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Gone Fishing

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So you wake up one day to find yourself in a fishing boat out in the middle of an immense body of water. No land in sight. As you become conscious and aware of where you are, the obvious question forms on your lips: “How in God’s name did I get here?”

I think this is one of life’s truly productive spiritual questions. What had to happen for us to wind up where we are, doing what we are doing, believing what we are believing, etc.?

Perhaps you have read the book, or seen some of the episodes of the PBS series based on it, “How We Got To Now” by Steven Johnson. It covers things like how glass and light and cold (the ability to produce and ship ice) have helped shape our culture. Fascinating stuff.

Our spiritual condition, our true spiritual condition, is that we are out in the boat on an immense body of water, fishing. How did this happen?

Perhaps you have noticed, if you get the e-mail previews and summaries of these times together, that the graphics on them have changed dramatically. For years I used a logo produced by perhaps the most creative human I have ever known - Stephanie Warfield. She is now an educator at the Seton Cove Spirituality Center in Austin, Texas. Years ago, when she was a chaplain in the medical center here, she attended Ordinary Live and graciously designed this logo. At that time we didn’t really have the internet and e-mail capabilities we do now. We have used this logo on everything. And, will continue to do so.

However, you have noticed that there are different images that appear on the e-mails and, hopefully eventually, on the Ordinary Life website.

I went back and looked at the talks I’ve offered in here during this past year. I decided to end my work on teaching about the Jesus of history by doing a series of talks on "resurrection." Notice I didn’t say “THE resurrection.” It is amazing what a difference such a small word can make. There is all the difference in the world between “resurrection” and “the resurrection.”

My first spiritual teacher said that one of his tasks was to teach me how to see - not what to look for. There is a great deal of difference between those two processes as well.

The example I used then was that of the nursery rhyme “Humpty Dumpty.”

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Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses
And all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

* * *

There is no egg in the rhyme.

One of the great failings of religion is when it teaches, and this is a metaphor you understand, people to look for an egg where there is no egg. Once we think there is an egg in the narrative, or narratives, of what we think of as "the resurrection," we do not see that it is not there and we do not see what other things might be there. Where we start often determines where we end up.

The very next class after that talk I titled “Shift Happens.” A crisis came in the life and lives of the Jewish people that caused them to rethink their entire theological system. They did so in the face of massive injustices done to them and as a way to revisit and re-image what it meant for them to live with hope.

I believe that we are in a crisis time of our own where the entire world aches for meaning and hope. The ego wants security and answers. The Self, our Souls, hunger for meaning.

You are aware from news accounts what is going on in this country. Racial strife and tension are at a new high with protests going on all over the country. People, right and left, are scared and angry. Matt Stroud, reporter for the Associated Press, wrote an article that was published the end of November that was about the high number of gun sales in this country, 512 a day, and how the system of being able to do background checks is broken beyond repair. In the United States there are nine

guns for every ten people and someone is killed with a firearm in this country every sixteen minutes.

The crises in other parts of the world from Ebola to beheadings seems out of control. I heard on NPR this week that the crisis of Syrian refugees is the greatest such crisis since World War II and isn't making the news daily because it simply isn't news any more.

At any rate making the move from THE resurrection to resurrection was hopeful for my own spiritual journey. If the word "resurrection" troubles you, substitute the word "transformation." It is just as disturbing to the ego in its own way. We'll get to that in a moment.

After doing that series I took a month off and went on pilgrimage in France and Spain. We were led by a man who is genuinely pious in the best sense of the word. He is a high church Anglican who led us in some religious ritual of one sort or the other several times a day. Every day we went into and usually worshipped in one of the great cathedrals of those countries. I got to assist celebrating mass in a cathedral that was the original starting point for the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage. The cathedral where this service took place took 200 years to build.

One of the most beautiful Gothic cathedrals I've ever entered is the one in Leon, Spain. Construction of this cathedral began in 1253. It is impossible to take a photograph of the interior of such a structure. It's like trying to take a picture of the Grand Canyon. You walk into a place like this and say, "Where did this come from?" It is like seeing spiritual consciousness made concrete. I remember when, years ago, I stepped into the cathedral in Toledo, Spain the words that came involuntarily out of my mouth were, "Holy Toledo!"

Traveling expands one's consciousness. Stay long enough and you begin to see things from another culture's and another time's point of view. You begin to live in a much larger world and stand a chance of becoming a bit of a citizen of the world rather than merely of your local tribe. As one of my professors put it decades ago, "When you travel, you learn that mother is not the only cook."

