

What Are You Looking For? Shopping or Just Looking Around?

The Keystone Fellowship Church in North Wales, Pennsylvania, has a tradition of congregants reserving pew seats by leaving their Bibles in place. Robert Braxton, age 27, was having none of that so he simply moved someone's bible out of the way and took that seat. When a church member gently tapped Braxton on the shoulder and told him he would have to move, he snapped back that he was staying put. I wasn't there and there is no tape recording of what happened but the person who did the shoulder-tapping reported Braxton as being disruptive. So another congregant, Mark Storms (aptly named) approached Braxton and told him he would have to move. Braxton did not move so Storms opened his jacket to reveal the gun he was carrying. Braxton is reported to have said, "That's not a real gun. What are you going to do? Shoot me?" Storms said he felt threatened by that remark so he drew his gun and shot Braxton twice, killing him. Storms has been charged with manslaughter.

According to one news source I read, just checking on the veracity of this story, there were hundreds of people in the church building at the time, including many children.

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/05/05/parishioner-shot-to-death-in-church-during-hymns-was-only-armed-with-his-bible-police-say/>)

There is a joke preachers used to love to tell about a little boy who was standing in the vestibule of a church looking up at a plaque on the wall with a long list of names on it. The minister saw this and walked up beside the child. The little boy said, "Who are all those people?" The minister said, "They are the names of those who died in the service."

The little boy then asked, "The 8:30 service or the 11 o'clock service?" Maybe that's getting to be not so much a joke.

I'm sure there is more to the story of the church shooting in Pennsylvania than we know about but nothing justifies such behavior.

I doubt that anyone here came in hopes of getting shot.

I have no idea what motivates you to be here. I'm glad you are and am so grateful to and for you.

Some people come to a gathering like this openly and honestly looking for something and others are just, as the phrase goes, "looking around."

A couple of years ago I read a study that some sociologists published about why people attend religious services of any sort in the United States. They were able to classify their findings under at least seventeen distinct headings. These reasons are wide ranging as you might imagine. Indeed, the reasons people attend this gathering are abundantly broad: it's like being part of a family, people like the community/social aspect of it, their spouse made them come, habit, hope of getting something, it's my job and on and on. It might, or might not, surprise you to know that people attend St. Paul's from at least 272 different ZIP codes. That's right, 272 different ZIP codes.

Some of you, I am aware, have to overcome unfortunate experiences with church or religion in your background just to walk in the doors of this place. One person once said to me, "You know why I think some people come here? Just to hear what you are going to say next." Implying, I think, that some might consider things I say in here to be matters not normally heard in a church setting, or "on the edge."

One of my very favorite books of all time begins with a page that is titled "The Author's Blessing." Hear it now, adapted, for this time and this place:

"If you have come to here for laughter, may you find it.

If you are here to be offended, may your ire rise and your blood boil.

If you seek an adventure, may this time sing you away to blissful escape.

If you need to test or confirm your beliefs, may you reach comfortable conclusions.

All spiritual teachings reveal perfection, by what they are or what they are not.

May you find that which you seek, in this space or outside of here.

May you find perfection and know it by name."

(This is found at the beginning of the book “Lamb” by Christopher Moore. The book’s subtitle is: “a novel: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal.” Read it at your peril.)

Sometimes when I speak outside of here to a group that is interested in my take on the intersection of psychology and spirituality, like last Saturday when I spoke at the Hines Center here about my own spiritual journey, “From Southern Baptist to Cosmological Spirituality,” I will say very near the beginning that there are two fears we all bring into a space like this.

We certainly bring them when we attend some “special event” - something out of our ordinary routine. If we enter counseling or spiritual direction, we bring them with us. I believe they are present at every gathering like this or like a religious ritual or whatever is like that for us.

One fear we bring is that nothing will happen. We have gone to the trouble and effort to be here and I speak and you listen and afterwards the evaluation might be, “Well, that was nothing new.” “Ho hum.” “Same old stuff.” “I’ve heard better.” And, these sorts of evaluations come from the speaker as well.

Then, there is the other side of the coin. The fear is that something might happen. Maybe we will lose our lives. All religious traditions, even those that are a-theistic, like Buddhism and Zen, and all true spiritual teachers, like Jesus, are clear: if we want to have life, we have to be willing to let it go.

I try to be as clear as I can be that this that we do in here is not about religion. I hope you learn some wise and useful religious things. One of my purposes in my teaching is to contribute to religious literacy.

