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## Listen Again

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Concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz tells about the time he played a dissonant contemporary composition at a private gathering. When he finished, someone asked, “I don’t understand what that composition means, Mr. Horowitz. Could you please explain it?”

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There are several words and phrases in that story that not only stand out for me but also that fit the work we are up to in here today as we seek to embody the spirit of the revolutionary Jewish mystic, Jesus, by exposing ourselves to the teachings of his as found in the Gospel of Thomas.

The words that stand out are “played,” “dissonant,” “contemporary,” “don’t understand,” “please explain.”

I have come to believe that Jesus was very playful in his mood and manner. I know he could get very indignant at and about what had happened to his Jewish religion. Many of his teachings, however, fall into the category of standup comedy. Clearly children were attracted to him.

His teachings were dissonant in the sense that what he had to teach was a wisdom no one else was teaching. He jarred the sensibilities of the religious leaders to the point that in their anger they colluded with the Roman Empire who had him executed for treason. For the common people his teachings were astounding. Their

response was frequently to say, "This guy is amazing! Where does he come up with this stuff?"

He was contemporary in the sense that, unlike most preachers he wasn't rehashing history as if what people cared about was the latest thing that happened to the Jebusites. Nor was he doing academic teaching that lived only from the neck up.

A lot of what he said people didn't understand. Even his closest and most intimate companions were constantly misunderstanding both him and what he had to say. He seemed to be exasperated with them as well.

And, when asked to explain himself or his teachings, he more often than not responded with something that left people scratching their heads even harder than before.

We live in a Jesus obsessed culture. It is impossible for anyone living in Western civilization not to have some some awareness of Jesus.

This is the Christmas season. It is the only religious holiday that is also a federal holiday. The way the two very different tellings of the birth of Jesus, both of them parables created by the early church, are squished together into one story and then this is merged with the Santa myth produces a massive amount of religious misinformation.

There was a cartoon in a recent New Yorker that showed the three wise men on their camels following the star to Bethlehem. One of them has broken into the familiar and popular holiday song, "It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas."

I hope you know that there were no camels around, Jesus was likely born in the Spring of the year and the wise men, if there were any, didn't arrive until Jesus was likely three or four years old.

The amount of misinformation about Jesus and his teachings is just appalling. I have been reading the writings of a man named Jim Palmer who has written a book titled "Inner Anarchy." One of his blog postings was titled "Fifteen Things Jesus Didn't Say." Here they are:

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15 things Jesus Didn't Say:

“For God was so disgusted with the world and you that he gave his one and only Son.”

“I have come to bring you a new religion.”

“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have correct theology.”

“If anyone would come after me, let him disparage all other religions and their followers.”

“If you love me, you will regularly attend a church of your choice... within reason.”

“Blessed are the tithers for they shall be called the children of God.”

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in Heaven after the earth goes up in flames and is destroyed.”

“You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor,’ which means the people with whom you attend church and relate to in your Christian sub-culture.”

“In my Father's house there are a limited number of rooms. But no worries, there is plenty of room in Hell.”

“The kingdom of God has come!... Well, not exactly. I mean, not completely. Let's face it, the really-real kingdom comes after we die. Hang in there. It won't be long.”

“And you will know the truth and the truth will make you superior to all the other simpletons who never learned Greek or Hebrew.”

“You are the light of the world... well... in a sinful-filthy-scum kind of way.”

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you a checklist of things to do and not do in order to remain in God’s favor.”

“For God so loved the world... you know like theoretically... as in, God loves the big ‘W’-world. But when it come to you specifically, there are quite a few things that would need to change for God to actually and specifically love... or even like... YOU.”

“He appeared to his disciples over a period of 40 days and spoke about how to incorporate his life and teaching as a 501(c)3, and go into all the earth to build mega-churches in his name.”

(Jim Palmer, Notes from (Over) the Edge: Unmasking the Truth to End Your Suffering)

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How did this happen?

One answer to that is that we live in a spiritually impoverished culture.

One example of this I found in the most recent issue of “The Week” (December 12, 2014)

Here is what I read there:

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A Christian church-design company has proposed building McDonald’s restaurants inside churches to attract more worshippers. Lux Dei Design says its “McMass Project” will “draw a wider audience to the church” and spread “the message of Christ’s love.”

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There are likely many ways to frame an understanding of why our culture is so spiritually impoverished. Here is just one.

