

“Common Sense Isn’t”

“A faith is something you die for, a doctrine is something you kill for. There is all the difference in the world.”

I accidentally ran across this quote by British politician Tony Benn this week and thought, “How true.”

Faith is something you live by and for which some people have died and do die for. A doctrine is something people kill for. There is all the difference in the world between faith and doctrine.

Here is the tricky part. Everybody starts out in life living by doctrinal certainties.

I did and if you are reasonably planted in the world at the present moment so did you.

I grew up knowing that the United States was the best country in the world, especially the Southern part of it. I knew for certain that Christianity was the only right religion, especially the Southern Baptist part of it. The Bible was the only real word from God. God didn’t really say anything until there were white males in the South who could correctly hear and interpret this God.

Later we would systematize our thoughts about this God and call it systematic theology so that if God ever wanted to know anything about himself, it was surely a male God, all God had to do was go to one our seminaries and find out about himself. We had the truth.

Every child needs to grow up in a container that is gives them form, tradition, structure, certitude, order, clarity, authority and safety.

Walter Brueggemann, a highly respected biblical scholar, sees an essential progression reflected in Judaism as it begins with Torah, the law, progresses through the prophets, the ability to be self-critical and moves on into wisdom as reflected in the writings of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and, especially Job, where nothing works as it was supposed to.

Some people never graduate from the need for certainty. You see this in the rampant narcissism and self-absorption of so many people in our culture are affected with. Especially do we see it in those in places of leadership or who want to be, in this country.

Everybody seems to be in agreement that our government, especially the Congress, has been behaving dysfunctionally. Those currently putting themselves forward as candidates for the presidency are not only full of themselves but also down on and critical of everyone else who is vying for the same position. They are making the most out of the fact that most Americans are, as they say, “mad as hell” at Washington.

I got into a fantasy the other day. What I’d like to do is get two dozen people who have been elected to congress and who have served there a good while in a room together. This would be, as they say, a bipartisan group, Republicans and Democrats. They would be given truth serum. They would be denied the use of the words “you” or “they.” Their topic of discussion would be, “This is how I contributed to the dysfunction of our government.”

The ability to take personal responsibility for “the way things are” rather than blaming others and/or circumstances is a mark of maturity. Faith is a mark of maturity. Doctrine is a mark of arrested development. Doctrinal rigidity and righteousness is destroying this world.

Though we must start out in a tribe and develop tribal loyalty, if we do not move beyond that, we contribute to the dysfunction of the world. I’m convinced that if organized religion cannot move beyond tribalism, we are done for.

In case you have been living under a rock, and if that is the case I would LOVE to borrow that rock sometime, though the presidential election is nearly ten months away, you would think it is tomorrow. Some of the candidates have explicitly courted what they labeled as “evangelical Christians” in the most recent Iowa Caucus. They have assured the voters that their faith was important to them and they even quoted the Bible a lot. Late night television talk show host Jimmy Kimmel thought it might be a good idea to have Jesus come onto his show and talk

not about the candidates but have Jesus say some of the things some of the candidates said in their effort to get elected.

(Here is one link to a video of that episode:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXS9IZnvzPI>)

Last week I concluded our time together by offering you an image I got from spiritual teacher Jim Finley about Sacred Mystery being a river. Actually, we are in the river all the time just not all the time aware of this. Sometimes, because of the culture in which we live, our consciousness of being in the river can be so distracted or corrupted that it is as if we are not in the river at all.

I was pleasantly surprised to see that after our time together last week one of Richard Rohr's daily meditations was about the importance of not getting caught in our small tribal or personal stories. Because they don't speak the whole truth about "what is," they are not true at all.

Our personal stories, our tribal stories are usually based on hurts and unconscious agendas that allow us to see and judge things in a very selective way. Rohr says, "They're not the whole You, not the Great You, not the Great River. Therefore it is not where your big life can really happen. No wonder the Spirit is described as "flowing water" and as "a spring inside you" (John 4:10-14) or, at the end of the Bible, as a "river of life" (Revelation 22:1-2). Strangely, your real life is not about 'you.' It is a part of a much larger stream called God."

Jesus called this River "the kingdom or rule of God." It is a phrase that we have always had great difficulty with. We have confused it with something that is either political and whips our enemies or something that is off out in the future to be realized only after death - and only then if one is a believer of the right sort.

