

How Many Of Us Are There

These talks, and though some of you may find my reminding you of this tiresome I nonetheless feel obligated to keep it ever in front of all of us, are based on my immersion into and reflections on teachings of Jesus that were held to be life-transforming by his earliest followers.

The source I am using for these teachings is a collection that is referred to as “The Gospel of Thomas.” Though it is not in the collection that most people who call themselves Christian are familiar with, most scholars are now of the opinion that the Gospel of Thomas, in parts or in its entirety, pre-date the narratives that are in the Christian Scriptures.

If someone were to ask you what this class is about or what the Gospel of Thomas is about, you can sound very learned, even a bit mysterious, by saying, “The emphasis is unity over division.”

Wholeness versus division is a theme in Thomas.

You remember, I hope, that in the last teaching we looked at Jesus is quoted as emphatically saying, “I am not a divider.”

Sadly, since the early part of the fourth century, the form of Christianity that came into and held on to power has become one of the most divisive religions on the planet. So much so, and it remains so on issues of relevant concern to many people, issues like the Church’s practices of inclusion at all levels of people of all sexual orientation, that an increasing number of people are distancing themselves from what is considered “mainline Christianity” in astounding numbers. On that note, I’d love to be able to “time travel” and visit a place like St. Paul’s fifty to seventy-five years from now.

Of course, there are churches that go by the name “Christian” that are flourishing. The largest church in this country has as its pastor a man who assures the nearly 50,000 people who attend its various services every week that it is God’s deepest desire that they be happy and prosperous. His wife, referred to as co-pastor, has

told how she had a desire for a particular house and that God answered her prayer by making sure they could acquire that residence.

One wonders what the people who hold to this kind of theology do when God doesn't keep his end of the bargain. (This God is always seen in masculine terms.) What happens when a child dies of leukemia? Or, some calamity strikes?

Tony Perkins, head of the friendly sounding Family Research Council but which is actually a religious "hate-tank," has said in the past that natural disasters are a sign of God's wrath on gay marriage and abortion. During the flooding that took place in Louisiana in August of this year, his house and cars were flooded. There was about ten feet of water in his driveway and his family had to be rescued in a canoe. (Source: Christian Century, 9/14/16, p. 9)

Divisive religions come from an immature ego state. In the natural process of developing a separate identity - you know, the terrible two-year-old who screams, "Mine! Mine!" - we learn to divide. When we take this mentality into adulthood, it shows up in behaviors like possessiveness, entitlement, competition, judgment, "them against us" - all of the conflictive stances that keep us, and our world, trapped in what we have today, a vicious cycle of alienation and violence.

Groups of people, like religions and nations, also have developmental lives. If a group gets stuck at an adolescent level, it behaves like an adolescent. Or, worse, like a belligerent two-year-old.

Before risking talking some about what constitutes "healthy religion and spirituality," which is risky, I just want to be clear that the actual teachings of Jesus are all about unity, inclusiveness and wholeness. He wanted to lead people into a whole new way of being and that way of being was based on the unity and identity to be found in his understanding of and relationship to God. It is an understanding that cannot be had at the dualistic level but only when we embrace the world and our experience of ourselves and each other at the mystical, non-dual level.

We will talk more about non-duality before we are done today in our on-going quest not only to understand it conceptually but also, and more importantly, to be open to experiencing it.

I'm returning to this matter of unity because there is perhaps no teaching from the early Jesus movement that has been more abused, or misused, than the teaching we are going to look at today.

Here is one translation of the teaching:

Yeshua says,

The harvest is abundant.

The reapers are few.

Implore the Master of Harvest
to send out workers.

Eugene Peterson, whom I'll reference later, translates this passage as it appears in Matthew, it also appears in Luke, this way: "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!"

I grew up in an evangelical, benignly Fundamentalist church that was confusedly committed to evangelism and what was then called "foreign missions." I say "confusedly committed" because this "soul-saving" emphasis had not one whit of social conscience about it.