First, what became known as Christianity got coopted by the political power system. That immediately robbed the church of have any real prophetic voice and also caused it to become everything Jesus was not - mostly divisive and exclusive. These were the very things Jesus was not. He included and he said, "God is not up there but right here, right now; you are living in God and God is in everyone. Now, live like it."

The core teaching of Jesus and the early movement he founded was something called "the incarnation." It means: God is in everything and everyone. It was not an original teaching of Jesus. He got it from his Jewish religion. He just re-imaged it for people.

As soon as the movement became what I call "imperial Christianity," it came up with a creed - because Constantine said to do so. The creed begins, "We believe in God, the Father Almighty." And then the church went about telling people where God was not. God is not in the Jews, only in Christians. God is not even in all Christians but only those who "believe the right things." God is not even in all of those people, only those who have been ordained and are therefore eligible to perform sacred rituals. God is certainly not in those who have been labeled "infidels" and it is just the Christian thing to do to go on crusades and root those people out.

I think it is Dr. Phil who has the habit of listening to people pour out their tales of woe and the often stubborn, if not abusive, ways they have tried to deal with the people in their lives and then asking them, "How's that working for you?"

I want to ask that of so many people and institutions. How is beheading working for you? How is torture working for you? How is racial divisiveness working for you? And on and on.

If a religion makes a person less loving, less inclusive, less joyful, less confident; it is a bad religion. This is why every spiritual teacher who is in contact with wise and useful truth teaches, "Don't judge."

The second thing I would point to at the heart of our spiritually impoverished culture is the fear so many "religious" people have of "not knowing." The opposite of faith is not doubt. The opposite of faith is certitude. This is true for so-called liberals as well as conservatives. People think they know. Just because someone is a highly educated person of the liberal persuasion, doesn't mean that they are still not as dualistic in their thinking as can be.

When it comes to Jesus and what he had to teach this is especially true. Conservative, evangelical "Christians" have Jesus figured out. They know exactly what he said and what he meant. More liberal leaning folks either dismiss Jesus and his teaching as entirely irrelevant and join what is called "the church alumni society" or they stay in some organized church structure and analyze the bejesus out of Jesus. I know because I've done that. And love it! And, further, have benefited from it. And, if you have been the recipient of my teaching over the past many years, so have you.

We must, however, go further.

Where is it we are to go?

My current answer to that, as you might have guessed, is into the realm of non-duality or mysticism.

As you know, I hope, the direction I've decided to take in these teachings I offer in here I'm calling "Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic" and I'm doing do by working my way through the Gospel of Thomas.

Because of the culture in which we all have been born into the topic of mysticism is for the most part foreign to people. It sounds fuzzy or "new age-y." It is neither.

Mysticism is an awareness of the presence of Sacred Mystery in both the inner and outer world. This awareness not only exceeds description but also deeply

transforms the person who experiences this awareness. If it does not deeply change the life and lifestyle of the person who experiences it - the way we view the world, our economic beliefs, our politics, our ability to form and be part of a community - there is no reason to believe that we have had a truly mystical experience.

Richard Rohr says that "mysticism is not just a change in some religious ideas or affirmation, but is an encounter of such immensity that everything else shifts in position."

I would say one mark of a person who has had such an encounter is their ability to be inclusive. Mystics are inclusive because they have experienced radical inclusivity themselves. My first intellectual experience of this was reading the works of Paul Tillich in the mid 1950s. He writes about the mystical experience this way:

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Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.

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Some of my favorite words! And something very difficult to move from the head into the Soul. Tillich called this acceptance of being accepted "the courage to be."

True mystics have no need for specialness because that need has been met once and for all.

One of the things required to be open to this experience is that we must become and learn to return again and again to the place Buddhists call "beginners mind" and Jesus referred to as "become as a child."

Many of you have children. Perhaps you yourself were once a child.

Whereas many regular church going folks will hear a teaching of Jesus and make a snap judgment of "I've heard that before," tell a story to a child and almost immediately they will want to hear it again. I remember my own son had a favorite bedtime story. I would read it to him and he would respond, "Read it again." Some adults can do this as well. Who doesn't like to watch and gets captivated by "The Christmas Story" every year around this time? I know a family who, when they get together, watch the movie "Princess Bride" together. They have done this so often they can recite the lines of the movie as it plays.

In 1994 I read my first book by Marcus Borg. It was his "Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time. The next book I read of his, in 2001 - 13 years ago now! - was "Reading the Bible Again For the First Time." Since then I have read eighteen of the many books Borg has written. The titles of these two, however, have stayed with me. They embrace the paradoxical and contradictory aspects of what I have come to believe constitute a wise and useful spiritual path.

