

Living With Serenity In the Midst of Life's Storms

Jesus took his disciples up the mountain, and, gathering them around him, he taught them saying: "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted. Blessed are you who suffer, be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven." Then he added, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another."

The disciples sat dumbfounded. They looked at him with puzzled looks, much like a dog looks at you when he knows you are saying something important but isn't quite sure what it is. Or, one of our distant ancestors.

Then Simon Peter said, "Are we supposed to know this?"

And Andrew said, "Do we have to write this down?"

And James said, "Will we have a test over this?"

And Phillip said, "I don't have any paper."

And Bartholomew said, "Do we have to turn this in?"

And John said, "The other disciples didn't have to learn this!"

And Judas said, "What does this have to do with real life?"

And Jesus wept.

On another occasion Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood revealed."

And Jesus wept some more.

I wonder if Jesus does not, or would not, also weep over, for the most part, the astounding irrelevance of so much that passes in his name today?

This talk today is based on a teaching of Jesus that the scholars say is not original with him. They say that it does, however, come from the very early stages of the movement he started and that it reflects the wisdom of those who not only experienced transformed lives from and through Jesus but also who left the system in order to live out their understanding of his teachings.

You might wonder how the scholars know what Jesus did and did not say.

That's easy. If you have any familiarity with the Christian religion at all, you have heard of various groups of people who lived at the time of Jesus. There were the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and so forth. Each group served a specific function.

The scribes were a group of people who had Big Chief writing tablets and carried with them No. 2 pencils. (I've never understood why if the No. 2 pencil is the favorite among pencils, why it is still No. 2.) At any rate, their job was to write down everything Jesus said and then to keep their work in airtight, waterproof storage spaces. They were very accurate in their work and never made mistakes or left anything out.

That's ridiculous, of course. However, there are many people who approach their belief about what they hold as the sacred scripture of their tradition just like that.

If I were to tell you that when I graduated from Hogwarts I left with two cloaks of invisibility and I'm willing to sell one, not cheap but I'm willing to part with it, if I were to say that to anybody, my hunch is they would look at me as if I were nuts.

But, if I told many of these same people that it is God's deepest desire that they be rich, or that it is okay to kill those who disagree with them, or that it's okay in God's eyes, perhaps even commanded, to discriminate against someone because of their sexual orientation, or any of the other nonsense that passes as what is causing so much divisiveness in the human community, the response is, "Makes sense to me." What does that say about the way we can so easily deny, resist, repress?

These people take the profoundly beautiful and symbolic metaphors of the Bible - such as dead people coming back to life, women conceiving children without benefit of sex and men riding chariots off into heaven or simply ascending into the sky -and take them literally.

I looked on the internet and discovered that there are almost 8,000 colleges and universities in this country. With that statistic you wonder, at least I do, how have we created so many ignorant people? I don't mean to say that education is the same as transformation. It is not. Any more than being part of a religious organization makes a person moral.

Marching under the banner of Islam today there are people who would and will walk out of a mosque and into public places and blow themselves up. Marching under the banner of "Christianity" today there are people who attend church, defend this country as a "Christian nation" who are racist, homophobic, sexist, class-conscious and so-forth.

I know, as do many of you, people who go to church and believe all the "right things," but they are still greedy, warlike, divisive and judgmental. If religion doesn't teach us how to rise above all of this, religion is not doing its job.

Side note: I read recently somewhere of a study that has shown that as humans evolve we get less intelligent, not more. That means that as we evolve, we get dumber. This means that as we evolve there will be fewer and fewer people who believe in evolution. (I think this is funny.)

I have talked in here before about the long and respected scholarship that has gone into excavating and exposing more and deeper understandings of Jesus and his teachings. These scholars are attempting to construct, basing their work on the most recent scholarly documents, a picture of the Jesus of history, the historical Jesus.

This is not the "real" Jesus. That person is unavailable to us just as when you and I die the "real" us will not be available. All that will remain will be stories and memories.

Jesus was a real person. He was a Jew born in the real world of first-century Palestine. A world we can barely imagine. He said and he did real things for which he was executed.

Many people have not liked the scholarship behind the Jesus of history movement. Because, and this is just my opinion, unlike the Christ of Faith, Jesus cannot be confined and controlled by doctrines and beliefs. Jesus is constantly turning things upside down. Jesus is not an object. He is a subject whom we can know and understand only in part and only to the extent that we are open to inhabiting his world and trying to understand his teachings from that point of view. Real faith always has the character of trust, not possession.

Though I have benefited from many different spiritual teachers and teachings from a variety of traditions over the years - Buddhism, Judaism, the Sufi branch of Islam as well as various flavors of "Christianity" - my desire and commitment is to use the "teachings of Jesus as my central reference point."

Academically, this is where the fun begins. Figuring out what did Jesus say, what did his first followers say, what did the establishment add decades later, etc.

Stephen Mitchell uses this metaphor. There is a stream of water that you come across. The water in the stream is okay but not absolutely pure. As you hike up the stream you see where pollutants and debris have been introduced to the stream. You continue to hike and, though it takes some daring and difficulty, you eventually come to source of the spring. There, you drink and are refreshed.

