

You Already Have What You Are Looking For

It is said that president Calvin Coolidge, 30th president of the United States, was a man of few words. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvin_Coolidge) Both his dry Yankee wit and his frugality with words became legendary. His wife, Grace Goodhue Coolidge, recounted that a young woman sitting next to Coolidge at a dinner party confided to him she had bet she could get at least three words of conversation from him. Without looking at her he quietly retorted, “You lose.”

Another story has it that he came back to the White House one Sunday after attending church. His wife asked him how the service was. “OK,” he said. “What was the sermon about?” “Sin” he said. She then asked, “What did he say about it?” Coolidge is alleged to have responded, “He’s against it.”

If you are asked after today’s class what was the topic of Ordinary Life today, you might respond, “Circumcision.” What did he say about it? That remains to be seen. Or, heard.

As I have gotten older, I’m less sure about more and more. One of the things I am fairly certain of is that I have never given a talk of any kind - sermon, lecture, life talk - that even mentions the word “circumcision.”

Today, however, that is unavoidable. Why is that?

I have been using the Gospel of Thomas for my inspiration and guidance in writing the talks I offer in here. There are several reasons I’ve been doing this. One is to contribute to religious and spiritual literacy. I think people ought to know and know about this material.

Another reason is that Thomas offers us a doorway we can walk through to an earlier and more mystical understanding of Jesus and his teachings.

There are 114 sayings in the Gospel of Thomas. About half of these are found in the canonical Gospels most people might be familiar with. Half are not.

Just to remind you: In December of 1945 an Egyptian farmer named Muhammed Ali went out on the cliffs that skirt the Nile as it winds its way through Upper Egypt near the town of Nag Hammadi. He and his brother were searching for a naturally occurring form of fertilizer to be spread on their fields when they came across an earthenware jar of obviously ancient origin. When they broke open the jar, they discovered inside thirteen leather-bound books containing more than fifty individual documents of various origins.

Though it was not the monetary treasure he had hoped for, Muhammed Ali could guess that such a crusty collection would have some value in the antiquities trade. What he did not know is that he had just uncovered one of the most important archaeological finds in the history of New Testament scholarship.

It took three years for the significance of the find to become evident. In combing through this collection of manuscripts, and there is a great variety in them, at the end of the second bound collection was a manuscript that had been known about. It was in Coptic and was copied down around 350. Scholars had fragments of this manuscript in Greek from an earlier discovery and they dated those coming from an edition that may have originated as early as 50 to 60. If so, and I'm of that opinion, this is the earliest writing we have from the early Jesus community.

As I have bemoaned in here more than once, this kind of information never made it into the education curriculum of your average Sunday School. For a variety of reasons, which I am not going into now, a huge rift developed between what came to be called "the academy" and "your average religious person on the street." Indeed, much of religion, especially conservative or evangelical religion, came to regard higher religious education with disdain. Theologians who tried to bring the actual teachings of Jesus into mainstream awareness were said to "live in ivory towers," "be out of touch with reality" and not to live in the real world. The work of the Jesus Seminar was greeted by some with out-and-out hostility. (Just the Christian thing to do.)

Just this week someone sent me a collection of great cartoons and among them was this: "To most Christians, the Bible is like a software license. Nobody actually reads it. They just scroll to the bottom and click 'I agree.'"

Most of you are aware that St. Paul's is what is known as a "lectionary" church. Lectionaries have been used in one form or another from the very beginning of the Christian movement - well before Constantine.

Though you can now download a copy of the Gospel of Thomas, or the entire Bible, for free off of the Internet, it was not always so.

Copies of collections of sayings or teachings were hand made and rare. They did exist. Let's say someone visited Rome and discovered that there was a writing used to inform and instruct people new to the Jesus movement. This person wanted such a writing for the community where they lived and got one made and took it home. This was repeated in other places.

As the movement spread and became more organized, so did its worship and instruction. Some form of uniformity was sought and valued. Building on their Jewish heritage, a liturgical calendar came into existence. Certain readings were suggested for certain days.

In its present form, at least for those churches following a lectionary, there are four readings appointed for each Sunday - actually, there are readings appointed for every single day. These readings are from the Hebrew Scripture, the Psalms, the Epistles and the Gospels. We follow what is called "the common lectionary" and it repeats itself on a three year cycle. If you came to church every Sunday, or followed the lectionary in your personal practice, you would cover most, not all, of the Bible every three years.