I had also begun my work on the Gospel of Thomas. I knew that I wanted to venture in my teaching into the realm of non-duality and to do so not as a concept or academically but to see what teaching on this text that is clearly about non-dual mind, the word "singleness" is used in the Gospel of Thomas, might be able to do to and for us so that we can not only experience transformation for ourselves but

also make a difference to and in the places where we go out to be God's people in the world. I have heard James Finley, the teacher I so admire and who had Thomas Merton as his spiritual director, say more than once that non-dual mind cannot be taught or communicated. It communicates itself. But, I'm stubborn.

The Gospel of Thomas is not concerned at all about Jesus as a person or about telling the story of his life. Rather, it is about how he calls us to live.

We are in Advent in the Christian year and in the Christmas season in our culture. It is a time when Christmas and Jesus get all smashed together. What Advent is really about is a time to reflect, to change the direction of our minds and living, to be vigilant, to change our inner orientation, to grow in spiritual attentiveness and intelligence and to cultivate receptivity. The Gospel of Thomas is about all of these things. It is, if you read it correctly, what one of the scholars calls a "hand grenade for the mind."

One of the ways I would summarize what the Gospel of Thomas is about is Jesus teaching, telling those who have ears as he puts it, that there is another and more real world than the one we normally live in. Jesus teaches: "There is an invisible world out there and you are living in it."

Mysticism teaches that for the most part we do not experience true reality but, rather, a limited version of it.

Is the world that we perceive real? Is our version of reality true? From a mystical perspective it is said that for the most part we do not experience true reality but rather a limited version of it.

Then I had this most serendipitous experience. I went to a conference where I heard Dr. Ilia Delio, a Franciscan nun, an expert in cosmological physics, speak. I have mentioned her before and will again because no experience in recent time has been such a game changer for me.

When I was a kid my father's business owned several trucks, pickups. He would drive one home and frequently he would take me with him on various trips. I loved to ride in the back of the pickup, standing up and holding on to the railing that had been put into the bed of the truck to help secure things carried there. I know it was crazy. But it was so exhilarating to feel the wind blowing in my face. That's something of what it was like to spend a day and a half with this woman. I couldn't

take notes fast enough. Eventually I gave up and just started taking photographs with my phone of her slide presentation.

In summary: in the largest way you can attempt to conceive - I say "attempt" because your mind cannot get around what we now know "is" - and in the smallest way you can attempt to conceive, current understandings of the cosmos and of quantum physics is confirming what the mystics have said for centuries. Life is conscious energy that is innately joyful, creative, expanding, evolving. True reality is blissful consciousness. This is not, of course, the experience of most human being.

We limit our experience of reality with our definitions of it. Our projected data then distorts our experience of reality. It could be said that we dumb life down to a very fragmented and limited experience and we forfeit the innate joy of life in the process. Indeed, true reality is invisible to us while we are living within it. This is exactly what you will find Jesus teaching in the Gospel of Thomas.

So, I have switched to other images in an effort to point to Sacred Mystery.

I'm sharing this "how we got to now" journey with you in an effort to seduce you into making the Gospel of Thomas part of your daily practice.

There is a vast amount of information on the Gospel of Thomas that is at your fingertips online.

(Here is just one example: <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>)

There are free translations on line and a vast amount of information and opinion about it.

Read it. Some of it will sound familiar because many of these sayings are also in the narrative gospels that are in the Christian scriptures. Some of the teachings are not familiar at all.

The point of the Gospel of Thomas is not to tell a story about Jesus but, rather, to more directly convey his teachings. The emphasis is on personal transformation and on paying attention to what is going on right in front of us.

Let's be honest. Transformation sounds wonderful, liberating. Transformation also sounds awful, threatening. It is threatening to the ego and to the systems the ego

creates. Though I could say this about other forms of organized religion, I'll limit this to Christianity.

Christianity has understood the ego's survival needs by relating to them in a moralistic way. The human is self-centered has said the church. We have fallen from original perfection which accounts for our present state of inadequacy and brokenness from which no effort on our own part could ever deliver us. So the church would offer salvation. Jesus, we have been taught, was sent to be the savior of the sinful and the redeemer of the fallen.

It is true that the problem with humanity is its self-centered reality. The cause of this is not a fall from some original perfection or caused by original sin. The proposed cure has shown its invalidity in the fact that it has not produced human wholeness but rather incredible divisions and divisiveness - there are the true believers and the heretics. One cannot be saved from a fall that never happened or restored to a status one never possessed.

