

Faith That Moves Mountains

I want to begin today by reading to you a prayer/poem brought to my attention by my alert research department. I'll read it to you twice:

* * *

O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,
gimme a break before I die;
grant me wisdom, will, & wit,
purity, probity, pluck, & grit.
Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind,
gimme great abs & a steel-trap mind,
and forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice -
these little blessings would suffice
to beget an earthly paradise:
make the bad people good -
and the good people nice;
and before our world goes over the brink,
teach the believers how to think.

* * *

If you are unfamiliar with the word “probity,” I was not familiar with it, it means “having highest principles.” The poem was written by Philip Appleman. Philip Appleman has published seven volumes of poetry and three novels. He has received many awards for his writing. (Here is a link to learn more about him - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Appleman)

Let me read it to you again in slow motion.

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O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,

[We all pray in one way or another to some understanding of "the Great Mystery."]

Gimme a break before I die;

[We all have our hopes and/or fears of what we believe would make us happy or safe.]

Grant me wisdom, will and wit,
Purity, probity, pluck and grit.

[We all want the resources to be able to deal with what life will inevitably give us.]

Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind,
[Is this buttering God up, trying to get on the Divine's "good side"?)

Gimme me great abs & and a steel-trap mind,

[This is not too much to ask for is it? To meet cultural expectations and stay sharper than the competition?]

And forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice -
To beget an earthly paradise:

[Ah, this is what we are so good at. Telling God how to run the show and what is needed to run the show properly.]

Make the bad people good -
And the good people nice;

[Absolutely!]

And before our world goes over the brink,
Teach the believers how to think.

[which likely means: teach those who disagree with me how to think like I think.]

* * *

I love this poem and, no doubt, there is a lot of mindless nonsense going on in the world and what looks like, from a lot of perspectives, a lot of bad or non-thinking. If, however, you were to accuse a Fundamentalist of any stripe of not thinking clearly or of not thinking at all, you'd have a fight on your hands.

I once suggested to someone that they read Jim Finley's book about the writings of Thomas Merton, Merton's Palace of Nowhere, because it would introduce them to the concept of non-duality. They dismissed non-duality immediately as being just a bunch of "fuzzy thinking."

Let me be clear: there is, at least in my opinion, a woeful lack of there being enough good information and knowledge about religious and spiritual matters. Many people who consider themselves very religious are horribly misinformed or ill informed about the very religion they say they believe and practice. Many others have dismissed religions out of hand because of misinformation or a lack of good information. That is one of the reasons I will continue to contribute in whatever way I can to all of us growing in religious literacy.

However, there is that great theological word again, however, all of the information in the world is useless unless we use it to gain higher and higher levels of understanding and wisdom.

I wondered for years about the great temptation story in the Jewish creation myth. Adam and Eve were granted freedom to do whatever they wanted to in the Garden of Eden except eat of the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Why in the world would that be considered a sin?

It was not until I got introduced to the developmental theories of Kohlberg and Piaget that I got it. If we don't graduate from the levels of knowledge and information to those of wisdom and understanding, we risk falling into the sin of thinking that we "know." The sin of Fundamentalism is its absolute certainty about its religious beliefs.

There is a phrase used by the church's first theologian, Paul, several times. The phrase, at least one rendition of it is, "putting on the mind which was in Christ Jesus." Another place has it, "Have the mind of Christ." Eugene Peterson translates

these familiar, to church goers, phrases this way: “Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.”

It doesn't mean “think like Jesus thought” or to attempt to go by the slogan - WWJD. It means to have and live a different kind of consciousness. If we as individuals and institutions, including institutional religion, cannot be open to a transformation of consciousness, the future is bleak. What Jesus means by “the kingdom of heaven,” a most lamentable translation, is a particular level of human consciousness. To mistake it for anything else, like life after death, can throw one's spirituality off on the wrong track for the rest of one's life and create tons of unfortunate consequences along the way.

The most important thing Jesus taught about this realm of reality called “the kingdom of God” is that it is, first of all within us. Then, it is to be realized to be among us. And, he said, the only way to get there is to die. Not physical death, you understand. But death to a certain kind of awareness so that we can move into another.

What is this kind of consciousness, this mind of Christ? First of all and most importantly of all it is a vision of this world that sees no separation (or, duality) between God and humans.