All of this is based on one of the most influential books in shaping the English language, "The Book of Common Prayer." (For more information see this - http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Book_of_Common_Prayer - and related articles.)

Even following this lectionary approach the preacher has a wide terrain from which to pick a verse or passage to base her or his teaching on. I can virtually guarantee that if one of the Hebrew passages or Paul's writings mention the word "circumcision," that will not be chosen as the topic of the sermon.

That's not what I'm doing. I'm taking each teaching in the Gospel of Thomas as it comes. Though, with a few exceptions, the sayings are in no particular order whatsoever.

Here is the teaching we are up to for today.

His students asked,

Is circumcision of
Any help to us?

Yeshua replied,

“If it were your fathers would have
Been born fully circumcised
From their mother's womb.
The only circumcision that will benefit
You at all is spiritual.

I know weeks ahead what sayings from the Gospel of Thomas are coming down the pipeline. When I read this one I thought, “Oh no! How am I going to deal with this? Can you even say the word ‘circumcision’ in church?”

Except for times when the word is read in one of the epistle readings, Paul as we'll see mentions it often, I can't think of ever hearing a sermon on the matter.

The second thing I thought was of a passage from Jim Gaffigan's book, “Dad is Fat.”

I think Gaffigan is one of the funniest comedians I've ever heard or read. He and his wife live in a two-bedroom apartment in Manhattan with their five young children, three of whom are boys. Here is what he writes:

* * *

When you have a boy, you have to deal with the circumcision question. If you are eating a hot dog while reading this book, my apologies. Most men cringe when they hear the word circumcision. “Uh, can you talk about something else, like prison rape?” Circumcision is just a scary word. I looked up circumcision in the dictionary, and it just said: “Owwwww. From the Latin for Ow!”

Everyone will admit circumcision is crazy. The Germans flirted with the idea of making it illegal to circumcise your son. This is impressive, given Germans don’t really have a great record on the human rights front. Obviously, circumcision began as a religious tradition. I don’t know how they even came up with the idea of circumcision, really. I guess there was a meeting at some point.

LEADER: All right, how should we honor God?

GUY #1: I say we don’t eat pork.

LEADER: I don’t know. I like bacon. Anyone got anything else?

GUY #2: What if we cut off part of our penis?

LEADER: [Beat.] Okay, no pork. We’ll go with no pork, and I want Guy #2 removed from the building.

Jeannie told me that in the Bible, Abraham circumcised himself. Wow. I don’t even like clipping my nails. Apparently God told Abraham to do it. I would love to have overhead that conversation.

GOD: Abraham!

ABRAHAM: Oh, hey God.

GOD: I need you to do something for me.

ABRAHAM: Well, sure. You’re God! Whatever you want.

GOD: I need you to circumcise yourself.

ABRAHAM: [Beat.] I think we have a bad connection here. You’re breaking up. Can you send me an e-mail?

When you think about it, God’s requests in the Old Testament took a dramatic leap in difficulty. “Don’t eat that Apple!” “Build a boat!” Then, out of nowhere, “Cut off part of your penis!” I imagine Abraham was like, “Uh, how about I build two boats and no more bananas?”

We have to assume Abraham went through with God's request. I'm not sure how Abraham hid the adjustment from his wife. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he was getting out of the shower and his wife was brushing her teeth.

WIFE: What the hell have you done?

ABRAHAM: Honey, I can explain . . . God told me to do it.

WIFE: What? What if God told you to jump off a bridge? What if God told you to sacrifice our first born son?

ABRAHAM: Actually, I have to talk to you about that one.

* * *

When I was in seminary and we covered this topic, briefly, one of my classmates imagined a different conversation between Abraham and God. It went like this:

ABRAHAM: Okay, let me see if I get this straight. The Arabs get the oil and we have to cut off the end of out what!?"

Or, a minister, a priest and a rabbi are asked to bless a guy's new and expensive car. The minister reads a prayer from the prayer book, the priest shakes some holy water on it and the rabbi cuts off three inches of the tail pipe.

No Jesus scholar thinks that Jesus actually said this. Though it is attributed to Jesus, this actually comes from a later time in the movement's development. You will find this same teaching, stated variously, in the writings of Paul at least four different ways. (See Romans 2:25f, Philippians 3:3, I Corinthians 7:17f, Galatians 6:5)

One of the things I like about this saying is that it does catch, at least for me, the spirit of Jesus as a man who had a quick wit and an ability to be bitingly critical. But, Jesus was a Jew and circumcision was part of Jewish law.