Faith is ability to trust the Big River of God's providential love, which is to trust the visible embodiment, the flow, and the source itself. The visible embodiment has to do with the teachings and rituals of the tradition. The flow has to do with the sea of energy in which we live and move and have our being. The source has to do with the mystery from which we came and to which we return.

This is not something that we control or have to improve upon. We just need to be aware of it, trust it and enjoy it. This, of course, takes immense confidence, especially when we are hurting or in peril. What is required is to be present. We don't have to push the river. As Rohr puts it, ". . . the Big River is already flowing through me and I am only one small part of it."

So he advises, "Ask yourself regularly, 'What am I afraid of? Does it matter? Will it matter at the end or in the great scheme of things? Is it worth holding on to?' Grace will lead you into such fears and emptiness, and grace alone can fill them up, if we are willing to stay in the void. It is a kind of 'negative capability' that God seems to make constant use of. We mustn't engineer an answer too quickly. We mustn't get settled too fast. We all want to manufacture an answer to take away our anxiety and settle the dust. To stay in God's hands, to trust, means that we usually have to let go of our attachments to feelings - which are going to pass away anyway (which is the irony of it all). People of deep faith develop a high tolerance for ambiguity, and come to recognize that it is only the small self that needs certitude or perfect order all the time. The Godself is perfectly at home in the River of Mystery."

I share with you two of my favorite teaching stories from the Buddhist tradition.

After his enlightenment, someone encountered Buddha on the road and was stunned at his appearance. Clearly, there was something different about this man. The passerby asked, "Are you the messiah?"

"No," answered Buddha.

"Then are you a healer?"

"No," Buddha replied.

"Then are you a teacher?" the student persisted.

"No, I am not a teacher."

"Then what are you?" asked the student, exasperated.

“I am awake,” Buddha replied.

In the other story Buddha is asked one day what do he and his monks do all day in their monastery.

The Buddha replied, “We sit, we walk, and we eat.”

The person asking the question said, “We also do these things every day, so how are you different?”

The Buddha responded, “When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating.”

Waking up and being aware is why we have a daily practice. Practice is what allows us to play in the river. Practice is what allows us to live in faith rather than by doctrine.

I have been basing the talks I offer to you in here - all of them in one way or another - about how our awareness of and wakefulness to being in the river can give meaning not only to our lives individually but also can help create a better world - on wisdom teachings of Jesus. I am taking these teachings from the Gospel of Thomas. Here is the saying this talk is based on.

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No one can mount two horses,
or draw two bows at once,
and you cannot serve
two masters at the same time.
If you honor one,
the other will be offended.

No one drinks a vintage wine
and immediately wants
to taste wine freshly bottled.

New wine is not put into
old containers lest it be ruined,
nor is aged wine put into
new barrels lest it spoil.

Also, old cloth is not sewn
onto new garments because
it only makes the tear worse.

* * *

Even if you are not a church goer, you have heard some version of some of this before. These sayings fall into the category of folk wisdom or what we refer to as “common sense.”

That’s why we mishear them or let them roll off of us with little impact.

I’m calling this talk “Common Sense Isn’t”

These sayings are scattered all through the Jesus narratives - that is, Mark, Luke and Matthew - and are used by the story tellers there to make their particular points about Jesus. One of them, the one about wine, is also found in the first of the miracle stories in John.

Here, of course, they stand alone because Thomas has no story to tell. This is a collection of teachings used by the early followers of Jesus to communicate mystical wisdom.

It is fun for me to read what the scholars have said about these sayings and to what degree they attribute them to something Jesus himself might have actually said.

There was no such thing as plagiarism then. Some of these sayings were proverbs that existed in the culture. As I mentioned last week, there were many in the day of Jesus who put themselves forward as prophets or wisdom teachers. If you compare these sayings with those found in the Jesus narratives you will see that they are different. There is room in the narratives to equate. As the sayings developed over

time the “new” became superior to the “old.” Jesus is NOT saying that the Christian was superior to the Jewish way or any other way. For one thing, there was no such thing as “Christian.” Jesus was a Jewish mystic committed to reforming his own, as he saw it, gone-wrong religion.

So what is there here for us? Jesus is taking proverbs, what we might call “common sense sayings” from his culture and using them to teach something about his passion which was forgiveness, inclusion and justice.