John Dominic Crossan, perhaps the living authority of the "Jesus of history," recounts in his biography how as a lad growing up in a catholic church and school in Ireland, the Jesuit missionary who came to his school to speak absolutely captured his heart and imagination. "What an adventure!", he thought to be in that line of work.

We had missionaries home on furlough come to speak to us when I was a child growing up in that church environment I mentioned. They held up items from the countries where they served and showed pictures of the people they worked with as if we were looking at animals in a zoo. Their commitment was not only to "save their souls" but also to Westernize them

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Jesus not only called people to him, to follow him, he also sent people out. The purpose was not to get people to believe in him but to believe in what he believed was a coming reality, a time when the oppressed would find freedom by trusting the personal and political revolution that would occur when people found and lived their true identity and when the system was organized as if the God he knew ran the show.

Throughout the Gospel of Thomas as well as in the parables Jesus told and the Hebrew Scriptures he drew on for inspiration, the image of the world as a farm or garden is repeatedly used to illustrate the purpose of both human and Sacred activity. God is the gardener who is cultivating the world. Humanity, a humanity that lives out its identity as being created in the image of this God, is the crop being cultivated.

Suppose we catch a vision of the world as that field. Our brothers and sisters on this planet are the harvest. Suppose also we catch the vision Jesus had of a new world order. How then are we to live? To relate?

You know that Texas is called “the buckle of the Bible belt.” No other state has more evangelical Christians than Texas. In Texas, as in the state where I grew up, Tennessee, as in most of the South, the dominant form of evangelical Christianity has been deeply complicit with white supremacy.

For example, in 1956, W.A. Criswell, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas - the nation’s largest Southern Baptist church at the time, not only opposed the civil rights movement but also denounced the Supreme Court’s Brown vs. Board of Education decision that ruled racial segregation unconstitutional. Here is a quote from this most influential pastor. He made it before the South Carolina legislature: “Let them integrate. Let them sit up there in their dirty shirts and make all their fine speeches. But they are all a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up.” (Source: Sojourners magazine, June 2015, p. 19)

A theological defense system began to develop. If Christianity was all about saving individual souls, then worrying about earthly injustice was an unspiritual distraction from “the gospel.” If individual sin was all that mattered, then all one had to do was to live upright personal lives - even within a racist system. Consequently, a prophetic voice like Martin Luther King, Jr. could be easily rejected.

I’m speaking from personal experience here because I was, to the degree I was able and conscious, involved in that civil rights movement in Tennessee in 1956. When I spoke to the leaders of my church, one of the most frequent responses I got was, “Well, if you are really interested in righting wrongs done to minorities, you should start with Native Americans. Now, go away and be nice.”

I preached a sermon here in Houston in the 1960’s to a liberal group of people that almost got me fired. I dared to mention that not only was there such a thing as individual sin and sinful behavior but also corporate or structural sin and injustice. We are, all of us, myself included, sometimes so blind to our biases and prejudices.

One of the flash points in current American culture is the culture’s dealing with both at the individual and systemic level what African Americans have long known: what it means to have one’s humanity stripped away by unjust systems.

What are we called to if we stand with Jesus and see an unjust system at work?

I believe that we are called, individually and corporately, to dismantle any system of injustice that subjugates people. Any theology that justifies violence, enslavement and oppression - any system that dehumanizes the “image of God” in anyone - is idolatrous.

Theologian and mystic Howard Thurman has written, “To speak of the love for humanity is meaningless. There is no such thing as humanity. What we call humanity has a name, was born, lives on a street, gets hungry, needs all the particular things we need. As an abstract, it has no reality whatsoever.”

This teaching of Jesus was not about saving individual souls so that they could flit off to heaven at death. This was about unleashing a fire-storm of love and

compassion and justice. That's why they killed him. They did not kill him for saying, "Now, you all be nice and don't fight." Or, as my mother would say, "Be sweet." They killed him for saying to the religious and political leaders of his time, "The whores and the street people are going to make it before you do."

And, sadly, we can be so blind to the applicability of this in our own time and in our own lives. At least I can.