The teachings of Jesus are my central reference point.

Spiritually, this is where the challenge begins. Jesus, if we don't use him and belief in him as a fire-insurance policy for how to exit this world, can show us how to stand with the culture in which we live, how to stand against the culture in which we live, and - hopefully - how we can stand in service to our culture.

I wish I had thought that up but I didn't. That way of seeing the usefulness of Jesus belongs to Reinhold Niebuhr (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reinhold_Niebuhr) a theologian who significantly shaped my social consciousness when I was first in

seminary. (Niebuhr's dates are: 1892 - 1971.) He, by the way, is the man who wrote what we know as the "serenity prayer" used by many people but prominently by Alcoholic Anonymous.

The full version of this prayer is -

God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.

The title I've given this talk is "Living With Serenity In The Midst of Life's Storms."

I used to say that he was one of the five most theological characters in my life. He taught at Union Seminary for over thirty years. He was a great ethicist and had a huge social conscience.

I hope you read the link above. He was a most impressive and very influential person.

Somebody said to me one Sunday a couple of years ago something like, “It must take you a lot of courage to say what you do.” They were referring to my stance of inclusion of all persons - especially those of non-heterosexual orientation.

No, it takes no courage whatsoever. It’s the stance of Jesus. Read the record: non-violence, simplicity, forgiveness, healing, preference for the poor, inclusion of all. I think it takes courage for this not to be the agenda of any church that calls itself “Christian.” It is obvious, at least it is to me, that as far as the narrative of Jesus’ life is concerned, he spends it standing in solidarity with the excluded, the unworthy, the so-called “bad people.” And, further, the only way he ever tries to change them is by loving them.

So, after all of that excursion, we come back to the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are going to attempt to deal with today. Here it is:

Yeshua says,

God’s realm is like this:

A farmer planted good
Seed in his field,
But at night enemies came
And sowed it with weeds.
When he found out,
He did not allow them to be
Pulled up, saying,
“No, you might uproot the grain
Along with the weeds. Wait till harvest.
It will be perfectly apparent then
Which ones are the weeds,
And you may pull them out easily
And burn them.”

I want you to reflect on this teaching before I share with you my thinking about what it means and the relevance it has for us.

Jesus taught mostly by his behavior. He, no doubt, offered teachings. Mostly one-liners and stories.

You are aware that there are no non-biased reports about Jesus. What we have come to know as “eye-witness news” reporting was unknown.

A non-believing historian of the time wrote about the time in which Jesus lived: “Under Tiberius, nothing happened.” For the most part for centuries Jesus would go unnoticed. Outside of the circle of those who believed in him and who became followers of “the way,” no one took note of his life, teachings or death. If he had been remembered in Roman circles, it would have been as a criminal. His followers didn’t get much respect either. After all, they were devoted to and took their guidance from a criminal.

What was it that attracted people to this movement that started with twenty or thirty people and by the time of Constantine had probably three million followers - which is only 5% of the population at that time? One scholar has argued that the movement only had to increase in number 40% per decade to get to that point. Interestingly, that is exactly the kind of growth rate the Mormon Church has experienced from its founding until now.

Why this growth for the early Jesus movement? Bart Ehrman, whose scholarship I respect, says that in that world religions were all about two things: divine power and secret knowledge. The stories told about Jesus, and later about his disciples, are primarily about those two things. He caused people to see who could not see, to walk who could not walk, to hear who could not hear, to be raised from the dead and to be raised from the dead himself.

However, these kinds of things were said about other prophets, healers, teachers and mystics of the time as well.

In the book of Acts Peter performs miracles, even raising a woman from the dead. He also has a conflict with a certain Simon Magus. (Here Avanzino Nucci’s painting, Peter’s conflict with Simon Magus, is shown.) (Read Acts 8:9ff to see the story.) Simon wanted to buy the religious power he saw in Peter. The story has it, this is Peterson’s translation, Simon saw their power, “he pulled out his money,

excited, and said, 'Sell me your secret! Show me how you did that! How much do you want? Name your price.'

"Peter said, 'Tell hell with your money! And you along with it.'"

In the Acts of Peter, a book that didn't make it into the Christian collection, Simon is said to have the power to levitate and to fly and once, while in mid-flight, Peter used his power on him and brought him crashing to the ground and breaking his legs in three parts. Quite a story.

So though all religions at the time could claim access to divine powers and secret knowledge there were three things that caused what became the Christian movement to grow: the transformed lives of the people who followed Jesus, the fact that they were very enthusiastic about spreading their message (this they got from Jesus) and they were exclusive. Not meaning that only they had the truth or were the only way to know the Sacred. They meant that you couldn't be part of their movement and pledge allegiance to another at the same time. That's why they got killed themselves.

Of course, when Constantine legitimized the religion, people converted in droves.

Okay. Been ruminating on this text?

God's realm is like this:

A farmer planted good
Seed in his field,
But at night enemies came
And sowed it with weeds.
When he found out,
He did not allow them to be
Pulled up, saying,
"No, you might uproot the grain
Along with the weeds. Wait till harvest.
It will be perfectly apparent then
Which ones are the weeds,
And you may pull them out easily

And burn them.”