I think this is one of the reasons mysticism is having a wider and wider appeal. The older way of thinking, what I call "recent Christianity," has made less and less sense to people. It is becoming more and more irrelevant.

Here is the teaching we are up to for today.

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A true human being can be
compared to a wise fisherman
who casts his net into the sea and draws it
up from below
full of small fish.
Hidden among them is one large,
exceptional fish that
he seizes immediately,
throwing back all the rest
without a second thought.
Whoever has ears
let them understand this.

* * *

Keep in mind that this is a mystical teaching. At the level of the ego this teaching makes no sense and is not good advice. Those who first heard it would have responded, “What?! Is this guy nuts?”

This is a teaching about transformation, about learning to live in the heart of Sacred Mystery. It is about learning to live in the world in a new a different way, learning to see with different eyes, learning to hear and speak a different language.

You know this word: ghoti.

If the GH sound in “enough” is pronounced “f” and the O in “women” makes the short “i” sound and the TI in “nation” is pronounced “sh”, then the word “ghoti” is pronounced just like “fish.”

This teaching focuses on the act of finding. The discovery of the great fish is an accident. It is part of the regular practice of fishing. Notice that. It is a part of a “regular practice.”

This is a metaphor Jesus uses a lot because fishing and people who fished were a huge part of that culture. The wisdom of the person called “a true human being” here is that of recognizing and choosing the finest part. “The great fish” says Davies in his book on the Gospel of Thomas, “is a symbol of something already out there in the world whose discovery can occur in the ordinary course of events. Realizing the value of what has been found is the real accomplishment.”

In this teaching Jesus is making clear that daring to know the truth of who we are demands and costs nothing less than a commitment to realize that we dwell in the heart of Sacred Mystery. Living in the heart of Sacred Mystery requires a total reversal of cultural values by which we ordinarily live.

On the surface this teaching seems to say living with and in Sacred Mystery is life’s highest treasure and that all lesser things should be given up for it. If, however, you dig deeper into it, you begin to see what this giving up of lesser things involves. After all, it is crazy for a fisherman trying to earn a living to throw back all the little fish. It reverses all comfortable and common sense laws of commerce or livelihood. This is precisely Jesus’ point. If you really want to become a mystical revolutionary, and I’m quoting Davies again, if we are going to inhabit this realm, we “are going to have to surrender all conventional ways of being, acting, or living, and all conventional games of status or power. We are going to have to risk the divine madness that is the true sanity of the fisherman,

who so clearly sees and knows the ultimate value of ‘the large fine fish’ that he is willing to throw back all the ‘little fish’ and risk poverty and the contempt of his world to stay true to that divine reality that overturns and potentially transforms all worldly realities.” This is not your capitalistic, family values gospel.

Keep this in mind when we get to another saying of Jesus in a couple of weeks when he says, “I have thrown fire on the world.” This is a refusal to find security in doctrine, civil or religious authority or morality codes.

I don’t want my teaching or the teaching of Jesus to make any of us feel bad or inadequate because we are seldom so unwilling to make this kind of commitment. Rather, I do want us to experience the liberation, the love, the joy that can come from our willingness to go into the depths and begin to develop the capacity to see and embrace the big fish.

Let’s go in through this door:

In myths and mystical stories and mystical teachings water is usually associated with the source of life, with understanding and wisdom. In doing dream work water is usually seen as a symbol of the unconscious.

So when you have a dream and you are in water or near water, that is saying something about an invitation to go deep. People frequently report that in their dreams they have an ability to breathe under water.

Being in a boat on water is symbolic of being on, or being invited to be on, a spiritual journey.

Water was a metaphor Jesus used for himself. It quenches our thirst physically and spiritually.

We spend the first nine months of our lives in water, 90% of who we are is water, most of the globe is water.

The fish is also a powerful of faith and spirituality. We use the word “fish” for so many metaphors it is astounding: one can be said to drink like a fish, be like a fish out of water, be as cold as a fish, be neither fish or fowl, have other fish to fry, be like a little fish in a big pond. Jesus used fish and fishing a lot in his teaching and fish show up a lot in the narratives of his life.

(See <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys>)

The earliest Christian art that we have shows a fish not a cross. The cross didn't appear until much later. The letters for the Greek word for fish soon came to stand for Jesus Christ God's Son Savior. By drawing two simple lines in the sand or dirt someone could convey their identity as a follower of Jesus. You've likely seen some version of this symbol on car bumpers. Those who oppose Fundamentalism's creationist point of view usually have the fish with legs or the word "Darwin" in it or something other.