But, these teachings I’m offering based on my immersion in the Gospel of Thomas are about a relationship, about our relationship with Sacred Mystery. It is not about knowing. It is about being known. It is not about finding. It is about being found. This is not about making God visible to us. It is about making us visible to God. We’re not trying to see God in a new way. We’re trying to see ourselves and our world in a new way. This is not about something you do in order to have a spiritual relationship. This is about opening our eyes, ears and hearts to the spiritual

relationship we already have and are. We are working, hopefully, to open our being to see the world as God does and opening our being to embracing those whom God embraces. This could mess with us.

I love the story about the Pentecostal man who wandered into, let us say, a church. Not just any church, you understand. But, a proper one - like ours.

During the sermon, the visitor got so excited that whenever the preacher made a good point, the Pentecostal man would shout out, "Praise God!" or "Hallelujah!" or "Amen!" The ushers were so distraught about the Pentecostal's behavior that the head usher went down the aisle and whispered to him: "You'll have to keep quiet! The pastor is right in the middle of his sermon!" The Pentecostal man said, "Keep quiet? How can I keep quiet? I've got the Holy Spirit!" To which the usher said, "Well, you didn't get it in this church!"

The Pentecostal man made a theological error that many of us make. You see, he didn't have the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit had him.

This is where we have gotten to in our understanding of the mystical journey. The first part of the journey we work to enter into Sacred Mystery.

The second part of the journey is about Sacred Mystery seeking to enter into us.

By the way, I want to be as clear as I can be: this is not a zip-zap one time event. This is what I was taught growing up: "Accept Jesus as your personal Savior" and it is done. That's settled.

That's one of the problems with much of contemporary Christianity as it is seen, presented and experienced in our culture. It is not put this bluntly or explicitly but the teaching is, "You believe this way and belong to this group and you've got God in your pocket." And, in fact, our egos wish that we could keep God in the nice, neat, tidy confines of our categories and behind our fences. We'd like to put God in a box, into our story.

However, there is that delicious theological word - "however" - however, as I indicated last week, we do in fact expose ourselves to the risk when we get

involved in a venture like this of losing our lives. Not by being shot but by having the identity we are so sure is who we are so completely taken away from us that when we get it back it is no longer, as Paul puts it, not we who live but Christ consciousness that lives within us.

It is really odd isn't it? We come here and however boldly or timidly or tentatively enter into the journey into the heart of Sacred Mystery, or the journey into wholeness - however you want to say it - hoping to know what the author of the preface of the Gospel of Thomas promises, truth beyond "the taste of death."

This is how the Gospel of Thomas begins:

"These are the hidden (or secret) sayings that the living Jesus spoke and that Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down. Whoever finds the correct interpretation of these sayings will never die."

I hope that, if you are new to this journey or relatively so, you will go to the Ordinary Life website and check out not simply talks given in here from the past but the evolution of my own thinking and teaching. I've tried to be succinct there and I don't want to repeat things some of you have heard endlessly. However, someone will ask me after class or I can just tell by looking that you don't know about the Gospel of Thomas.

Biblical scholars have long known that there was a source that the writer of Matthew in the Christian Scriptures and the writer of Luke used from which they drew sayings, or teachings, of Jesus on which to base their narratives. Matthew and Luke never met so where did they get their material? Scholars postulated that there was some source that we didn't have that they used.

In 1945 a major archeological discovery was made which contained, among many other things, a manuscript that scholars named "The Gospel of Thomas."

They so named it because of the way it begins.

One of the things we all in this room have in common is that we don't want to suffer and what suffering we do have we want it to reduce. We all want to be

comfortable and have satisfying states of mind. The way, however, we go about trying to reach these goals, especially as groups, only contributes to our suffering and the suffering of others. We need something else and that something can, I believe, be found in the realm of reality Jesus taught about and embodied.

When the text says that these teachings are hidden or secret, obviously that isn't literally true. You can download a copy of the Gospel of Thomas for free off the internet. What it means is that these teachings are puzzling. They are enigmatic - like we are, like life is.

Obviously, these sayings were not meant to be kept secret. Almost half of what is found in the Gospel of Thomas is also to be found in Mark, Matthew and Luke.

At the beginning of the Gospel of Thomas we are invited into a mystery. We are invited into a work, and it is work, that promises the possibility of knowing truth beyond "the taste of death."

To be clear, this isn't about some blessed after-life or prosperity in this one. It is about a life that isn't confined by or described by the limitations of the human condition or of egoic-consciousness. It is an invitation into mystical awareness.

This isn't about achieving or accomplishing something. This is about becoming aware of our true already given identity.

My research department is fond of poetry and particularly fond of the poetry of Billy Collins. While I was working on this talk she showed me a poem from his book "Aimless Love." The poem is based on a news article on printing which stated, "It has been calculated that each copy of the Gutenberg Bible required the skins of 300 sheep."

