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Disturbing Peace

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There is no more heartfelt saying in The The Gospel of Thomas than the one we are going to look at today. Let me read it to you and then we will go through the door our lives and culture have given us to gain access to this teaching.

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Yeshua says,

I stood to my feet
in the midst of the cosmos,
appearing outwardly in flesh.
I discovered that all were drunk
and none were thirsty,
and my soul ached for
the children of humanity.
For their hearts are blind
and they cannot see from within.
They have come into the cosmos empty,
and they are leaving it empty.
At the moment you are inebriated,
but free from the effects of wine,
you too may turn and stand.

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The title I have given this talk is “Disturbing Peace.”

The mission and purpose of Jesus was to bring peace. Caesar, ruler of the empire at the time of Jesus, put himself forth as the Prince of Peace. Jesus knew of another peace, the peace that passes understanding, the peace of Sacred Mystery. He said, “I want to give to you and leave with you my peace.” In order to do that, he did

and said some disturbing things. People were asleep to conditions as they really were. Jesus wanted to change that.

I had written much of this talk and was wondering how to get into this teaching. A homiletics professor of mine in the seminary said that a sermon or spiritual teaching was not like a football game, something that could be won with a field goal in the last thirteen seconds. How you get into things is very important.

No one, not even yours truly, enjoys being disturbed from the comfort we have created for ourselves - moving from pain toward pleasure is a fundamental human drive.

Indeed, we have laws on the books against “disturbing the peace.” Anything that is seen as upsetting the order of what a society defines as its norms or what is “socially appropriate,” can be labeled as “disturbing the peace.” Nobody welcomes a “trouble maker.”

Consequently, I was wondering how best to open the door on disturbing matters. How do you say disturbing the peace sort of things without disturbing anyone?

Then, on Thursday morning I woke to discover that Pope Francis had, among others, resolved the matter for me. There it was, right on the front page of The Houston Chronicle: “Pope Challenges States’s Core Values.” Above the headline are the words: “Dear Texas, ‘Man has slapped nature in the face.’” The article begins:

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Texas runs on faith and oil. The people elect leaders beholden to commerce, conservatism and Christianity. Rarely do they find their views challenged.

“Humbly invoking the blessing of Almighty God,” begins the state constitution. A country song reminds, “God Blessed Texas.”

Now here comes one of the largest and most conservative religious organizations in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, which has staked out far right positions

on such signature national political issues as abortion and gay rights, speaking through its leader, a man widely believed to communicate directly with God, to deliver a distinctly uncomfortable message for a state built on the economic foundation of fossil fuels.

. . .

[The article concludes with this, to me, dismal evaluation:] The true target of the message from the Vatican - the greed of wealthy nations - may have to wait for another day.

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Then, the next day, came the story of the shooting of nine people in an historic church in Charleston, South Carolina. Twenty-one year-old Dylann Root, after sitting with and, perhaps, praying with, a group gathered for Bible study, got up and began to shoot. When one of the young men pleaded with him to stop, he said, "No, you've raped our women, and you are taking over the country . . . I have to do what I have to do.' Then he shot the young man.

Here again is the profoundly moving teaching from the Gospel of Thomas. It reflects the broken heart of the teacher about what he sees going on around him rather than what might be.

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Though it is a dark saying, it is disturbingly hopeful.

Because the Gospel of Thomas, from which this saying is taken, was found among some fifty plus writings that have been labeled as "a collection of Gnostic texts," many people immediately discredited it as having any value for those who sought to hear and follow the teachings of the "historical Jesus."

Everybody knows what "agnosticism" means. It means "not knowing." To say, "I am an agnostic" simply means, "I don't know."

"Gnosticism" was an early heresy in the Christian movement. Every time it has appeared in human history, in whatever tradition or form, it has been correctly labeled a heresy. It means the belief that I can escape the confines of this world through the acquisition of special or esoteric knowledge.

Because the Gospel of Thomas was found among a collection of Gnostic texts, the assumption for years was that it too was such a text. Scholars soon put an end to that and concluded that the sayings found in the Gospel of Thomas are indeed authentic teachings of Jesus or creations by his closest and earliest followers.

