

Promise and Demand
Picking Up A Very Heavy, Life-Giving Light Burden

The teachings of Jesus and of his early followers are teachings that are full of both promise and demand.

That's the title I've given this talk - Promise and Demand.

The subtitle is: Picking Up A Very Heavy, Life-Giving Light Burden

Here is the teaching I have based this talk today on:

Yeshua says,

Come to me
for justice is my yoke,
and gentleness is my rule,
and you will discover the state of rest.

Those of you who grew up in any kind of Christian tradition have heard this teaching before. Though the way you likely remember it is like this:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (That's how it is found in the Matthew narrative.)

This is how Eugene Peterson translates the teaching:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

The promise here is that of rest and renewal, of hope of and for a different kind of life. The demand lies in the deceptive, though not deliberately so, phrase, “Come unto me.”

I can't think of any aspect of meaningful living that is not a mixture of promise and demand.

Take music, for example. If one wants to learn to play a musical instrument at a proficient level, that demands being dedicated to hours of being taught and even more hour of practice.

A few weeks ago we attended a performance sponsored by the Houston Chamber Music Society. The performers were a string quartet from Spain, the “Quarteto Casals.” They played music by Mozart and Bela Bartok and others.

I always enjoy reading the notes in the program about the performers and the more personal the notations the more I like it. “The violinist has three cats,” for example. This printed program contained none of that.

Opinion may be divided as to whether Mozart is the greatest composer ever. No one, I think would deny that this man, who died at age 35, was a musical genius. He performed before royalty at age five and composed over 600 works.

Because he is so well known and so often performed, reading whatever biographical statement is put into the program notes is always interesting to me. It must be challenging to write something new, fresh and interesting for the wide variety of performances where Mozart's musical talent is displayed.

The second composer on the program was Bela Bartok. He lived from 1881 until 1945. He was born in Budapest and, frankly, his music, what I have been exposed to of it, is just a smidgen too dissonant for my tastes. What stunned me when I read his biographical piece was how it began:

“Those who knew Bartok speak of his ferociously uncompromising personal integrity with reverence.” Let me read that to you again: “Those who knew Bartok

speak of his ferociously uncompromisingly personal integrity with reverence.” (Read more about him - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Béla_Bartók)

Wow! How would you like that to be said of you? Or, for someone to get up at your memorial service and begin a eulogy like that?

Compare that with an obituary that I read about in a news magazine. I mentioned the article to a friend and was told, “Oh yes, that obituary went viral.” So, I looked it up. I want to read it to you in its entirety. Even though you may not like obituaries, this one is something else:

Leslie Ray “Popeye” Charping was born in Galveston, Texas on November 20, 1942 and passed away January 30, 2017, which was 29 years longer than expected and much longer than he deserved. Leslie battled with cancer in his latter years and lost his battle, ultimately due to being the horse’s ass he was known for. He leaves behind 2 relieved children; a son Leslie Roy Charping and daughter, Shiela Smith along with six grandchildren and countless other victims including an ex-wife, relatives, friends, neighbors, doctors, nurses and random strangers.

At a young age, Leslie quickly became a model example of bad parenting combined with mental illness and a complete commitment to drinking, drugs, womanizing and being generally offensive. Leslie enlisted to serve in the Navy, but not so much in a brave & patriotic way but more as part of a plea deal to escape sentencing on criminal charges. While enlisted, Leslie was the Navy boxing champion and went on to sufficiently embarrass his family and country by spending the remainder of his service in the Balboa Mental Health Hospital receiving much needed mental healthcare services.

Leslie was surprisingly intelligent, however he lacked ambition and motivation to do anything more than being reckless, wasteful, squandering the family savings and fantasizing about get rich quick schemes. Leslie’s hobbies included being abusive to his family, expediting trips to heaven for the beloved family pets and fishing, which he was less skilled with than the previously mentioned. Leslie’s life served no other obvious purpose, he did not contribute to society or serve his community and he possessed no redeeming qualities besides quick witted sarcasm which was amusing during his sober days.

With Leslie's passing he will be missed only for what he never did; being a loving husband, father and good friend. No services will be held, there will be no prayers for eternal peace and no apologies to the family he tortured. Leslie's remains will be cremated and kept in the barn until "Ray," the family donkey's wood shavings run out. Leslie's passing proves that evil does in fact die and hopefully marks a time of healing and safety for all.

(Source - <http://obit.carnesfuneralhome.com/leslie-ray-charping>)

Those are two very different evaluations of a person's life.

For some people matters like integrity, fairness and community well-being matter. For others, and the members of this tribe seem to be increasing, a lack of civility and common decency seem no longer to be so important.