In some form or another the word "circumcise" is used in the collection of writings we call the Bible almost a hundred times. Hebrew law stipulated that every Hebrew male was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. Also, every slave owned by a Hebrew was to be circumcised; as was every resident alien.

Circumcision wasn't exclusive to Hebrews. Egyptians practiced this rite as far back as the 23rd century BC. Jesus defended his healing a man on the Sabbath as not being a violation of the law because a child could be circumcised on the Sabbath.

Although it is mentioned only in Luke's Gospel, Jesus was said to have been taken to the temple and circumcised on the eighth day. I knew I had seen paintings of this all over Europe and I Googled the matter and found nearly fifty such paintings.

(Here images are shown of Rembrandt's and Venetian's famous paintings.)

All of this took place in a culture and religion that was highly patriarchal where women were regarded as objects. Of course, we wouldn't know anything about that in our culture where women are never objectified - or idealized.

As the Jesus movement spread beyond the Jewish people and those called Gentiles were attracted to it, an intense debate arose about whether the Gentile men coming into the movement had to be circumcised. Paul said "no!" and won that argument. However, the Jews in the movement who thought that Jesus was the Messiah they had longed for got so angry with their Jewish brothers who did not agree with them that they eventually rewrote the story of the execution of Jesus by the Romans and made the Jews responsible for it. So the seeds of antisemitism were sown and the harvest has been tragically abundant.

Of course, none of us would know anything of people who started out as one family either biologically or religiously turning on each other.

The teaching that we have in the Gospel of Thomas reflects the stance of Paul's inclusiveness, though still highly patriarchal, where circumcision has become a metaphor for the removal of a person's ignorance.

You come here, I do this work, people get to a point or place in their lives - if they are open to it - where they seek more. The question gets raised, in one form or another, "What must I do to be saved?" That's the way it is put in religious language for many. What must I do to obtain peace of mind? Happiness? Some sense of security or serenity?

Will it do me any good to be circumcised? The answer is, “You already have what you are seeking for.”

This is precisely what Jesus taught. “What you seek is here. The Kingdom of God is already present, spread out all around you. All you have to do is open your eyes and, then, participate in it.”

The mystics of all ages have known this. I think religions have profoundly failed people by mystifying the very notion of mysticism. When we started on this journey through the Gospel of Thomas, I called it “Seeking to Embody the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic.” Taking up this path is to undertake something profoundly paradoxical. This is why non-dual mind is needed. There is nothing we can do to be. However, people who are in the process of being are very likely to be busying do particular things. Just by aping them will not get us where we say we want to go because there is no place to get to. Our task is simply to manifest our already true identity.

Our task is to open ourselves to higher levels of consciousness, always seeking to understand and to include more. Our task is also to be willing to have the faith and trust to go deeper into Sacred Mystery.

Mystics have learned to recognize the God within themselves, in others and in all things and they bring that recognition into concrete reality. This is why they live with no judgment, with forgiveness, love and peace in ordinary life, knowing that it is not ordinary at all.

The Truth is not out there to be found in something you do or believe. Truth is behind your eyes. Meister Eckhart (His real name was Eckhart von Hochheim and is profoundly worth knowing about. See - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meister_Eckhart) has a line I have used many times: “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.” He didn’t just believe that or assent to it. He experienced it. He knew it. When Carl Jung was asked if he believed in God, his answer was, “No. I know God.” This is what is behind the statement of Jesus, “I and the Father are one.”

It is sad to say but I believe true that Western Christianity, with its insistence on believing and belonging has been the perfect breeding ground to create people who can say that they are “atheist” and against organized religion. When Jesus called people “hypocrites,” that word didn’t have the connotation it has now. It simply meant “to be an actor.” Western Christianity has taught people how to act and not how to be.

How do we be? How do we experience what it already true? How do we find what is already there? We have a practice, of course. You knew I would say that. But mostly we do not so much find Sacred Mystery as we allow Sacred Mystery to find us. What this means, I currently believe, is that we live “as if.” This is the trust and faith that Jesus speaks of. We don’t think ourselves into a new way of living. We live ourselves into a new way of thinking. (This is a core teaching of Richard Rohr.)

This teaching in Thomas, and you’ll find it throughout the teaching of Jesus, is that self-worth is not created. It is discovered. We wouldn’t be searching for something if we hadn’t noticed it was already missing.