This saying is likely a mixture of something Jesus actually taught or said and the result of close observation of him.

In the Jesus narrative Jesus is said to have wept on two occasions. One was at the graveside of his friend Lazarus. The other was at the beginning of the last week collection of stories where Jesus is said to have gone into Jerusalem and as he did so he wept over the city because its inhabitants had resisted and rejected the truth.

In this saying Jesus looks around at the condition of his world and is broken hearted by what he sees around him. It was a world where the rich were getting richer, the poor were becoming more powerless and expendable and, unless serious

changes were made, the future looked bleak. Some would say a world not very unlike our own.

No one can deny that Jesus did and said some things that significantly disturbed the peace. He so rankled those in power, both religious and political authorities, that they had him executed. In following the tradition of the Jewish prophets there was for Jesus no division between the religious and political. Such a division did not exist.

The reform movement within Judaism that Jesus started soon, embracing his radical teachings of love, forgiveness and inclusiveness, grew to include any and all who wanted to be a follower. It even attracted the mother of the then ruler of the Roman Empire who advised her son to make this growing religious movement the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Almost overnight those who had been powerless and persecuted became the powerful and persecutors. Living up to the truism that you don't bite the hand that feeds you the newly empowered religion would not/could not say anything to criticize or contradict it. Over a period of time those in power began to modify and correct the teachings of Jesus, to tone them down so that they no longer disturbed the peace.

One of those now running for president said after the Pope's letter was published, "I don't get my economic policies from my priest, bishop or the Pope." Meaning: what the Pope says doesn't matter.

One of the true mystics and mystical teachers of our time is Andrew Harvey. (Here is a link to a website about him - <http://www.andrewharvey.net>) He has authored many books and is highly regarded all the major religious traditions. The book of his I am currently working my way through is "Son of Man: The Mystical Path to Christ."

This is not a book to be entered into lightly. He begins by devoting many chapters in this book to exploring and explaining the connection there is between Jesus, the historical person, and the Cosmic Christ. He writes:

“If Jesus is the world-teacher that Christianity and the Christian mystic tradition know him to be, then the form his ministry on earth took, the way he lived and expressed himself, the forces he summoned, and the causes he fought for are extremely important, because they show the movement of the Christ-force in time and give us clear clues as to how to act with that force now in the terrible problems that threaten the survival of the human race.

“An inadequate, distanced, sentimental vision of who Christ is and what Christ stood for will limit the potentially all-transforming force of the Christ in history. We cannot afford that now, when everything depends on whether sufficient numbers of people can first be awakened to their innate divine truth and then empowered to act in the world to preserve the planet. How they should act in the name of Christ is known most clearly by a definite vision of what Christ stood for in his life and how he acted.”

Wow!

Yet, when new information came to light about the Jesus of history: discovery of ancient manuscripts and archeological finds, linguistic advances and the like; though this information was well known at the academic level, it didn't make it into the curriculum of Christian churches because those who had the capacity to do this teaching didn't want to disturb the peace. They didn't want to risk offending people whose ideas about Jesus were firmly held to.

Right there is a clue, a HUGE clue, to one of the things that causes us as people, as a nation and a world so much trouble today. The Buddhists call it “attachment.” We cling to things even though they are killing us.

Someone sent me a cartoon this week that showed a picture of a Ford Pinto. The caption was, “Recalled after 27 deaths.” The next panel showed a bottle of Tylenol. The caption was, “Recalled after 7 deaths.” The next panel showed a pistol. The caption read: “Still going strong after 32,000 deaths per year for decades.”

Over the past fifty or sixty years the information we have had about the Jesus of history has been revolutionary. This information has challenged many of the most cherished “doctrines” or “beliefs” about Jesus and Christianity. Some of these

things have been simple and non-consequential like, for example, the fact that Jesus was born in Nazareth and not Bethlehem. But that information has been denied and resisted. It is about teaching this sort of thing that occasionally someone would say something to me like: “Do they know what you are teaching here?” And, “You couldn’t teach what you do in most churches.”

Why? Not because it isn’t true, factually. But, rather, because it disturbs the peace.

