

Found In Translation

In the 1850s, right after the borders of Texas were established, there was a Texas Ranger, Billy Mack Orr, who was bedeviled by a bandit from Mexico. El Bandido, which is how he would come to be known, would come across the border and target three things: banks, trains and stagecoaches. He seemed to have an uncanny ability, like a sixth sense, to know when and where to strike. His sole interest was in stealing gold. He was good at it. And, he was good at not getting caught.

As time passed, it became clear that this thievery was the work of this one bandit. Officials had no idea who he was or what he was doing with the gold because none of it ever seemed to resurface. As time passed and stretched into years, Billy Mack's obsession with capturing this guy increased.

The day came when Billy Mack would have to take off his badge and retire. It galled him that he, in spite of having an outstanding record otherwise, was not able to capture El Bandido. With only a few weeks left to serve, Billy Mack decided to go into Mexico and see if, by using his excellent sleuthing skills, he could find and capture El Bandido.

So Billy Mack rode south asking questions of the many contacts and informants he had developed over the years. One lead after another turned from hot to cold. Then, one day, following another tip, Billy Mack walked into a saloon on the edge of Morelia. The trail ended here. Over in the corner nursing a glass of whiskey, smoking a cigar and reading, believe it or not, the works of Shakespeare, sat El Bandido. Very quietly Billy Mack pulled out his '44, cocked the hammer, walked up to El Bandido and put the gun to his head.

Then he had the horrible realization that, in spite of his best intentions, he had never learned to speak Spanish. He called to a young kid behind the bar, "You speak English?" The young man, frightened like everyone else in the place, stammered, "Si, si - er, yes, yes." "Come here then," barked Billy Mack - by now El Bandido clearly knew he had been caught.

“Tell El Bandido that I have come to take him back. But, first, he must tell me where he has hidden all the gold he has stolen over the years. Tell him that if he doesn’t come clean, I’m going to put a bullet through his head right here, right now.”

The young boy, just barely a teenager, translated the message to El Bandido.

El Bandido listened and then said, in Spanish, “Tell Billy Mack I know he has spent years looking for me. I’m tired of running. I’m tired of my thieving ways. Almost all of the gold I’ve ever stolen, well over \$100,000 worth, is hidden in a strong box buried behind the potbellied stove in my shack just outside of town. The key to the strong box is in the toe of the left boot of the pair that are sitting at the foot of the bed. I’m ready to go.”

When The Bandit had stopped speaking, Billy Mack said, “Well, what did he say?”

The boy turned to Billy Mack and said, “El Bandido is a very brave man. He said he’s not afraid to die.”

That is an example of something being not only lost in translation but also twisted by the greedy purpose of the young man who had been snared by the hope for gold.

Understanding and being understood may be one of the most precious experiences we can give or receive in our lives.

When I entered clinical training in 1966 I got a line from the writings of Thomas Hora that was one of those truly life-altering lines for me. Thomas Hora is considered the founder of a discipline called “meta-psychiatry.” From my first serious encounter with the writings of Carl Jung this sort of thing has defined my life - both personally and professionally. “Meta-psychiatry” is an attempt to put together insights from metaphysics, spirituality and psychiatry.

I had not yet been introduced to any of the insights or teachers you have heard me frequently refer to in these talks. I had not yet encountered my first spiritual teacher - who was Buddhist mostly in his orientation. I had not met Richard Rohr or Jim

Finley or Ilia Delio or - well, just so many people who would turn out to shape my life.

Looking back now, however, I see what a perfect introduction Thomas Hora was for me to the world of non-duality. Hora said, "In order to understand yourself, you must be understood by another. In order to be understood by another, you must understand yourself."

We long to be understood. We long to be accepted. We long to be appreciated. We long to experience affection.

Yet, there are so many ways for us to miss hearing and understanding each other. I think it is a miracle that there is any understanding between us at all.

It is a miracle that I can stand here and by causing a couple of pieces of skin to vibrate in my throat can send out sound waves that hit something in your ears that your brain can translate into something that you can understand.

That there is any understanding between us, indeed between almost any two people, is miraculous. Think of all the differences that exist between us: different sexes, different ages, different life experiences, different personalities, different political philosophies, different economic statuses, different education experiences. Words mean different things to each of us. We are so different in so many, many ways. And, we are a fairly homogeneous group.