How do we do this? How do we join in cultivating and reaping the kind of "harvest" Jesus and other spiritual teachers had in mind?

One of the things we can do is work to become aware of any part we have played in the current system being the way it is.

I don't think anyone would deny that the US political system is broken. It is not behaving in a constructive way.

I've had this fantasy for some time now of being able to get twelve leading or influential senators and representatives together in a room. Six Republicans and six Democrats. Among those present would be Mitch McConnell, Kevin McCarthy, Nancy Pelosi, Paul Ryan and the like.

They would be given "truth serum" and denied the ability to use the word "you." They could not blame others. And, the question put to them would be, "How have you and/or the policies you have put forward contributed to the dysfunction of our government?"

I'd like to do that with church leaders. The church has significantly lost credibility among the group called "the millennials" (people ages 18 to 34). One recent poll showed that only 25% of this group had confidence in establishment institutions. This is the generation that has grown up with news of pedophile priest scandals and their cover-up as well as how organized religion still lags behind in areas of full inclusion of all people. And, the leaders in these institutions, political and religious and economic, tend to justify and/or make excuses for their continued policies.

Though it can be a tricky razor's edge to walk, if we identify as "Christian," we ought not only to be able to say what that means but also to know what contributes to healthy spirituality and what doesn't. A healthy religion or spirituality ought to bring enlargement and not narrowness to the world.

In one of the first graduate seminars I took on the way to being a licensed therapist, the professor walked in on the first day of class and said, "Gentlemen," there were no women in that training group, "gentlemen, my name is John. Beyond that everything is projection."

One of the things we can do is to become aware of how we project on to our institutions and on to other people aspects of ourselves that block our assuming personal responsibility for the world(s) and our experience of the world in which we live.

We all long for a mother to take care of us and a father to tell us what to do. The most impressive church and one of the most influential religious institutions of higher education are both called "Notre Dame" - our mother. And, even though I am not Roman Catholic when some people discover I am an ordained clergy, they refer to me as "father."

I think it was Archbishop William Temple who said, "I do not fear that if people stop believing in God that they will believe nothing. But, rather, that they will believe anything." It is, of course, easier to see this in others than in ourselves but in Nazi Germany good Christian people turned a blind eye to the workings of Hitler while others thought he was God. We cannot presume progress in spiritual awareness or that growing in emotional intelligence is automatic.

These unconscious projections set us up for disappointment and/or the relinquishment of our own personal responsibility.

We do not live in a culture that supports or favors discernment - which is a sorting and sifting over time.

Here is the teaching again:

The harvest is abundant.
The reapers are few.
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to send out workers.

If you went to any religious gathering anywhere in world yesterday or today, the priest, rabbi, Imam, shaman, teacher - whatever, their designated title; they would begin with or base their remarks on a teaching from their tradition. There is a productive and there is an unproductive way to deal with teachings from our tradition. To delve deeply both at the dualistic and non-dual level with a teaching can be a contemplative act.

This text has been dealt with by many in a very constrictive way. Healthy religion and spirituality is what expands us. We are called to offer enlarged being to the world.

This world needs good teachers, people who can bring enlarged being to the world and both information and understanding that feeds the soul.

In these times together we use poetic language so that we can talk about these things that cannot be talked about.

To assist in the harvest is to work to help the divine seed, already planted in everyone, to have a good chance to grow, ripen and bear its own fruit of light. All humans bear within themselves a spark that longs to be fanned into a blazing fire. We need holy ones to remind people what is really happening in their field of consciousness. We also need to have the strength, insight and willingness to work in our own inner field to bring forth the harvest Jesus taught about and demonstrated.

Jesus looked out into the field of the world and saw a reality that many people didn't see. He saw the world and people in a spiritual way and he wanted others to see that as well.

One of the things I love to do is go into and wander about bookstores. Not the big box types but smaller ones. We happened upon one in Ullapool, Scotland that was

a treasure trove. One of the books I found there was titled “The World As 100 People: A visual guide to 7 billion humans.”