I've no need to cite examples of this. You are as aware of them as I.

Though I don't want it to be said at my memorial service that I was a prude, there are things that happen in our culture that shock and are repulsive to me. For example, my grandchildren, just by virtue of living in this society, are exposed to a cesspool of material on TV and other media that neither I nor my own children were exposed to in their young years. In addition, the growing lack of civility that occurs when someone is behind the wheel of a car is appalling.

Over the years it has been my responsibility from time to time to offer supervision or direction to someone who is in training for some future position in ministry. One of the inevitable issues that comes up, usually fairly early in our work, is their disillusionment when they discover that those who work for the church are full of faults and shortcomings just like those on the outside of the church. They have projected some sort of youthful idealism onto those in the church's employee and are disappointed to discover that we all have feet of clay.

Nonetheless, we all have a choice of not only how we want to be remembered when we are no longer walking this planet but also the condition of our hearts and

how we affect each other. If we want the promise of spiritual well-being and wise and useful social contribution, it doesn't happen automatically.

I was going to call this talk today "Repeal and Replace." That's a phrase most of us have heard for a long time. Much of what passes for Christianity in this country, perhaps in the world, needs to be repealed and replaced with teachings that are reflective of what Jesus taught.

A poll was taken two years ago. People in every state in the United States were asked to say the first thing that came to their mind when they heard the word "Christian." The top three items on the list were: anti-gay, judgmental and hypocritical. There is something very wrong with this picture.

You may or may not call yourself "Christian." I personally think that labels are very risky. I used to put a label on myself as "young." No longer. Some people put the label "healthy" on themselves only to have that jerked away. Other temporary labels are things like - "employed," "married" "wealthy" etc.

A typical child between five and six years of age smiles around three hundred times a day. A typical man sixty and above smiles three times a day in our culture. What happens between six and sixty? Whatever it is, it tells me that religion is not doing its job very well.

The holy men and women I know laugh and smile - a lot. Look at Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Nelson Mandela. What is it that these people know that evidently so many frightened, angry, judgmental people don't?

Ironically it is that they know they don't know. Arrogant people know, they are certain. As we do our spiritual work we move, likely uncomfortably in the beginning, into the position of, at one and the same time, knowing what we do know - but as we go forward we know what we know at deeper, wider and quieter levels - and we also know what we do not know.

Look at the politicians who make the news, those on right and left: they know. Look at the religious leaders who make the news: they know.

Many people in places of powerful leadership know what they know, but they don't know what they don't know and that is what makes them so dangerous. Only people who are comfortable not knowing can usually smile. People who are preoccupied with knowing have little space for smiling.

We are in the midst of a spiritual crisis in our culture. Explicit expressions of anti-Semitism are on the increase, Muslims are attacked and their religion is vilified. Immigrants are seen as "then" - never "us" - always "them." How does any of this fit with the teachings of Jesus? Love your neighbor, welcome the stranger, take care of the widows and orphans. By the way, as I try to say at the beginning of our times every time we meet: we love the neighbor, the enemy, the stranger, the marginalized not simply because it is the Jesus and God-like thing to do but, more deeply, because the neighbor in whatever guise she or he shows up, is us.

The challenge of a spiritual teacher such as myself is how can I express the validity of this without either coming across as smug or feeding into the divisiveness and incivility that is so rampant in our culture. I don't want to get caught up in or contribute to the us-versus-them culture in which we find ourselves today.

What we are experiencing in our present day culture is nothing new. When we are functioning out of our lowest levels, out of what is sometimes referred to as our reptilian or tribal selves, we demonstrate a need to project our superiority over others, often doing so by harming or diminishing those who are not like us or who don't believe as we do. Tribal mentality has always had a tendency to appeal to an authority that is unfettered by reason or rational thought. This is what fundamentalism is - in whatever religion or whatever political ideology.

I know people who are very smart academically - having a graduate degree is no guarantee of wisdom - who because they grew up being taught that it was "the Christian thing to do," still take as literal the biblical story of Noah's flood as an actual, historical and factual account. This is in spite of the impossible logistics and the appalling theology. These people are able to suspend disbelief and embrace, because the Bible says so, an all-loving and gracious God committing global genocide.

If you don't embrace that point of view, trying to have a conversation with someone who does is a doomed venture before it begins. So what are we to do? How do we deal with this dilemma?

One thing we might do is face up to the reality that our culture is addicted to a dualistic mind-set that sees the world as divided between who is right and who is wrong, what is true and what is false. I'm not saying that there is no such thing as right and wrong, true and false. I am saying that arguing about it is getting us, as a culture, no where. Neither is hunkering down and hoping the storm will pass.