“Jesus of Nazareth, a human being like ourselves, a lowly carpenter from a nondescript town, nevertheless managed to realize and ‘see’ that he and the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Jacob, and Isaac, were one. He “saw” with his everyday mind (consciousness) that he was completely united to the God that everyone else merely thought they should worship. . . . Not only did Jesus see this truth for himself, but he saw that this essential non-separation from God was also true for the rest of us. And he actually had the courage to go about the land of Israel telling everyone that this was the case. He asked us, ‘Do you not know that you are gods?’ (John 1)34-45). In fact, it was because he had the nerve to ‘make himself equal to God’ that the religious authorities, threatened that their own authority with the people was being undermined, handed him over to the Romans to be killed. (This is a quote/paraphrase from an extended passage in James Marion's book, “Putting on the Mind of Christ: The inner Work of Christian Spirituality.”)

I am trying to delve into, understand for myself and offer to you the teachings of the Jewish mystic Jesus. I think these teachings are relevant for everyone. I don't care whether you consider yourself a "Christian" or not. I believe these teachings are relevant for all people regardless of religious tradition or belief. Of course, we have to have a correct understanding of who the teacher is who is offering these teachings. That is one reason I have spent so much time over the years teaching about the Jesus of history.

One desired outcome of what I'm up to is to raise our level of understanding and then for us to participate in life based on the principles of love, respect and inclusion for all that are to be found in these teachings. If we are to follow Paul's advice and "put on the mind of Christ," there are three notes or themes or facets of a diamond that we return to or look or or gain reflections of where we are over and over and over:

They are:

The mastery of some practice that allows us to grow in mindful consciousness.

The realization that there are different cognitive stages of awareness and emotional stages of development and the ability to see where we are on the map, so to speak. This is one example of the advantage and usefulness of like the Enneagram.

And, the conscious pursuit of psychological wholeness. This involves the kinds of books we read, the television we watch, the people we talk to and what we talk about, and so forth.

One of the reasons I always have my prayer beads with me and where I can see them is not for good luck or because I'm superstitious but because they remind me of what I say in my practice I want to live.

[Resources for growth in all of these areas abound. One excellent one is the website Spirituality and Practice. Check it out. www.spiritualityandpractice.com)

I ran across this week some amazing words by the artist/photographer David LaChapelle. He wrote:

“For thousands of years, sailors have used the stars to help establish their position upon the earth. We need a similar series of inner reference points to help guide us through the waves of change which are appearing on the ocean of our times. There is a name for such stars which arises out of a scientific way of depicting the world: invariant constants. Invariant constants are those qualities, processes and hidden organizing fields of life which endure throughout all changes. They are known as truth. The discovery of these invariant constants is the life task of any human being. And in the mystery of the universe, it appears that each one of us is afforded the opportunity to arrive at such constancy through our own particular journey. Stray too far from the truth and the chaos of change will tear you apart. Place your trust in it and you will find guidance though the seas may grow rough around you.”

All of this is to say that there is no other way to get to the Kingdom except to go within.

Let me also be clear about this: we live in a world where it is not generally understood that people, as well as the institutions that house us, have different levels of awareness. We may assume this for children - up to a certain point. When people ask me why they should have a practice, why they should practice a religion or have rituals, why should they regularly engage others in truly deeply meaningful conversations from the heart; my answer is: to accelerate growth in consciousness, grow in freedom, growth in love, growth in being an integrated and whole person. What else is life for?

Until recently, mythic consciousness has been the dominant and average consciousness of believers of all the world's religions, including Christianity. For example, the creeds of all religions, but I'm just focusing on Christianity here, are all expressed in mythic terms. In the so-called secular world, it is mythic consciousness that wants to conquer the world.

Mythic consciousness is a whole lot better than tribal consciousness but it is nowhere near the consciousness Jesus preached. But because most people have been incapable of understanding, not thinking about but understanding, Jesus

except in a mythic way they soon reduced Jesus to the level of mythic consciousness and, for the most part, it has stayed that way, at least at the popular level, for most of these last two thousand years. The exceptions, of course, have been the other mystics who get quickly dismissed as being unrealistic, impractical or just plain crazy.

Again, I'm not against good, clear, intellectually and academically informed thinking. It is helpful to realize that the rational level, like all levels, has many different degrees. To reference James Marion again, "A person who thinks at the lower rational level, for example, is a person who thinks in cliches. He or she has few original thoughts or insights. Rather, there is a platitude offered for every occasion. Or he or she is always asking, "You know what I mean?" To be polite, most people answer "Yes." But the true answer is that, not only don't you not know what he means, but he doesn't either. He or she hasn't developed the ability to think clearly enough to be able to articulate what he or she wants to express."

In religion this level of rationality is where every answer is a Bible quote or verse from the Koran or Zen saying, simply given out as platitudes.

Some people think that a higher level of rationality is reached simply by using big words.

I've taken this long excursion into the territory of thinking and understanding because the teaching of Jesus we are going to look at today won't be apprehended by thinking alone - as will no vital spiritual teaching. We have to live in the various worlds we do with a very high level of clear and good thinking. But that falls short, by itself, of having the mind of Christ.