Our world is not only crowded but getting more so. And, though this is so easy to lose sight of, it is an unbalanced place. I’m fairly confident that most of you have seen some small examples from this book. They have circulated in the kinds of e-mails people like to send around. This little book, which you can read in way less than an hour but which would likely take a lot longer actually to absorb, is a visual and graphic way to begin to understand something about the “blue marble” on which we live and just how unbalanced it is.

Those of us who live in the West find it easy to forget that our privileged life-style - with easy access to jobs, infrastructure, the internet, entertainment, fresh food, drinkable water - do not represent how the rest of the world lives. In fact, from the global perspective, our way of life is the minority.

In the last 200 years the human race has increased exponentially. Since 1800, the global population grew from 1 billion to 7 billion. And, is expected to grow by a further 3 billion by 2083. This means that the number of people on this planet will have increased by nearly 1,000 percent in less than 300 years.

“The World as 100 People” presents our human population as a small global village. Each person represents 70 million people. That’s approximately the population of France.

For example:

Of all the people who have ever lived only 7 are alive today. 93 have died.

2 people will be born every day and 1 will die.

61 people are from Asia and the Middle East, 15 are from Africa, 10 are from Europe, 9 are from South America and the Caribbean, 5 are from North America - only 4 of whom are from the US.

90 people are heterosexual, 10 people are non-heterosexual.

Only 5 out of 100 people speak English.

Only 33 call themselves Christian.

Only 7 out of the 100 would have a university degree.

If the world were 500 people only 1 would have a post graduate degree.

1 person owns 48% of all the wealth, 99 share the rest, 48 of whom live on less than \$2.50 a day.

Only 11 people own a car.

13 people have no access to clean, safe drinking water.

How do we learn to see this world and the people on it, beginning with ourselves?

I want to offer you an example of non-dualism from Sara Grant's book "Toward An Alternative Theology."

Here is how I got on to this particular book.

We heard that Christian Wiman, the poet who wrote "My Bright Abyss," was going to be at a conference at Laity Lodge. Speaking with him would be Eugene Peterson, the translator of a version of the Bible variously referred to as either "The Message" or "The Witness." Even though this was right after we were coming back from the conference where I first heard Ilia Delio, we wanted to go to this conference. This was in November of 2014.

Compared with the attendance of a thousand people at the Rohr Conference, this one had only a handful. So we had a chance to spend closeup and personal time with both Wiman and Peterson.

Christian Wiman is an impressive person. I highly recommend his book and, also, that you go on to YouTube and listen to him recite his and other people's poems.

He recites poems “by heart.” Not “by memory.” He said that learning a poem by memory was one thing. Learning one “by heart” was something else.

In one of his lectures he mentioned a book saying that it was the most important and influential, to him, book on non-duality that he had ever read and he highly recommended our reading it, quickly adding that it was out of print. The name of the book is “Toward An Alternative Theology: Confessions of a Non-Dualist” by Sara Grant.

There is no cellular connection at Laity Lodge so at the next break I went to where I could access wi-fi and got on Amazon to get a copy of the book. They didn’t have it. The second hand book provider I normally use, had a used copy for \$192. That seemed a bit steep.

Just to make sure I wasn’t ministerially speaking today, I checked again and one of Amazon’s partners is offering the book for almost \$2,000!

At the time I thought, “Yes, \$192 is a lot to pay. But, here is someone I highly respect saying that it was the best on the subject.” Dilemma strikes. At lunch I mentioned to Wiman what I had found and he said, “Well, just check it out of your local library.” Sure, how likely is that?

I went though the afternoon pondering, is this the pearl of great price I should sell everything for?

I sat next to Wiman at dinner that night. He turned to me and said, “By the way, I have that book in pdf format. Give me your e-mail address and I’ll send it to you when I get back to Yale.” He did.