We think we know and yet on deeper inspection we see what we had thought we had so clearly seen we see again as if for the first time. This is what the Buddhists mean by beginners mind and what Jesus meant by "become as a child."

I'm stealing Borg's idea for the title of this talk: "Listening Again For the First Time." (By the way when Borg spoke here in this room I went up to him at one of the breaks and told him I had read most of his stuff, had first heard him at the Jesus Seminar Meeting in New York and that I regularly plagiarized his material. His response was "borrow freely my friend, borrow freely.") Committed followers of his work refer to themselves as "Borg-Again Christians."

Jesus taught mostly by what he did. Then he used one line aphorisms and longer stories called parables to illustrate his life and living. If you were to ask people who have familiarity with the Jesus story to tell you one of the parables Jesus told, very likely most people would tell you that he told the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" and the "Parable of the Good Samaritan." However, the parable that the scholars have given the most attention to is the one we are up to dealing with today.



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Look, there was a man who came out to sow seed. He filled his hand with seed and threw it about. Some fell onto the road, and birds ate it. Some fell onto rocks and could not root and produced no grain. Some fell into patches of thorny weeds that kept it from growing, and grubs ate it. Some seed fell upon good soil and grew and produced good grain. It was 60 units per measure and 120 units per measure.

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That is likely a bit different from the version you may be more familiar with.

Several years ago I gave what someone took to be a particularly edgy talk in here. (Hard for me to imagine that.) Afterwards, someone sent me an e-mail about that said:

"Just so you will know: what you said was not what you intended nor what we heard. What we heard, of course, was not what you said and certainly not what you intended. And, our understanding of what you meant was somewhat less than complete not to mention inaccurate. We nevertheless are very appreciative of what we think we heard you say."

I did not write that. I think it is brilliant.

Gandhi said, "God speaks to us every day, but we do not listen."

Our challenge is to hear what Sacred Mystery says to us and it requires listening again and again and again.

When I was taking Greek and New Testament in graduate school, I had a professor who assigned this parable for me to work on for the entire semester. Most of the teachings of Jesus found in the Gospel of Thomas are found only there. Some of the teachings are found in the Gospels we are more familiar with as well. This parable is found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Thomas.

If you wanted to find a single teaching of Jesus that was the most comprehensive in conveying what Jesus meant to teach about the rule of God, it would be this parable. Though this is not the parable we are the most familiar with, if you go to the scholarly books and commentaries, you will find that of all of Jesus' teachings this is the one that gets the most attention. This is an important teaching

Keep in mind, and I keep reminding us because we so quickly and easily forget, Jesus was not a Christian and he did not live in the United States in the 21st century. He was a Jew intent on reforming his own religion and he lived in a world that was almost entirely agricultural.

One of the things I feel fortunate about in my life is that I got exposed to an agricultural world in my growing up. My mother's parents lived in the Cumberland Mountains in Tennessee and I loved it when we went to visit them. They lived virtually entirely off of the land.

They had no running water, no inside plumbing, no central heating or air conditioning, no electricity. The nearest telephone to their house was 14 miles away. They listened to the radio when there was enough wind to power the wind generator. In the Fall of the year they killed and butchered their own hogs, made soap and hominy. I loved it.

I'm not idealizing this time. My point is that they lived close to the land and were in touch with what happened when crops did or didn't make. We don't. We have other concerns but that is not one of them. The people who first heard this story were just a day or two away from having nothing to eat.

To us the farmer in this story seems reckless. He just goes out and throws seed everywhere, hoping for the best. The seed wasn't genetically modified, either. The folks who first heard this parable had seen this done. Very likely had done it themselves. The farmer would throw the seeds and, if possible, later come back and plow the ground.

What do you think is the focus on this parable? The farmer? The seed? The soil? The harvest? Think about it. What is this story about?

The way the story has it the farmer throws the seeds out, doesn't plow and immediately there is a harvest. We begin to get a clue: the focus is not on the harvest. The focus is on the seeds.

In working with the teachings of Jesus, or the teachings of any great spiritual teacher who speaks in parables, there are two questions to keep in mind:

First, what does the teaching mean?

Second, what relevance does it have for us?

As I said, I spent an entire semester studying just this one parable. You would be amazed at how much controversy there is over the widely varied interpretations of it.

I'm about to give you the correct one.