Here is the teaching as found in The Gospel of Thomas.

* * *

Yeshua says,

Should two make peace
in one house,

they could speak the word,
“Move!” to a mountain
and it would obey them.

* * *

Various teachings of Jesus have, over the years, been the recipient of different labels. I said last week that, to me, the most difficult teaching of Jesus is the one that says, “You must learn to be in but not of the world.” This is extremely difficult to do. It is so easy to gain, or lose, one’s identity depending on the world in which we live: our marriages or intimate relationships is one example. What we do to make money is another. This is especially true, it seems, for men. The statistics on men who die shortly after retiring is alarmingly high. It is so easy, and a mindless matter, to either gain or lose our identity from the various groups we are part of. And, on and on it goes.

There are other hard sayings, “In order to have life, you must let it go.” “Sell all that you have and give it to the poor.” (We've figured out a way to get out of that one.) “Follow me.”

And, there are radical sayings, “The rain falls on the just and the unjust.” “Love your neighbor.” “Love your enemy.” “Let your enemy love you.”

But, of all the teachings of Jesus, this one is the most powerful.

If you hear it at the rational level, it is pure nonsense.

There was a time in my life when I believed in and took this teaching literally. The only reason I could not move a mountain was that I didn't have enough faith.

I had a relative tell me once when I was a child, an uncle I believe, that if I could put salt on a bird's tail, I could catch it. For some reason I wanted to capture a bird. So off I went with salt shaker in hand to give it a try. It never worked. I couldn't get close enough to a bird to put salt on its tail. It was years before I figured out that the saying itself was an expression about the impossibility of catching a bird.

Some of you know that on the practical level it is hell to live in a house where there is no peace, no harmony. Just like many other things in our culture that are affected by poor thinking and poorer understanding, many, many relationships suffer such disharmony that divorce affects right at fifty percent of all marriages. That's a good outcome for many. Worse outcomes are domestic violence, infidelities, substance abuse and other forms of mayhem.

When there is unity and harmony in an intimate relationship there is a power not found elsewhere. I will sometimes hear a couple talk of some extremely challenging event they dealt with or ordeal they endured. "How did you manage?" "We pulled together."

What does it mean to make peace? The phrase is used throughout the Jewish/Christian tradition: "Peace be unto you." When Jesus sent his disciples out he said, "When you enter a house offer your peace. If it is not returned, don't stay." In most every service of Christian worship all over the world the phrase is used in one way or another, "The peace of the lord be with you." What is this peace?

I am obsessive-compulsive enough to keep fairly good records of sermons I have preached and talks I have given. I am fairly confident that in the decades I have been preaching and teaching I have never given a sermon on or based a talk on this teaching. A faith that moves mountains! Really? If you Google "having faith to move mountains," you'll get an idea how this teaching has been treated. The literalists don't know what to do with a text like this. Some of them will say, and this is said about other teaching of Jesus which I earlier referred to today as "hard sayings" or "radical sayings," "Well, he didn't mean this literally. It is a metaphor." For what?

This saying is found six times in the canonical Gospels, twice in the Gospel of Thomas and once in the writings of Paul. You recall the famous First Corinthians 13 passage, "If I have faith even enough to move mountains but have not love, . . ."

Look at the key words: peace, house, word, mountain.

There is not time for us to deal with the religious history and spiritual symbolism of each of these words.

I've already referred to "peace." The peace of God is spoken of all through Jewish Christian writings. What Paul said was that to have the mind of Christ would give one the peace that passes all understanding.

"House" is also a word with a formidable religious and spiritual history. It is a metaphor for where God is. That's not literal. God is every where. But, dualism divides and puts God over there us some where else other than here. I'll bet more than one person here has had a dream where someone was trying to break into your house. The house is the collective unconscious symbol of the psyche, which is everything about us that isn't physical. It is who we truly are.

Our task in life, should we choose to take it on, is to get it all together in one place, to become integrated persons. The stuff trying to break into the house is information the ego doesn't want because it is such a threat to the ego.

The word "word" also has a rich history. In the creation myths God speaks the "word" and the worlds comes into being. Prophets are always exhorting people to hear the "word of the Lord." Which isn't the Bible but the power that creates and names.

For the last two weeks I have referred to the metaphor of water or river as it fits into the teachings of Jesus. The word or symbol "mountain" is equally, if not more so, powerful. It appears over and over again - Moses received the law on the mountain, the ark came to rest on a mountain, Jesus delivers his most well-known teachings on a mountain, the collection called the Sermon on the Mount, (Please don't think that actually happened as one long Sunday morning sermon.)