Here is the poem:

I can see them squeezed into the holding pen
behind the stone building
where the printing press is housed,

all of them squirming around
to find a little room
and looking so much alike

it would be nearly impossible
to count them,
and there is no telling

which one will carry the news
that the Lord is a shepherd,
one of the few things they already know.

Our losing sight of and awareness of our true nature is one of the barriers to mystical spirituality.

There are other barriers.

One barrier, of course, is religion and religious language itself. The source of almost all of the world's self-inflicted woes is religion or a misunderstanding of religion. I know it sounds initially naive - it isn't! - but if every person on the planet were able to stand in the reality that allows them to say, "The God in me sees the God in you," we'd stop killing each other. If we could see that all of creation is an expression of the Sacred, we'd stop plundering the earth. The only animal that soils its own nest is the human animal.

Religion can also be a barrier if we leave it at the academic level alone. I am so grateful for all the biblical and religious scholarship that has emerged in recent years. I think it is important. But, if a person limits him or herself to that arena, he or she will not know the mystical journey. There is an arena of love and being loved we must risk entering. It is work.

Another barrier to this work is our context. We don't live in the desert. We don't live hand to mouth. We aren't forced into community bonds for survival. We are not monks living in monasteries. Most of us are not celibate but have a web of relationships and obligations. We have marriages to tend to, children to raise, parents to care for, jobs to maintain and, of course, we have to make time to watch

“America’s Got Talent” and “Dancing With the Stars.” Who has time for a daily spiritual practice?

One of the appeals of Eastern religions, including yoga, is that it teaches people who live in busy and distracting contexts practices for stepping outside one’s culture into something else altogether.

Then there has been the false distinction that is referred to as the conflict between science and religion. You will find the work of Ilia Delio and the people she cites as not only scientifically impeccable but also very mystical.

One other barrier I would mention is that of social justice. People who misunderstand and, thus, dismiss mysticism as something that is just too unknowable and who are, quite legitimately, interested in issues of social justice simply don’t have time for this sort of thing. But anyone who is driven by practice into the heart of Sacred Mystery must be and will be driven into the world and the lives of people in the world that God loves. Further, people without some mystical grounding who undertake matters of social justice soon find that they are either becoming cynics or they burn out.

Let me say this about mysticism. Mysticism does not refer to something that is not knowable. Mysticism points to that which is endlessly knowable. The word “mysticism” comes from a Sanskrit word that means “shush.” It is the root word from which we get words like mystery, misty, mute, muffled, mutter.

So this is the mystical teaching from Gospel of Thomas that we have gotten to for today.

Yeshua says,

Blessed are all those
who are persecuted right into
the depths of their own hearts.
Only there will they come to know
their true Father and Source.
Blessed are all the hungry ones.

Their inner longings will be satisfied.

This last phrase is why I began today with the issue of why we are here, why you are here. What is our, what is your, what is my inner longing and how will we know if it is satisfied? Are we really shopping to have that inner longing satisfied? Or, are we just looking around?

I mentioned the domination systems of the world last week. Domination systems routinely get rid of people who oppose them. Whether you are talking about Constantine and the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus or of people like Hitler, Stalin or any other despotic ruler of our own time.

Jesus was executed for his insistence that the “empire of God” was more important than the “empire of Rome.”

I would wager that if you stopped the next hundred cars going down Main Street and asked the drivers, and others in the car, what was Jesus primary message?, it would be something about “the Kingdom of Heaven.” And what is that about? “It is about going to heaven when you die.” For most people what is commonly referred to as “the kingdom of God” is about an afterlife.

The rule of God is wherever what Sacred Mystery intends is expanding and growing - in the inner and in the outer worlds.

The fact is that for the vast majority of its history the Christian religion has not emphasized this. What has been called Christianity in a variety of forms has fought both with others and within itself about a host of other issues.

When Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 it effectively led to making some early form of the Christian movement the “official religion” of the Empire. Prior to the time of this Edict being issued not only were those who were followers of Jesus persecuted but also they focused on how the world and human society were to be constructed to fit the teachings of Jesus. After the Edict of Milan which resulted in some version of the movement eventually becoming official, what do you think changed the most: the empire or the content of the religion? Even now,

perhaps especially now, and especially here in this country, the “empire” influences the church more than the other way around.

For example, no scholar or church historian would disagree that Jesus and his followers for centuries were non-violent passivists. Yet, let someone take that position now, especially in time of war, and that person is called a coward at best and a traitor at worst.

The church, organized religion, has lost its relevancy for many people because frankly it is not interested in transforming people but in maintaining the status quo - which is a Latin phrase meaning, “the mess we are in.”

By now you know enough about non-duality to be able to hold two things together in your mind at the same time. Right?