If we are having a spiritual crisis, there is only a spiritual solution. We need something that transcends the us-versus-them mentality. I think it is in this teaching, this is not the only place of course, that is offered to us in the Gospel of Thomas collection we are looking at today.

Let me give it to you again:

Come to me
for justice is my yoke,
and gentleness is my rule,
and you will discover the state of rest.

This is not an original statement by Jesus and, if he included it in his teaching, he wasn't talking about himself. This saying comes from his Jewish tradition and the speaker is Sophia, Wisdom personified. Stepping into wisdom is the solution to our spiritual problem.

The problem is our addiction to a kind of dualism that sees the world divided between competing ideas of right and wrong, true and false. That's not to say that right and wrong, true and false don't exist, but obsessing over convincing those who won't be convinced is getting us nowhere. Neither is isolating ourselves in our bunker and smugly settling for "being right." What's needed is a framework that transcends our primal, tribal us-vs-them mentality and reflects our conviction about and our commitment to growing up.

What I'm suggesting is that stepping into Wisdom would amount to repealing dualism and replacing this with an embracing as a faith stance a non-dual way of being in the world. This way involves wisdom and understanding. Understanding embraces the notion of loving-kindness and compassion.

I first met Jim Fowler sometime in the late sixties. We were brought together by a connection we each had with one of my mentor/teacher/colleagues, Caryle Marney. We spent two stints of time together in the next few years and then, when I went to Harvard for post-doctoral studies, Fowler was doing the research that led to the publication of his book on faith development.

If dualism is the sickness that ails us like a poison, at least part of the antidote can be found in this work, *Stages of Faith*. There are several models of faith development but this is the first one I encountered. The words dualism and non-dual were not even part of my vocabulary at that time.

In Fowler's model there are six stages through which people move as their faith matures - or doesn't.

All humans start at a "primal or undifferentiated" stage. This is where, if we are lucky, we experience a safe environment. If we are not lucky we experience being hurt, neglected or abused in some way. The seeds of faith/and spirituality are sown here.

Then, the first stage of faith development comes. It is called the "intuitive-projective" stage. This occurs in pre-school children where there is a need for concrete symbols and stories. Here our basic ideas about God are shaped through a mixture of fantasy and reality. These come from the authority figures in our lives, usually our parents.

Stage Two is called the "mythic-literal" stage. This stage, found in pre-adolescent children, has a strong belief in the justice and reciprocity of the universe. It is at this stage that a child will say, when things are not going her or his way, "That's not fair." God in this stage is anthropomorphic, usually male.

Logic shapes our world at this stage and the stories told by faith communities are often understood in very literal ways. Fundamentalists remain at this stage throughout adulthood.

By the way, I'm sure there may be Buddhists Fundamentalists. I've simply never met one. The Buddhists have mythical and miracle stories about the Buddha just as Christians have about Jesus. After Buddha's enlightenment, for example, everywhere he walked flowers sprung up in his steps. Buddhists tell that story still but I never met one who takes it literally.

Stage Three is called the "synthetic-conventional" stage. This occurs during those adolescent years where we are working so hard to fit in and be accepted by being unique and different. Stage Three people have a hard time seeing outside of their box because they do not recognize that they are in any kind of box at all.

This is where the quote I offered you from R. D. Laing last week is so relevant:

"The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And, because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change, until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds."

So a Stage Three person usually adopts a belief system of some kind. Once comfortable within it, a person at this stage has a hard time seeing outside their box. Many people - Mainline Protestants, Committed Catholics - remain at this stage for the rest of their lives.

Stage Four is called the "individuative-reflective" Stage. Here people begin to take personal responsibility for their beliefs, values, systems of meanings and commitments. This usually occurs in early adulthood. Critical thinking skills not only uncover the boxes we are in and to know that there is an outside of the box but also that other boxes are out there in which people are seemingly locked in.

I remember vividly being in my first IPR, Interpersonal Relationship, Group when I began my clinical training. I knew that I was in the Christian tradition because my parents had been. It was given to me like the English language was. I

intellectually knew that there were other traditions, other languages. But, I was just lucky to have been born into the right one, the correct one.

There were other people in my training group from other traditions who felt exactly the same way that I did about mine. It is at this point in faith development that many people chuck it all. What they abandon is their Stage Three Faith.

Stage Five is called the “Conjunctive” stage. It is rare for anyone to get here before midlife. Here people begin to acknowledge the paradoxes of life and faith, particularly the religious aspect of faith, becomes the subject of critical thinking.