I looked in the big concordance of the Bible I have and it contains six single spaced tightly packed columns, hundreds of references, to places in the Bible where the word "mount" or "mountain" is used.

I've heard Richard Rohr say many times that Jesus is the first non-dual teacher in the West. I don't know if that is true or not, but this is a teaching of non-duality and the transformative power that comes to us and to the world when we move out of our ego states into unitive consciousness.

In most of Christian history what has been emphasized about Jesus is his divinity. This makes actually following him or loving him seem unrealistic and out of reach. When it comes to Jesus we are on two totally different planes. What has failed to be realized and countered is the fact that if God is totally other that God is alienating.

If what it means to be Christian is to follow Jesus, to love Jesus, to work at having the “mind of Christ,” then a lot of people who call themselves “Christian,” aren’t. I’m not being judgmental - just descriptive. Many people who call themselves Christian believe in a Supreme Being who lives out there somewhere and who had a son named Jesus who died for our sins in the greatest act of child abuse ever conceived. As I’ve said before, this is the most successful piece of bad theology ever. All of this avoids the living message of Jesus.

Namely, that the human and the divine coexist in him. We can’t get this by believing in it. That’s too dualistic. It seems like such a contradiction in terms, an irreconcilable paradox.

Most people in the Christian tradition have little difficulty believing that Jesus was really divine. But, not really human. For an increasing number of those labeled “millennials,” they have no difficulty seeing Jesus as fully human - great spiritual teacher, you know - but not divine.

Here is the price we pay for our inability to think non-dually: When we deny what Jesus holds together, we can’t put it together in ourselves!

That is the point of this teaching. It is not about being able to pull off some David Copperfield like trick when he made the Statue of Liberty disappear - which, of course, he didn’t. The point of this teaching is that you and I are also daughters and sons of God and daughters and sons of this world. Both are true at the same time. I know, this defies all reason and logic. We also are a living paradox. But we need a model, an exemplar, a promise, and a guarantee (these are all words used by Paul in his effort to describe the indescribable “mind of Christ”) to imagine such a far off impossibility. For us, that model is Jesus.

This is how Jesus, if we choose to follow him, “saves” us. Not by changing God’s mind about us but by changing, if we allow it, our minds about God. Salvation is not some ecclesiastical magic trick that occurs because we believe a certain formula. Salvation is a gradual, life-long realization of who we really are and always have been and eternally will be.

As you know, one of my “invariant constants” comes from the work of Carl Jung. He wrote once, “The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are.”

Jung wanted to bring externalized religion back to its internal foundations. He saw how religion kept emphasizing the split and unbridgeable distance between the Creator and Creation, between God and the human, between inner and outer, between the One and the many.

I think one of the things that caused me to have such an overwhelmingly positive response to the teachings of Ilia Delio over two years ago now is that she taps into the new physics and quantum mechanics to say what has always been true. All that is is energy. Call it God, Sacred Mystery, Ground of Being, the Cosmos - what ever. The Buddhists explain what is, what we see and who we are, by saying, there is manifestation and there is the cessation of manifestation. This energy, God whom we cannot comprehend but nevertheless are driven to attempt to express, is expanding, evolving, entangled and creative.

The Christianity most of us are familiar with does not start with the safety of this but with a problem. It’s called “original sin.” There is something wrong with you. Jesus teaches the wonderful unity between creation and Creator. In Christian theology it is called Christ.

The dualistic distinctions we make are merely mental and they are certainly deceptive.

I once heard Richard Rohr say that the job of clergy has been like that of the fabled vacuum cleaner salesman who first dumps dirt on your floor so he can show you how well his little Hoover works. As if the meaning of the cosmos could start with a foundational problem.

What this teaching of Jesus is saying is that you don't have to trust anything outside of yourself. If you do, it will lead to either arrogant belief or emptiness.

This teaching is about inner trust. It is about a dialogue with the energy that is expanding, evolving, creative and entangled. God is love. Not right belief. God is safe. Not "getting it right."

If you want to leave this time with something today, which people say they want, leave with a commitment to search for and see the Sacred in yourself, in others, in all things.

Now, if you do this, it will shake things up. Talk like this is something not welcome in most churches. Paul Tillich referred to it as "the shaking of the foundations." It moves mountains.

This saying "yes" to what is - to who we are truly is mature religion's main function. This is what creates the bedrock foundation for all effective faith.

Our lifelong work is to get it together internally. Not to engage in endless moralisms about who is in and who is out. This is what gets the obstacles, the mountains if you will, out of the way so that the rest of the journey is so much more natural, beautiful, joyful and inclusive. What else should a spiritual journey be?

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