When I first read these words in Thomas I thought of Poor Richard’s Almanac. I had, of course, heard about Poor Richard’s Almanac and I thought I knew that Benjamin Franklin wrote it but when I looked it up on line I discovered a history that is most fascinating. (Here is a link to learn more - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poor_Richard%27s_Almanack)

It was full of the sort of practical advice people during that era were hungry for and it also contained sayings, witticisms, games and the like. It helped make Franklin famous and was also the target of his critics. People like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville and James Russell Lowell ridiculed Franklin severely for this publication saying it was shallow and insulting.

But he came up with sayings that are famous and used to this day.

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”

“Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”

And of course, “In the world nothing could be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

Some first grade teacher took a whole list of Benjamin quotes and gave them as only partial sentences to his class. The students had the first part of the saying but not the last. They were asked to complete them.

Some examples:

“A bird in the hand . . . is going to poop on you.”

“When the blind lead the blind . . . get out of the way.”

“There are none so blind as . . . Stevie Wonder.”

“A penny saved . . . is not much.”

When Jesus spoke, I don't think people said, “Well, duh. Everybody knows that. It's just common sense.”

* * *

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or draw two bows at once,
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two masters at the same time.
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No one drinks a vintage wine
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to taste wine freshly bottled.
New wine is not put into
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* * *

Jesus isn't running for office. He's not trying to get votes. He is calling people into a deeper understanding of themselves by inviting them into a deeper understanding of God. He is calling them into a different kind of relating to each other because of and through this new understanding of themselves and God.

The context in which Jesus did his teaching is not business as usual, not common sense. Besides, there is no such thing as "common sense." When we use it in a phrase like, "She has no common sense," we mean, "She doesn't think like I do."

The hardest saying, to me, that Jesus offered, and offers, is, "You must learn to be in the world but not of it."

The church fails us, organize religion fails us, when it allows us to receive a teaching and respond by saying things like, "Well, everybody knows that." Or, "That's not realistic."

I think I know I am onto something close to the truth when I can acknowledge that the teachings of Jesus embody everything I want and everything I'm afraid of. They are impractical, unreasonable, impossible, life giving.

Jesus is saying here one thing though it is a two-sided coin. On one said it says, keep yourself free for God. On the other side he wants to keep God free for people. The religion of Jesus day did not do that. A wise and authentic religion and spiritual work is about setting people free - free from bondage and free from suffering. Most churches do not allow God much freedom. Honestly, most people's operative image of God is like that of Santa Claus. He's making a list and checking it twice, gonna find out whose naughty or nice. The good kids get toys, heaven, the bad kids get lumps of coal, hell.

This is not a mature spirituality. It is not Good News. The sexism and racism in this country that brags about being the home of the free does not create freedom for half of our citizens.

In the day of Jesus the very people who did not make God free for people were those of the religious establishment. So the prophets, including John the Baptist, talked about making a path straight in the desert and Jesus talked about narrow

gates and the impossibility of divided loyalties. The great concepts of Jesus - forgiveness and inclusivity gradually became formulas and techniques. I've quoted Richard Rohr before as saying that the work of the church became sin management. The way of Sacred Mystery is not common sense. These sayings are about creating no barriers to or for God.

So on one side of the coin that is Jesus' message it says, "Keep God free." On the other side it says, "Keep yourself free." Don't buy into the message of your culture. You are not what you do or what you have, not any of the things that cause us to live with guilt or with either an inflated sense of self or a deflated one.

You can't know who you are and have what is called "low self esteem." Indeed, and this is the message of Jesus in these sayings, the purpose of life on earth is to achieve union with, to know and be our own every present, fundamental, and already enlightened essential nature.

When you fall into the river of the mercy and grace of your essential nature all the petty religious stuff just no longer makes sense. Anything that fails to serve, show mercy, include, forgive, show compassion is missing the mark. These teaching about our giving up trying to do the impossible and undesirable and still have life.

Do you understand these teachings of Jesus?

Sometime in the 60's I was discovered by the writings of Frederick Buechner. I used to brag that I owned everything he had ever written but that's not true. His writings, both fiction and non-fiction, have influenced me perhaps more than any other writer I have ever read.