We've talked in here a lot about dualistic and non-dual mind states - as we will continue to do. I'll repeat something I said last week because it is so important: Dualist thinking, which is the norm in our culture, causes us to hear something or see something or hear someone or see someone and immediately compare what we hear or see with some already believed stance. We divide. Then, we discard what it is that we don't prefer. The process is: we compare, we compete, we crucify. Just watch your mind.

At the dualistic level we objectify people. We create what the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber called the "I-It" relationships. No one likes to be made into an "it." At the non-dual level, we create "I-Thou" relationships. We all long to be

connected at the personal level and, further, we long to know and believe that the energy field in which we live is personal, friendly, safe.

What we do at the conventional, cultural, mindless, automatic-pilot level of living; we take into our religious and spiritual work.

What has led me to this topic is a teaching from the Gospel of Thomas that is not only also in the canonical Christian writings but has made its way into the popular language of most all cultures - as far as I could find out. Here it is. At least the version of it that is found in Thomas:

Do not give what is sacred
to dogs who will only
discard it on a manure pile.
Do not cast pearls in front of pigs
who will only trample and ruin them.

The proverbial way most of us know this teaching is “Do not cast your pearls before swine.”

There is even a comic strip by that name that provides an excellent example of what today’s talk is about:

Two of the characters in the strip, Zebra and Rat, are wondering where their friend Pig is. Zebra says, “Where is Pig?” Rat says, “Going door-to-door looking for his stolen nativity scene figurines.” Zebra says, “Any progress?” Rat responds, “No, I think there is a communication problem.” The next panel shows Pig at someone’s door asking, “Have you found Jesus?” The result is a door slammed in Pig’s face.

My hunch is that if you walked up to almost anyone and asked them if they had found Jesus, that would shut them down.

There are so many ways and opportunities for us to mishear and/or misinterpret each other. In how many family fights are the words said, “That’s not what I meant at all.” Or, “That’s not what I said.”

I have had it happen to me countless times. Someone will return a week after we have had a counseling session to say, “What you said last week was really helpful - or, was really not helpful - to me.” Curious, I’ll ask, “And, what was that?” The person will play back to me something that not only do I NOT remember saying but also, more often than now, something I don’t think I WOULD say.

It is a miracle that there is any understanding, to say nothing of dialogue, between us at all. To say nothing of dialogue between us and Sacred Mystery.

Let’s take a closer look at this teaching.

This is a really, to me and I hope to make it so for you too, interesting, profound and somewhat difficult to deal with teaching.

Those whose scholarship I trust and rely on say that though Jesus may have recommended a certain amount of discernment and discrimination in choosing those to whom his teachings were addressed, to refer to people as dogs of pigs, which is how Jews regarded those who were not Jews, is not consistent with the other sayings, parables and behaviors of Jesus in which the unclean are embraced rather than being rejected.

Here is the way Eugene Peterson renders the version of this saying that is found in Matthew:

Don’t be flip with the sacred. Banter and silliness give no honor to God. Don’t reduce holy mysteries to slogans. In trying to be relevant, you’re only being cute and inviting sacrilege.

Though Jesus may not have said it, there is something absolutely true about the teaching. There is no point in giving wisdom or truth to people who aren’t ready for it.

Yes, we are asked, indeed commanded, not to judge. But that doesn’t mean checking our brains at the door or succumbing to the linguistic carelessness of our culture or being drowned by the rising tide of stupidity and ignorance that negatively affects our levels of religious and spiritual literacy.

4,000 churches close their doors every year in this country. Almost three million people a year leave Christian churches - Protestant and Catholic. The attendance in Ordinary Life is larger than half the churches in the Methodist Denomination. Far too many churches are practicing a religion that last had relevance in the 19th century. Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets.

Most religious expressions in this country practice a cognitive dissonance with which most people experience not in the least bit of discomfort. That is to say, the churches can talk the talk but not walk the walk. They either talk about love for all and then exclude some; or, they promote a theology like “the prosperity gospel” that is designed to ultimately fail; or, they create an exclusive club; or, they reduce mighty matters to trivialities. I know there are exceptions to this but the church in general would be playing to better reviews if we had not fixed it were it is so easy to be Christian and and even easier to avoid being like Jesus.