(Here is one of Amazon’s partner’s offer of the book for almost \$2,000 - https://www.amazon.com/Toward-Alternative-Theology-Confessions-Non-Dualist/dp/0268042195/ref=tmm_hrd_title_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

Sara Grant was a Roman Catholic nun, member of the Sacred Heart Society, from Scotland who went to India and became a pioneer in inter-religious dialogue. It

was by being immersed in Hinduism that she found the experience of non-duality that she believed was so essential for mature spirituality.

(You can read more about her here - https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sara_Grant)

After that long excursion about how I got this simple but profound example of non-duality, here it is:

“Imagine a man standing in a field, only the man and his shadow. If you asked a group of people how many things were in the field, some might say one, some might say two - only the man, or the man and his shadow. The non-dualists would argue for the reality of the shadow, but they could not deny its dependence on the man. The crux of the question is the nature of the relation between man and shadow.”

Jim Finley has a similar example: Imagine you are standing in front of a full length mirror looking at your reflection. All of a sudden, the image in the mirror looks at you and says, “You know, we’ve been together a long time now and I appreciate all you’ve done for me. But, I think I’m ready now to go off and try it on my own. I can make it without you.” You try to explain to your image that this is not going to go so well but it doesn’t listen.

Slowly or quickly, depending on your personality, it walks out of the mirror. Of course, as soon as it does, it has a panic attack. Has to get back into therapy. Is angry and frustrated, “After all this work I still feel so anxious. Maybe I need to be on medication.”

Cosmological spirituality tells us that everything and everyone is connected. This is the reality that we take into the world. By our abiding in the Source of who we are and all that is because that Source abides in us we go into the world and live values of peace, love and joy neither counting the cost or depending on the outcome.

How in heaven’s name do we do this?

We begin by having the goal of living in daily abiding awareness of God’s abiding awareness in us.

We want to conform our hearts to the love that is giving itself to us as our life.

This is why we meditate.

Because if we don't meditate we won't develop the qualities that contribute to a good harvest in us and we won't be able to bring qualities to the world. Meditation is what lays bare our true nature. By meditating we learn to be patient. If we are not patient, we will not meditate. We will quit.

By meditating we learn to be compassionate. Meditation reveals to us how easily we can be dismissive of and even violent and abusive to our True Self. Just pay attention to your "self-talk" when you try to sit quietly.

By meditating we learn to be humble. Meditation reveals to us what utter failures we are at meditation itself and how hard it is simply to be with not only ourselves but also with what is.

By meditating we learn to be open. If we aren't open, especially to the unknown, rejected, resisted, denied parts of ourselves; we'll likely not even begin the process.

We are to bring to the world peace, love, joy and we cannot bring these qualities to the world if we do not first bring them forth within ourselves.

You are already in the midst of this or you would not have been drawn to come here today.

There is a hymn we sometimes sing in our liturgy. It is a relatively recent hymn and one of my favorites. It is sung as a closing hymn. It is based on the writings of Paul found in 1 Thessalonians. Here is how Gene Peterson translates it:

"And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love!

“Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other nerves you don’t snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.

“Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.”

Here is the text of the hymn:

Go forth for God, go to the world in peace;
be of good courage, armed with heavenly grace,
in God’s good Spirit daily to increase
tell in the kingdom we see face to face.
Go forth for God, go to the world in peace.

Go forth for God, go to the world in love;
strengthen the faint, give courage to the weak;
help the afflicted; richly from above
God’s love supplies the grace and power to seek.
Go forth for God, go to the world in love.

Go forth for God, go to the world in strength,
hold fast the good, be urgent for the right;
render to no one evil; Christ at length
shall overcome all darkness with his light.
Go forth for God, go to the world in strength.

Go forth for God, go to the world in joy,
to serve God’s people every day and hour,
and serving Christ, our every gift employ,
rejoicing in the Holy Spirit’s power.
Go forth for God, go to the world in joy.

The closing remarks I make at the end of each time we spend together are not intended as a casual “see you next week.”

They are intended to send you forth more hopeful, more confident in your true identity, with an awakened heart, open to seeing the world and all who live on it as part of one family. We are all in this together. We must, as we are able, in wise and useful ways, contribute to a good harvest. So -

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