(Here is a link to learn more - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Buechner)

His writings shepherded me through the bleakest period of my life. Thirty five or thirty six years ago, during a very dark time, a friend of mine gave me a set of cassette tapes of Buechner giving some lectures at Yale. Later, these lectures would become the first volume of Buechner's autobiography. It is called "The Sacred Journey." I have read this book numerous times. In it he talks about his understanding of faith, hope and love.

In the summer of 1982 I had a second date with the woman who would become my wife. On that second date I took her a copy of this book and inside it I had written, "To Sherry from Bill, at the beginning."

This brief volume is rich beyond measure. In it he speaks of a time in his life when he was very sick as a child and where he spent his time living in the Land of Oz in his imagination by reading the Oz books written by Frank Baum.

The character in the Oz books that left the deepest mark on Buechner was a plump, ebullient king named Rinkitink. He was, according to Buechner, a foolish man in many ways who laughed too much and talked too much and at moments of stress was apt to burst into unkingly tears; but beneath all that, he gave the impression of remarkable strength and resilience and courage even, a good man to have around when the chips were down.

He and his young friend Prince Inga of Pingaree came into possession of three magic pearls - a blue one that conferred such strength that no power could resist it, a pink one that protected its owner from all dangers, and a pure white one that would speak words of great wisdom and helpfulness. When Rinkitink consulted it for the first time it said, "Never question the truth of what you fail to understand for the world is filled with wonders."

In this volume Buechner also tells of an experience he had one weekend when he went to a monastery, the order of the Holy Cross in West Park, New York. These are his words.

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I had two reasons for going. One of them was that I heard that one of the monks there was a man of great wisdom and sanctity. And I had questions I wanted to ask him, which I have long since forgotten, just as I would have undoubtedly long since forgotten his answers. The other reason was that I felt I needed somehow to be cleansed of the too-muchness and too-littleness of my life, to be cleansed as much as anything, I suppose, of myself.

In some ways the trip was a flop. The monk I had come to see had taken on some special vows and could not be seen and all the other monks practiced the vow of silence except for one elderly one known as the “guest master,” who had the responsibility to talk to visitors like me but, as the result of a stroke, spoke so indistinctly as to be almost unintelligible. So none of my questions were answered, whatever they were. I met no one who gave me whatever help I had come for or whom I ever saw again or especially wanted to. Nothing in that sense happened.

But silence happened. Silence at meals, in the corridors, the silence of men who, for the love of God, kept silence. And to some degree, silence happened also in myself. Silence not merely as the absence of speech but as a kind of speech itself or something as a prelude to speech, a prelude to hearing someone or something speak out of the silence.

When it came time for me to leave a couple of days later, the guest master asked if I would like him to hear my confession, and I cringed with embarrassment. I told him I thought you confessed your sins to God. “Well, sometimes it meant more to confess them to God through a priest,” he said. So I told him what I could, told him a few of the things I had done that I thought were sinful, childish, fleshy things for the most part, but terrible to tell. And at the time I suppose he must have pronounced my forgiveness, though I do not remember feeling particularly forgiven and cleansed. But the old man himself I remember, some special combination of sternness and kindness about him. Would I like him to give me his blessing, he asked. And as much out of politeness as anything and because I thought maybe then he would let me go, I said yes. So he indicated I was to kneel and down on the stone floor. I knelt, as awkwardly as I confessed if not more so, and he signed me with the sign of the cross and blessed me. “You have a long way to go,” he said. His only words that I think I remember exactly. I had a long way to go.

* * *

I think that is what Jesus says to me. You have a long way to go. I don't hear these words as judgmental words but as hopeful.

I need, no doubt, judgment about my own judgments and righteousness. But I hear hope that there is more. That what matters is the work of freedom - to allow God to be God and ourselves to be who we truly are. To allow ourselves to be who we are in God. Nothing more. Nothing less.

The thing that matters along our sacred journey is that we learn this freedom and extend it to others. That we live with faith. For to live with doctrine causes us to miss the journey entirely.

What we carry to lighten our step as we go is the wisdom Buechner found in Oz: "Never question the truth of what you fail to understand, for the world is filled with wonders." Never question the truth that is far on the other side of what we call "common sense."

What I hear Jesus say and it is the one thing about which I am absolutely certain is that right now we live and move and have our being in Sacred Mystery. That's not common sense. That is Sacred Truth.

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