I say this criticism from within the church, as someone who has benefited enormously from the church and as someone committed to St. Paul’s. I also say it as a personal counselor and spiritual director who cannot tell you how many people I have seen over the years who suffer from profound religious wounds dealt to them by the church and/or its representatives.

If we are going to lay down a foundation for credible theological, spiritual and religious work; a lot of debris has got to be cleared out of the way. Included in this debris would be:

God did not dictate the Bible to people who served as his secretaries.

God does not love Christians more than she does Hindus.

Prayer is not adult letters addressed to a Santa-Claus type God in the sky.

God is not some sort of Celestial Mr. Fix-It who, if talked to just right, will send an approaching hurricane to some other place where we are not.

Now, lest you think I am foisting some newfangled ideas off on you, let me offer a few lines from the works of St. Bonaventure:

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bonaventure>)

Bonaventura was born in Italy in 1221.

Bonaventure wrote: God is “within all things but not enclosed; outside all things, but not excluded; above all things, but not aloof; below all things, but not debased.” Bonaventure spoke of God as one “whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” This sounds like the kind of thing modern physics and quantum mechanics is saying. He taught that the origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity, and order of all created things are the very “footprints” and “fingerprints” of God. Now that is quite a lovely and very safe universe to live in.

Bonaventure continues:

“Whoever, therefore, is not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf; whoever does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb; whoever does not discover the First Principle from such signs is a fool.

“Therefore, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honor your God, lest the whole world rise against you.”

How different our world, especially the world of religion might have been these past 800 years had more people been shaped and formed by this vision.

The sad fact is, however, that our common seeing has been partial, punitive and prejudicial. So individuals with religious power got to decide where God’s image would be seen and honored. As Richard Rohr writes, when this happened “sinners, heretics, witches, Muslims, slaves, Jews, blacks, natives, buffalo, whales, elephants, land, and water were all the losers.” Rohr goes on, “Until we weep over these sins and publicly own our own complicity in the destruction of God’s people and God’s creation, we are surely doomed to remain blind; and we will likely keep looking for acceptable scapegoats. We always think the problem is elsewhere.”

So Jesus taught and teaches that we have a responsibility to discern what is truly true and to teach that in appropriate ways and places. Not an easy task.

Understanding and being understood is hard work. I think we don't do it because we live immersed in a culture that values efficiency over effectiveness.

No one wants to be thought of as a "pig" or "swine." But, it does help to know when to keep your mouth shut. I don't get this as much as I used to but there are religious questions, I call them "code questions," that are not asked to open a dialogue but, rather, to test for orthodoxy.

Dialogue can only go forward when we ask each other open and honest questions. An honest question is one that does not have an expected answer. An open question is one that doesn't back someone into a corner.

So if someone comes and asks me, "Do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?" "Do you believe Jesus is God's son?" "Do you believe that Jesus died for our sins?" I know they are not interested in a dialogue. I'm not sure that it is possible to have a dialogue with someone who is committed to a "fundamentalist" position of any kind. What is ironic is that a fundamentalist - religious or political - believes that they are defending the truth when they are in fact defending a part of the truth. That is the true definition of heresy.

Jesus spoke to people, when he spoke to the religious leaders, who sincerely believed they were defending the truth. They weren't bad people.

If you read the Bible, you will find in it healthy religion and unhealthy religion. How do you tell the difference? For Jesus it was simple, "By their fruits you shall know them."

Unhealthy religion almost always has the feel of posturing about it. It is arrogant about the truth it has. It is lodged completely in the ego. It simply does not feel like Jesus. He was always patient and humble, holding his truth calmly.

What are the fruits of true religion? Peace, love and joy. And, I would add to that a sense of power. I don't mean strength. In our culture we confuse strength with power. Strength leads people to being bullies of one sort or another.

Several years ago I got on an airplane to fly off to see my dying father. I had with me a copy of a book I was reading by Alan Watts. We boarded the plane, which was not very crowded. After we had reached that magical altitude where “you are free to get up and move about the cabin,” a man from the back of the plane came up to my seat and said, “Do you mind if I sit with you and we talk?” I did but what do you do?