I have seen some terminally ill children make it to this stage. I learned in my training that parents of a very ill child will project onto the child their fears and concerns and report these to the doctor or chaplain as coming from the child.

In one situation where there was rather "open awareness" about the fact that the child was near death, and the young girl was perhaps 11, the parents were expressing to her how much they loved her and would miss her. She reached up and pulled the privacy curtain so that it was between her and her parents and she said, "Don't be afraid. It will be like this. I will still be here."

At this stage we begin to confront the fact that dualistic thinking cannot deal with the mysteries of life - love, suffering, death. There are irresolvable paradoxes that “black and white” thinking simply cannot handle. People at this stage begin to see life as a mystery and the necessity for a mystical approach to religion and spirituality. They abandon old theological and religious boxes and are open to exploring the depths of sacred stories and symbols across a variety of traditions.

As with what we are doing today with the saying from the Gospel of Thomas. “Come to me for justice is my yoke, and gentleness is my rule and you will discover the state of rest.” Wow! Jesus wasn’t talking about himself but this is Wisdom herself calling to us. To me it doesn’t get better than this.

Stage six is called “the universalizing” stage. This is enlightenment. Very rare. I’ve known some people who have made it here. This is the place where the saints live. They altruistically create zones of liberation for others. They value all life and

living creatures and mean it when they say - “may all beings everywhere be filled with loving-kindness and compassion, may all beings be well, may all beings be peaceful and at ease.” Further, they put their lives into making that blessing a reality.

Six stages. It was from Ken Wilbur that I learned that you don’t put one stage behind you when you move to another. You transcend and include. Each stage is essential for the next. And it was from Richard Rohr that I learned that you can’t get into an airplane at stage one and fly to stage six, skipping the intervening stages.

Some people stay stuck at stage two or three. They are fiercely suspicious of any “new” information. Sometimes they are, apparently “blissfully,” unaware that there is new information or further states. Jesus, and other spiritual masters as well, call those who would hear into a much deeper and broader spiritual living than most of us experience.

So, some people reject the notion that they are in a box and that there is an outside. Others seem committed to moving from one stage to another as part of a life-long journey toward greater and deeper levels of peace, joy and love.

It is easy for people at stages four or five to be judgmental of people at stages two or three. Though I think when I’m being judgmental I’ve stepped out of a higher stage.

It is also easy for people at stages two or three to think that people at higher levels are wishy-washy, that we stand for nothing and have no firm convictions. Someone said to me not long ago about my teachings, “You are not a defender of the faith.” Thank you!

What I’d like you to notice is that Fowler’s system isn’t judgmental. It simply acknowledges that there are stages and that we are all in different places along the way. If we are liberated from the dualism that exists at earlier stages, we don’t have to try to convince a Stage Three people of anything.

Simply be who you are where you are on your spiritual journey. One mark of spiritual growth is giving up the tribal impulse of trying to prove you are right and others are wrong. Nor, do we give up on a commitment to follow Jesus into wisdom for fear that we might upset someone.

Our opportunity is to respond to the invitation and continue to step into Wisdom so that we can find the restful liberation that is the gift of that journey.

Got it? The commitment, or call, is not to being right or wrong but being wise, useful and loving and working on our own transformation. That is a contribution we can make to our neighbor, our community, our church, our state, our nation, our globe.

I began today by juxtaposing what was said about Bela Bartok and his unflinching integrity with that of a eulogy written by a man's family who didn't care much for him.

I first heard of that eulogy in a news magazine. Then, I read the full eulogy, the one I read to you, online where it is still posted at the funeral home.

That news magazine, and this is the first page I turn to when the magazine arrives in the mail, runs a contest each week about some story in the news. They ran a story about this one. The contest referenced the obituary and said, "In that obituary the deceased was described as selfish and abusive whose life served no "obvious purpose." If an entrepreneur were to start a company that provided brutally honest obituaries and eulogies, what would it be called?"

The winners were:

Screweulogies.

R.I.P. Him to Shreds

The Final Roasting Place.

This is not a fire and brimstone presentation. I'm not trying to scare anybody about anything or into anything.

Though I believe every word of everything I've said today I pray you hear it at a non-dual level. Stages of Faith are not things we accomplish. They are things we realize.

Yes, there is a call here: Come unto me.

But, if you walk through that door and look back, you will read above it: You did not choose me. I chose you.

So I will simply remind you of a chant I got from the Zen tradition:

“Let me respectfully remind you:
Life and death are of supreme importance.
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.
Each of us should strive to awaken... awaken...
Take heed: Do not squander your life.”

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