Once I was doing a retreat for a group of chaplains and I was using this kind of material talking about the symbolism of water and fish, the need to recognize the importance of and power of the unconscious, the importance of developing a willingness to go deep and become knowledgeable about what we do not about who we are. That's one definition of the unconscious: We don't know what we don't know. Yet what we don't know is constantly making decisions for us.

At one of the breaks one of the chaplains asked me if I really thought that those who crafted these stories and teachings were really that sophisticated. My answer is that I think these people were more "sophisticated" than most of us ever hope to be. Of course, they had never heard of Freud or Jung or Copernicus or Darwin. They also hadn't experienced what we call "the Enlightenment." They didn't think, when it came to what we call "spiritual matters," dualistically. They were easy with myth and symbol. And, if we are ever to be transformed, we must learn to be also.

Jesus is telling a parable here. Let's heed it. Metaphorically we have come to him and asked what we have to do to have life. What does he say to us?

This is a parable Jesus tells designed to lead to transformation. Later on some of Jesus followers would tell parables about Jesus. One of those parable that everybody knows or has heard of is the story of Nicodemus.

I want to retell it because becoming a transformed person is not something we do to and/or for ourselves. It is something we develop the willingness to have done to us. A true mystic would never say, "Look at what I have done or become." Rather, the mystic would say, "Look at what Love has done to me."

So -

Nicodemus was a leader in his community. He was a senior partner in the leading law firm in Jerusalem. He was an intellectual. He had a string of publications. He was scheduled for an impressive lecture tour. Perhaps he was heading into politics and had his own political action committee. He was likely a big shot in downtown Jerusalem.

Like anyone in his position his actions are always subject to scrutiny. The press followed his every move and reported on him.

One night he went for a secret rendezvous. He got his secretary to hire a limo and the story says that he came to talk to Jesus secretly.

It was a huge public relations risk for him to be seen with this Jesus character. You see, Nicodemus was part of the one percent. He had it all but he was lucky enough to know something was missing and he had heard the rumors about this Jesus fellow. Perhaps he could help him.

You understand that this is a story about you and me and not some historical character named Nicodemus.

Nicodemus spoke first. It must have felt like the first line you say to your therapist in your first session. (I got this line and story impetus from Walter Brueggeman.)

What is it Nicodemus wants? He isn't looking for Jesus to give him a creed. He doesn't want to walk away with something that is factually true.

Jesus blows off his credentials and portfolio and says to him: "You've got to start over. You've got to become as vulnerable and innocent and dependent as a little child. You've got to forgo your social position, your achievements, your political affiliation, your wealth, your reputation, your being right and in control. You've got to let go of all the things that make you self-sufficient and that alienate you from the wonder of the gift of God. This is what I have done. This is what you see in me. You are invited into this. Living in arrogant security keeps you cut off from all the gifts of life for which you yearn so much."

Long pause.

Jesus waits.

Finally, Nicodemus responds: "That's not possible." What he means is, "I can't do it. Too costly."

Jesus says, "It's like the wind. You can't make it blow. And, when it does blow, you can't stop it."

They both knew that the word "wind" was the same Hebrew word for "spirit."

The Spirit is the power of God that enables us to contradict the world and the world's expectation and to sign on for the innocence and vulnerability and dependence and freedom and love that only come through the way of faith and living Jesus taught and demonstrated.

This is the way transformation occurs. It is the way for us to be free and not captive to the pressures and demands and dictates of this world. It is the way for us to respond to God's call for us to be our true selves. It is like being born again.

Those who heard the teachings of Jesus would watch his faithfulness take him to the cross. He died out of integrity to his mission.

The relevance of this for us is that to affirm Jesus as Lord puts us on a collision course with the powers that be.

Jesus ends this parable by saying, "Whoever has ears, let them understand this." He says, "Hang a big sign on you that you wear into the world so you won't forget and so others will know who you are and what your life is about." What does the sign declare? "Gone Fishing."

Jesus never once say, "worship me!" but he often says, "follow me."

Christianity is a lifestyle - a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared, inclusive, and loving. We made it, however, into a formal established religion, in order to avoid the demanding lifestyle itself. One could then be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish, and vain at the highest levels of the church, and still easily believe that Jesus is "my personal Lord and Savior" The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.

So, let go fishing.

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