He sat down and said, “I couldn’t help but notice that you are reading Alan Watts. Tell me about your relationship with him.” So we began our conversation. It lasted the entire flight and he ended up with tears in his eyes telling me how, at a crucial time in his life, his encounter with the works of Alan Watts saved his life. We exchanged contact information and for a good while stayed in touch. He asked me to send him a list of the books I found myself most often recommending to people.

One of the books that was on that list, and I’d recommend it to you if you haven’t read it, is Jim Hollis’ book, “Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life.”

A few weeks later I got an e-mail back from him thanking me for the recommendation and saying, “Why isn’t everyone in this country reading this book and talking about these things?”

Because, and I’m sure there is a multitude of ways to say this, most people in this culture don’t want to do the work of letting go what they think makes them who they are to move to another level of spiritual, emotional and relational development.

We have a task, those of us who seek to know and embody as best we can the teachings of Jesus. We have to practice discernment. I believe we have a responsibility to be “evangelistic” about communicating the peace, love and joy that animates us. This task isn’t easy given the fact that the religion of our culture is consumerism. Consequently, there are a lot of people who have no interest in having “heart conversations.” But, if we don’t learn to have them, we will not recover our soul either as individuals or as a country.

When people have no real inner experience, they have to pretend that they do. They have to pretend that they have the perfect and right answers. More often than

not they demand agreement and compliance from others about their “truth” and when they don’t get it, they are either out of here or out to do damage. When religion leads to a righteousness that excludes others, it is a bad religion.

So, here is a pearl. I’m confident of it. If and when we get our “God understanding” right, then everything else will fall into place. Go back and read and reflect on the words I used from Bonaventure. Or, how about this from Meister Eckhart? He is the 13th century mystic who wrote and prayed, “Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally.” He also wrote, “God is the newest thing there is, the youngest thing there is. God is the beginning and if we are united to God, we become new again.” By the way, he didn’t see God as a big guy in the sky. Rather, he said, “The Eye with which I see God is the same Eye with which God sees me.”

If our God understanding is not true, we won’t be true either. So many people today have a God-image that is toxic and that makes them toxic. This is part of what Jesus is talking about in this teaching.

When religion is good, it can be one of the best things in the world. When religion is bad, there is nothing worse. It has to do with how we relate to God which has to do with how we relate to ourselves which has to do with how we relate to each other.

We live in a culture where it is very difficult to talk about the best things and the second-best things are almost always misunderstood. So we talk about third-best things: sports, politics, the weather and other “safe” topics. I think this is one reason so much religion and religious language end up being smug, silly and superstitious.

Jesus never once said, “You must be right.” What he said was, “You must love one another.”

The call of the Sacred to everyone - pearl casters and pigs alike - is to come into a larger world. It is a call to embrace what God embraces. To love who and what God loves. It is so hard for the ego to hear this.

I actually had a man say to me once, “Do you think it is possible for me to address my alcoholism without having to give up drinking?” That reminds me of lines from W. H. Auden:

We would rather be ruined than changed.
We would die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the present
And let our illusions die.

Until we take this journey, which Thank God never ends, that which we are unaware of owns us. That is why so many people serve patterns of which they are not aware. That which we cannot own we project onto others. When that happens, we miss why we are here and what our brief, precious but fragile lives are about.

Rumi, the Sufi poet, put it this way:

“A King sent you to a country to carry out one special, specific task. You go to the country and you perform a hundred other tasks, but if you have not performed the task you were sent for, it is as if you have performed nothing at all. So (you have) come into the world for a particular task and that is (your) purpose. If (you) don’t perform it, you will have done nothing.”

So what are we to do. How do we live so that neither we nor Truth gets lost in translation, but rather found?

It isn’t about having the truth or right answers. It is about having empty and open hands and hearts and standing before and within the Sacred - not saying very much and not being sure of very much. That is to say, we must work to make sure that we don’t ourselves fall into the category of being what are referred to in this teaching as dogs or swine. We work, whatever practices we take up, whatever religion we follow at being empty-handed and open-minded so that we are always ready for wisdom and truth. It is the certainty that people think they have that keeps them trapped.

What Jesus is offering in this teaching is - be still, be quiet, listen.

What that means is that we have to be with ourselves and for some of us that is difficult to do.

Don't cast your pearls before swine.

Buddha said,

The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed;
The deed develops into habit;
And habit hardens into character.
So watch the thought and its ways with care.
And let it spring from love
Born out of concern for all Beings.

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