Let me put all of this a slightly different way. We are already there. We cannot attain Sacred Mystery because we are already totally in the presence of Sacred Mystery. What may be absent is our awareness of this. What you will hear Ilia Delio say, I believe, is that Sacred Mystery is maintaining us in existence with every breath we take. Every breath we take is God choosing us again and again. We have nothing to do or to learn. We do, obviously, need to unlearn some things.

We live in a culture that is in a huge hypnotic trance. There has been, especially since the Brussels terrorist attacks, an amazing amount of fear talk about terrorism. Are we next? The U.S. I mean. The blessed good news is that we have had relatively few terrorist attacks in the U.S., while, and this has not gotten much attention, in 2015 there were 372 mass shootings that killed 475 people and wounded 1,870. I got this information from “The Week” (4/8/2016, p. 5) The article goes on to say, “Americans are far more at risk of dying in a car crash than a terrorist attack, but terrorism is effective precisely because it creates levels of fear that overwhelm reason. ‘We have met they enemy, and he is us.’” We are

sleepwalkers. Wise and useful spiritual practices are intended to help us “wake up.”

This is so hard for us to understand. We want to get more information or knowledge or do something - whatever would be the contemporary equivalent of being circumcised. And, though a spiritual practice is essential, it is not something we do to be. It is something we do to connect to our already Being. Unfortunately, most of the world’s religions most of the time have played a cosmic game of crime and punishment.

Occasionally someone will ask me what they need to do to join this class. The answer is, “Nothing. If you are here, you are a member.”

We are a gathering and we are here, both individually and collectively, to both gain knowledge and information as well as experience wisdom and understanding, about what it means to deepen our journey into Sacred Mystery, grow in our understanding of who we are and to contribute to more compassionate and just world. Though we already have what we are seeking for, we cannot sit idly back. I think that the question for us as individuals and as a collective is not so much what shall we do - will circumcision do us any good? - but where shall we go from here?

Before we go anywhere, we must be clear where we are. In growing in any area of intelligence, we must first know where we are. Where we are now is perfect for where we need to be. Where we are is perfect for the lessons we need to learn in providing for us people and situations who mirror back our current level of consciousness, our fears, our strengths. By paying attention to what “hooks” us, what we are reactive to, we can learn a lot about our Shadow Self.

Sherry and I were talking this week about the importance for us of keeping a gratitude journal. Each of us has done it for decades. I told her that one of the things I have added to my daily practice is that of having a prayer list.

After hearing Ilia Delio talk about “Divine Entanglement” and how everything is connected, and because a series of people have specifically asked me to pray for them (an illustration of Divine Entanglement!), I decided to keep a written prayer list. On it are names of people I bring to mind every day. She asked me, and

women are so much wiser and astute than men, “Is Donald Trump on that list?” No, but someone very like him. Knowing who and what closes our hearts is very valuable information.

Second, we must learn to listen. The great mystics have developed the capacity to hear God, or Sacred Mystery, speak to them. We are very good at talking. Not so good as discerning, listening, being still and knowing.

Third, we must work hard on ourselves. One master has called the spiritual path “manual labor.” Jesus talked about it as putting your shoulder to the plow and not looking back. He said the way was difficult. Western Christianity has deluded millions of people by saying, “Come join our group, believe our stuff. It won’t cost you anything. All you have to do is believe these three things.” Nonsense. Read the teachings of Jesus. I think of the sacrifices people make to win Olympic Gold Medals. That’s the kind of work I’m talking about.

Forth, we must be patient. Wait. Waiting in the biblical sense is a non-dual experience of, on the one hand, standing on tiptoe eagerly anticipating the dawn on a new day barely able to contain ourselves and, at the same time, resting back, confident that everything is and will be all right, like a farmer waiting for a crop to come in.

The ego wants to push and shove and get things done now. War and terrorism is ego at its extreme trying violently to force things to go our way. Many people I know are in a perpetual state of war within themselves. The Kingdom of God inwardly or outwardly is not under our control.

Fifth, we must find a community of people who think like we do, who are serious about the spiritual matters we value and are moving in the same direction we are. One of my first and most important spiritual teachers cautioned me always to be in relationship with someone to whom I could submit my self-understanding for correction, someone to whom I could speak the truth about what is going on with me at the Self or Soul level.

Finally, we should stay clear about who we are. We already have that for which we seek. We are already, according to Jesus, sons and daughters of God, loved and safe.

Spiritual work is not about getting any of these things. We already have them. Spiritual work is designed to help us become conscious of who we already are, what we already have. And, to make ourselves better vehicles for the expression of God's love, compassion and justice on this earth.

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