In this early movement there were those “in the know” and those who were not. As the movement grew by 40 percent per decade you have it going to 100 people the first decade, 140 the next, 196 the next and so on in a steadily increasing curve; they struggled, like every group, to define themselves. They had internal conflict and they experienced persecution from those who had no objection to their being followers of Jesus as long as it did not interfere with their loyalty to Caesar - paying taxes, serving in the military and so forth.

This teaching, which is a reflection of the core teaching of Jesus, is about tolerance and community.

Every community, no matter how it defines itself - either a religious community like a church, a service community like the Rotary club, or a nation like our own - is made up of all sorts and conditions of people. Sometimes there are those who in their zeal for purity of the organization, want to get rid of those who in their opinion don't measure up to the organization's charter.

What this parable is teaching is that we must be patient with each other because it is very difficult, even for the most discerning person, to distinguish between the weeds and the wheat.

We cannot finally know good and evil. To claim to be able to do so always puts us, like it did in the myth of Adam and Even, outside the kingdom.

I wondered for years why in that story eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was classified as a sin. Isn't a good thing to know? To know the good from the bad? That doesn't sound like it should be a sin at all does it?

But then I had a spiritual teacher, I think it was Richard Rohr, who taught me that the moment we assume a position of certitude about who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, we have just opened the door that enables us to be capable of great evil, while not thinking of it as evil at all.

The teaching here is: Don't judge, don't label, don't rush to judgment. We don't usually know other people's real motives or intentions. We hardly know our own.

According to the author of the classic book "The Cloud of Unknowing" the first step into mysticism is to enter into "the cloud of forgetting." Forget all your certitudes, all your labels, all your explanations. We use these things to put people into various categories.

The judging we do is usually the projection of our ego's own fearful stance onto others. It has little to do with objective reality, real love or the truth. Most people do not see things as they are. They see things as they are.

Richard Rohr says, "If the world and the world's religions do not learn this kind of humility and patience very soon, I think we're in historical trouble."

We have been conditioned to pay attention to a certain set of things and to ignore another set of things. When we are told what to pay attention to it block other stuff out.

Sometimes people will hear teachings like those of Jesus or the Buddha or what I'm trying to teach now and mishear the teachings to say that we are not to blame others or protect ourselves from them if they are dangerous or attempt to keep them from doing harm to others. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Religious and spiritual teachings that are wise and useful involve honesty, clear seeing and straightforwardness in being able to acknowledge that harm has been or is being done. People harm each other - we harm others and others harm us. To know that is clear seeing.

There is, however, a difference between seeing that harm has been or is being done and blaming. Great harm was being done in the time of Jesus. What he did in his teaching, rather than blame, was to offer a way that the harm that had been done and was being done could unravel itself.

The question I want to put to myself in the face of harm, rather than pointing the finger of blame and demand - which is so reflexively easy to do - is: How can I find

my own wisdom, skill, kindness, compassion and even sense of humor in this situation? That is a much greater challenge than blaming and hating and acting out.

How do we do this? By growing in the awareness that the various worlds in which we live, both inner and outer, are made up not just of “them” but of “them and us.”

When we do our own inner work with honesty and courage, we can begin to see why it is that people do some of the things they do. There is no one in this room who is in an intimate relationship who has not wanted at one time or another cheerfully to kill your partner. Most of us don't act on these feelings. Some people do. But, we do know what it is like to be angry, jealous, lonely. You know how you yourself do some strange things - things that perhaps later you bitterly regret. Seeing some of our own capacity for evil helps us recognize that we share the same stuff.

We all have people, or groups of people, we consider the “enemy.” Both within and without. Some sense of being able to communicate with the enemy, heart to heart, is how things can change. As long as people hate and practice estrangement, then we suffer, other suffer, the world suffers.

If most of what we do is projection, it means that there are things within we want to get rid of. We project our own fear, sadness, anger and hate outward.

That may come as a surprise to you but here is an even bigger one: More often than not what we think is the wheat about us is in fact weeds and what we are ashamed of and wish weren't part of our makeup constitutes our real gold.

I said last week that I would continue as we go forward to do my best to do the impossible and that is to say what non-dual mind is.

Someone who is in non-dual mind is actually someone who is not in their mind at all. They are experiencing “what is” without running it through some mental filter. They simply offer “presence” to what is in front of them at the moment.

This is one of the things I think Jesus meant when he taught that little children were already in the kingdom of God. Children don't think much. They just experience.

This teaching we are looking at today and the one about being like children means that Christianity, whatever else it is, is not about believing doctrines and moralities. Children do not believe in theologies or strive for moral certitude. They respond vulnerably and openly to what is offered them moment by moment.

This is pure presence and it is much more demanding than securing ourselves with our judgments.

Presence, like non-dual mind, cannot be defined. It can only be experienced.

Non-dual mind, or what the Buddhists call "beginner's mind," is being present to each moment as it comes to us - before we label it, critique it, exclude it, judge it as either wheat or weed.

It is a new way of living. It is the only mind-set that has the power to transform us.

This is the mind with which we can experience serenity in the midst of life's inevitable storms.

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