I see, however, this emphasis on new information about the Jesus of history not as a disaster but as liberation; freedom from manipulation, fear and religious superstition. The Jesus I have found as a result of recent scholarship - I can’t call it modern scholarship because it is over fifty years old now - has in no way diminished Jesus. I have found that in many crucial ways this Jesus is far more challenging, unnerving and a revolutionary guide and teacher than anything pious legend has made of him.

Yet, in spite of the scholarship, there are many even, or especially, in high places of power in established Christianity who refuse to accept the data. It is analogous to what the church did with Galileo. Or, what the medical profession did when Lister discovered the importance of having sterile operating instruments.

The Gospels are not eye-witness accounts but carefully sculpted stories about Jesus. God did not dictate the documents nor divinely inspire them. To say that in some churches risks getting fired. Or, worse. Nonetheless, I will continue to teach this material.

Jesus looks around and sees the sleep induced state of people, as if they were drunk, and it breaks his heart.

In the teachings of Jesus, in the teachings of Buddha, in the teachings of the Tao, in the teachings of all wise and useful and authentic paths into the Heart of Sacred Mystery, there is a huge emphasis on the need to be awake and aware. Sadly, many times when people are in the deepest of trances, they defend that they are not. In Alcoholics Anonymous this condition is called denial.

What causes this? Earlier I mentioned one root cause - attachment. In Buddhism the teaching is that we cause ourselves suffering by grasping after things we don't have that we think would make us happy or, conversely, we try to get rid of things that we think are making us unhappy. This is called "clinging" and "aversion." Jesus was a tad more stark about it. He said, "If you want to have a life that will make you truly free and happy, leave everything behind and follow me."

We said, "You gotta be kidding!"

Later the church said, "Hey, he didn't really mean that. What he meant was, 'If it is not too inconvenient and costly, not too upsetting, do what you can.'"

And we said, "Thank goodness. You had me scared there for a minute. I thought maybe I might have to go hug a leper. Or, befriend a homosexual. Or, work to get the poor a fair shake. Thanks, church, for letting me off the hook."

The second way to think about what causes our numbness or intoxicated state is fragmentation. I don't know about you but my devices, as helpful as they are in many ways, only contribute to my fragmentation.

Spiritual practice is about catching ourselves in the act of clinging, aversion, being fragmented and numbing out. The goal is to get a clear look at ourselves and coming clean about being inebriated by the wine of this world.

In this saying we are looking at today Jesus is identified with Wisdom. In Jewish writings, called Wisdom literature, Wisdom is seen as a feminine energy, she is called Sophia. Some Jewish writings show her as an independent aspect of God who comes into the world offering people access to her wisdom. If people take it, it guarantees them successful lives. Often wisdom laments her inability to communicate with anyone.

Let me read you some verses from the book of Proverbs. This is great stuff. Of course, it isn't applicable to us but . . .

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In the middle of the traffic she takes her stand.
At the busiest corner she calls out:
“Simpletons! How long will you wallow in ignorance?
Cynics! How long will you feed your cynicism?
Idiots! How long will you refuse to learn?
About face! I can revise your life.
Look, I’m ready to pour out my spirit on you;
I’m ready to tell you all I know.
As it is, I’ve called, but you’ve turned a deaf ear;
I’ve reached out to you, but you’ve ignored me.

Since you laugh at my counsel and make a joke of my advice,
How can I take you seriously?
I’ll turn the tables and joke about your troubles!
What if the roof falls in,
and your whole life goes to pieces?
What if catastrophe strikes and there’s nothing
to show for your life but rubble and ashes?
You’ll need me then. You’ll call for me, but don’t expect an answer.
No matter how hard you look, you won’t find me.
(Proverbs 1:21ff)

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In this teaching we are looking at today a representation of Wisdom stands up and turns around.

Standing up is aligning oneself with the vertical axis.

Turning around is the same word as we use for repentance. Repentance doesn’t mean being sorry for. It means changing your mind about.

Let me say a bit more about fragmentation. In the process of creating the ego, which we must have to live on this planet, we split off aspects of ourselves. If we are to live our true identity, we must become aware of these splits and overcome them, make the journey into wholeness.