The Kingdom of God is inextricably and simultaneously one hundred percent political and one hundred percent religious.

“Kingdom” is a political word. In using the phrase “Kingdom of God,” it was the word “of” that got Jesus executed. In that world God already sat on the throne. It was Caesar. (We have some politicians who seem to think that about themselves in our time.)

One of the ways that Jesus announced the presence of the Kingdom of God was by inviting people to come and see how he and his companions had already accept it, had already entered it and were already living it.

Basically it was this: heal the sick, eat with those you heal and announce the Kingdom’s presence in that mutuality.

What does it mean for us who live in a world where three billion people live on less than two dollars a day, where all of these people live in less than sanitary conditions and where one billion of them have no sanitary water to drink at all, to be faithful in following Jesus and in being who we are intended to be?

Let us not allow our culture to shape our understanding of what love and compassion, that is the essence of Sacred Mystery, look like.

We cannot ignore the fact that, like the flip of a switch, so-called Christians went from being the persecuted to being the persecutors. As the state religion, Christianity was called upon to justify war and empire and the presence of the oppressed and the impoverished.

The central part of the essence of spiritual practice is being able to see “what is.” This includes being able to see ourselves as we are and the context in which we live as for what it is. I have been, am and will propose that in the path of embodying the spirit of the radical Jewish mystic Jesus there is a wisdom that is both within us and in these teachings, as well as in the tradition that has kept them alive, a wisdom that can lead to our transformation and the transformation of the world. But in order to see that and experience it, we have to step out of the cultural and tribal constraints that have bound and blinded us in the past.

How do we do this? How do we step into this process and keep on going in it?

My story, which some of you know bits and pieces of, is that I had no intellectual passion for any of this - I did have a personal fear-driven hunger - until a moment of divine entanglement brought together for me the reading of the works of Harry Emerson Fosdick and Carl Jung. The path of psychological “peace of mind” would be found following a spiritual path. The truth was not to be found in a doctrine, not in a denomination, not in a tribal loyalty but in working to become and benefit from being a citizen of the world, God’s world.

In that process I learned that what had been called Christianity did not have any settled answers to the big questions in life. There was this combination of giddy freedom and terrifying free-fall in the realization that there was no definitely settled way of seeing life - of what is, what is real and how, then, we should live. The idea that there was one “right” way to see things disappeared.

However, even though, as Kenneth Burke says in his book “The Philosophy of Literary Form,” we are part of an ongoing conversation about these matters for a

while, our answers - or lack of answers - to the big questions matters. Our convictions - or lack of convictions - shape our lives.

I knew then that what I did to make a living did not matter nearly so much as what I did to make a life.

It was then that I found what I was looking for. No more shopping around. No more looking. I wanted, and want, to be involved in the process of becoming a center of freedom and love. It was only later that I would add to this: to create interesting and fun ways to teach what I am learning.

You'll have to say for yourself what is your deep hunger, whether you are really shopping for a way, or just looking around.

Pick this path and there is a risk. You'll die to a lot of stuff. You'll leave a lot behind.

Mystical spirituality is not complicated - or mysterious. It's just risky. It means learning to live inside the person God has already said we are. It is knowing that if we live in any way that is contradictory to this we are off the path.

Sadly, what most of us were taught as Christianity isn't within a country mile of what Jesus taught. Mystical Christianity is about transformation. It is not about believing stuff. Transformation is the central dynamic of mystical living. It is two fold: first to the Self. Not of the self.

Then, of the world.

If we don't get the order right, we are going to end up frustrated and angry trying to defend and correct what we think is the truth.

Spiritual practice is how we pay attention to our relationship to Sacred Mystery. Beliefs don't change people. Practice does. Believing all the right things people can still be jerks. Believing that some people, for whatever reason, should be denied access to the table, makes absolutely no transformational difference in anyone's life.

Jesus was all about revitalizing the notions people had of who they were and the institutions that housed them. He did not walk away from his religion. He stayed in it. Where those who had risen to places of leadership and power had allowed themselves and those they served to be separated from Sacred Mystery, Jesus called them out.

Andrew Harvey, whom I have mentioned to you before, is one of our contemporary mystics. I read his stuff. In doing so I found this book of prayer, “Light the Flame,” which contains prayers from all spiritual traditions across the ages. It is really a gift for one’s practice. In it just this week I read this prayer by St. Nicholas of Flue, a German mystic:

My Lord and my God,
Take everything from me
That keeps me from Thee.

My Lord and my God
Give everything to me
That brings me near to Thee.

My Lord and my God,
Take me away from myself
And give me completely to Thee.

Not a bad shopping list. Unless, of course, you’re just looking around.

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