There are many sowing and reaping metaphors in both Jewish and Christian teachings. It is also a prominent teaching in Buddhism. I'll bet there is more than one person in this room who has had a parent say to you, "Be careful what you say or do. What you sow, you will reap." When I heard Ilia Delio talk about quantum physics and say that if a physicist takes a tiny particle and cuts it in two and puts one piece on this podium and another on the moon and then turns the one on the podium over the one on the moon turns over as well, I thought immediately about the Buddhist teaching of Karma. Everything is connected. Everything has consequences.

In this parable some seeds produce nothing. The focus isn't on a good harvest or a bad harvest.

Since all of Jesus' teachings are about what he called "the rule of God," then it is a place where there is failure. It is also a place where there is the miraculous as some seeds produce a humongous amount. And, some seeds produce what the farmer would expect and hope for.

This is the way farming is. Sometimes you get a crop failure. For whatever reason. Bad weather. Insect infestation. Sometimes you get an average yield. Sometimes you get what is called a bumper crop. We want there to be a bumper crop every year. Especially in our culture where the emphasis is on success and winning. Again, American success is not synonymous with God's rule. Hard as that is for many Americans to believe.

What I have come to believe is that this parable is about embracing God's ruling activity under the most unusual and, perhaps, unacceptable forms. Jesus pointed to prostitutes and street people as being first. The way I have been putting it for these past fifteen years is: finding God's presence and power in "ordinary life."

Everything, everyone - seeds that fail, seeds that are ordinary, seeds that are spectacular - all are included.

In the divisive and divided world in which we live the relevance this has is enormous, immense.

One of the reasons our world is so divisive and divided is that we can't get it together and keep it together internally. You're right. I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about the person sitting next to you.

We have such difficulty seeing and taking personal responsibility for our own complicity in things being the way they are both in our personal relationships and in the world.

Most of the world's atrocities have been committed by people who are absolutely convinced that not only is their view the right one but, even more, that their God has given them both an agenda and the permission to set the world straight.

There is one truth and it is this: There is not one truth. Or, there is one Truth and it has nothing to do with facts.

We do not so much achieve or have the truth as we awaken to the truth.

The most important truth about you is that you are who you are in God. No more. No less.

I think one of the reasons most really good spiritual teachers and the saints were and are so happy and laughing all the time is that they have come to revel in their true identity. The truth Jesus taught about people, and those who got it were transformed, is that there is nothing you can do to get God to love you any more than God loves you. Nor is there anything you can do to get God to love you less.

This identity of who we are - we are who we are in God, no more, no less - has nothing to do with our religion. Everybody has it. The seeds of this truth are scattered all over the world. My God! What daily life and our world would look like if we lived this identity.

I'll summarize it all this way: Jesus believed and taught and then enacted and made a radical commitment to God as a presence and power in the world and within people. This truth wasn't, and isn't, apparent to many people. So, Jesus showed how it make look by finding God in the very places and the very people that the religion of his time said God could not be. He didn't support or affirm the conventional wisdom of his time. He upset it by using parables to challenge security as a goal for living. Consequently, he is always throwing paradox and contradiction at us all the time. For example, "Those who want to save their live will lose it, and those who loves their life will save it."

Jesus taught and lived that what we put at the center of our lives determines everything. Liberals tend to put social justice at the center of their lives. Conservatives tend to put doctrine. Lean in either one of those directions and eventually you'll come to judge those who lean the other way.

I have seen so many liberals become burned out and cynical and so many conservatives become so righteously angry. What leads to transformation in the land of the here-and-now is not doing the right thing or believing the right thing but being rightly related to Sacred Mystery.

By the way, I didn't just say that social justice doesn't matter or that good theology isn't important. I'm talking about what is at the center.

Jesus was a master at telling parables.

I think he told parables for several reasons.

For one thing, he wanted to sneak truth in on people. People don't usually like to hear the truth directly.

For another, he wanted people to think. The truth from and about Sacred Mystery is not something you grab on the run from a fast food joint.

Hard as it is for us to get initially, Jesus was killed for telling parables like this. Because, after telling it, he went and put it into practice.

An encounter with Sacred Mystery is meant to present a challenge to us about how we see things. Not just once and for all. But, every day. This is why a daily practice is so essential.

The way we are to receive Sacred Mystery is by living lives that bear fruit and we are not the ones to judge whether that fruit is a failed or successful harvest.

Our part in this is receiving the seed. And we do it over and over. We get up every day with a commitment to listen again for the first time. The failure in the parable is the failure to hear.

So listen:

Right now we love and move and have our being in Sacred Mystery.

We are, with faith, to live this identity in the world.

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