you want?

You know what these disciples said? "Where do you live?"

And he said, "Why don't you come and see."

There is nothing about any requirement whatsoever. He doesn't give a head answer like I'm always doing in here.

I get amused about my work as a spiritual teacher. I try to change people into believing that you can't change people. I use the very teachings of the Southern Baptist tradition that birthed me to say how wrong we have gotten most of the teachings and emphases of Jesus.

The church has become so judgmental about so much. Most of Jesus' teachings can be put under one of two headings: Don't be greedy, live simply. Don't hurt each other, live non-violently. Greed and violence run our culture.

Things the church over the centuries has made red-hot sins, usually sins of the flesh, Jesus never mentioned once.

What do you want?

Where do you live?

Come and see.

Abide with me. That is to say, live where I live; inside the heart of God. Then you will know that everything is okay. Then you will be, no matter what, happy.

Why are you do happy?

Why don't you come and see.

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