One of the things I heard Jim Finley say when I was with him once was this:

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It is a supreme transgression against one's nature to live a life that is unfaithful to one's true identity.

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What is our true identity? Who we are in God. No more. No less.

In building the ego, we split ourselves off, first, from this true identity, from our true Selves. We over identify with this small, separate self and begin to think it is who we truly are.

Then, we split ourselves off from other people.

We split life from death and try to avoid death.

We split mind from body and soul, and we give mind pre-eminence.

Finally, we split our acceptable self from our unacceptable self and identify with an idealized acceptable self-image.

Spiritual practice, and being here counts as an aspect of that practice, we work to overcome these splits.

We do this by embracing the shadow, putting the mind in its place, dying before we die, and knowing that what we do to another, we do to ourselves.

What we do to each other is what we do to Christ. Remember, Christ isn't Jesus.

Paul, before his conversion experience on the Road to Damascus - you all know that story - was on his way to kill some more Christians, they weren't called that then, when he heard the voice of Christ saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you

persecuting me?” He likely responded, “I’m not doing anything to you! I’m killing these heretics!” Then he got it. Then he got it. What he was doing to them is what he was doing to Christ. Jesus himself is quoted as saying, “As you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

In the end it all becomes one. How you do anything is how you do everything.

I know that there is a division between those who think that we are to use the resources of the earth for our own benefit or whether we are to care for the earth in the way that a child would care for a frail and ailing mother.

Sometimes the fractured, fragmented state of ourselves and the world is frightening. The rifts and chasms seem irreparable. Perhaps they are. Many are unable to offer one another basic respect, engage in civic and civil dialogue.

What are we to do?

What I have learned from my spiritual teacher is that we are not to spend time and energy blaming or defending but living with love. Rohr quotes Thomas Aquinas, as saying, “We must love them both: those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have labored in search for their truth and both have helped us in the finding of our own.”

I heard a rabbi say in a sermon once, “God is not nice. God is not an uncle. God is an earthquake.”

We have created a nice God. We have created a sweet Jesus. Neither can stand up to the challenges that we face.

The Pope is correct. We are not caring for the earth. Some people are saying that if it is not already too late to change the course of planet degradation, we are close to it.

That young man who said those words before he killed those people, he didn’t make them up. They were part of a culture he was immersed in.

For those who hear the teaching of Jesus, it's an earthquake. It's having the rug pulled out from under us. It's disturbing. It is the kind of disturbance, however, that could lead to real peace, disturbing peace. Because it will put life on a new footing.

This is not something you reason with people about, or defend, or blame. It's something we live. Even when those around us may not.

We must not run away from who we truly are. Claim the faith that God is present in this moment. God is present in me. God is present in you. God is present in those who were shot. God is present, however dimly seen, in the shooter. We must stand still, firmly grounded in this reality, in this hope.

At the same time, we must be ready to move on. We must be open to change, to what Thomas Merton called "continual conversion of life. We must be prepared to face whatever may be involved in responding to Christ's call of "follow me." By how we live every day we either say "yes" or "no" to that invitation.

It is especially important in times like these when there are issues and people we might prefer to neglect, reject or evade. Unless, however, we have the courage so to live, we will never grow into the persons Christ has called us to be. The moment when we think we have the truth and that our way is right, is the most dangerous moment of all. It is then that we are tempted to stop, to fossilize instead of recognizing that growth goes on until the day we die.

In the two events that made the headlines this week, what is God telling us that we need to hear? What is it we are clinging to or avoiding that keeps us from being free for not only what truly is but what possibly could be?

I want to end today with a mystical teaching from the Gospel of John.

John the Baptist is evidently teaching to some of his disciples when he looks up and sees Jesus walking by. He says, "Here he is!"

Two of his disciples 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?

The response these disciples gave was a question itself. “Where do you live?”

Remember, this is a parable, a metaphor, a mystical teaching.

Jesus 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.

Actually, most all of the teachings of Jesus can be so simply put: Don’t be greedy. Live simply. Don’t hurt each other. Live non-violently.

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 how live, how to love and that everything is okay.

May we all experience ongoing disturbing peace.

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