

## Clear and Confusing, Confusing and Clear: Asking For What You Want

Jesus, the Jewish Mystic whose teachings I have been basing these talks on, was both clean and confusing in what he taught. Or, he was confusing and clear - which may be, if we add that phrase, a more non-dual mind way to put it.

For example, one of his clear teachings was and is:

Those seeking will find  
what they are looking for.  
Doors will swing open  
for the ones who knock.

This is the teaching in the Gospel of Thomas we are up to in going through this marvelous collection of sayings. This teaching shows up in a variety of ways all through both the Jesus narratives and in this collection of sayings. Indeed, the second saying in the Gospel of Thomas and the one we looked at just two teachings before this one clearly emphasize the importance, in spiritual work and practice, of asking for what you want.

Indeed, as far as I can find out, this teaching, and the ones that go along with it, are in all Sacred Texts from all traditions. If there is anything you want, ask for it. If there is anything you want to find, look for it. If there is some area of life - either in the inner world or the outer world, knock on that door and it will be opened to you.

The teachings could not be clearer.

Nor, could they, at least on the surface, be more confusing. Because, when Jesus himself was asked questions, he didn't answer them. And, when he himself asked things like "Let this cup pass from me" or "My God, My God why have you forsaken me?" - apt for this season of the liturgical year, he got no answer. Confusing.

Several people have asked me in one way or another, "How do biblical scholars know what Jesus did and didn't say?"

For starters, I recommend that you get a copy of “The Five Gospels.” (You can buy a copy from Amazon for \$20 - and, it contains The Gospel of Thomas.) This book contains a very readable guide to how biblical scholars rate the sayings of Jesus all the way from -

Jesus undoubtedly said this or something like it.

Jesus probably said something like this.

Jesus did not say this, but the ideas contained in it are close to his own.

Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.

This only covers the “sayings” attributed to Jesus. The acts of Jesus, some of which are significantly more important than anything he said, are covered in another book.

So how do we know what Jesus said and did? The Jesus scholars use five criteria for making their determinations. In the interest of contributing to religious literacy, I’d like to say what these are.

The first criterion is multiple attestation. If a saying or deed of Jesus is in several early and independent sources, it is likely historical. The feeding of the multitude is one such example as this story appears six times in the gospels. On the other hand almost all the sayings in John’s gospel appear only in John. Almost no recognized biblical scholar sees John as historical. It is a mystical document. More about mysticism in a moment.

The second criteria is embarrassment. If a saying or deed is in the early documents that the early church would feel obligated to explain later, it is likely historical. One example of this is Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. If he is the Messiah, why? The other, of course, is the crucifixion. Saviors don’t get executed.

The third criteria is what they call coherence. That is, something might appear in only one source but be so consistent with other teachings of Jesus that it is considered authentic. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is an example of this; it appears only in Luke. For the Jews of Jesus day it is an embarrassing story.

The fourth criteria is dissimilarity. If Jesus is quoted as saying or doing something that no other teacher or the later church said, that is likely authentic. For example, no Jew of Jesus day would refer to God as “Abba,” which means “Daddy.”

The fifth criteria is called by the scholars “historical continuity.” What this means is that the church, over the years, has had the tendency to create a “pretty” picture of Jesus. In his teaching, for example, what he likely said was “blessed are the poor.” As the church gained in power and wealth, someone heard Jesus to have said, “Blessed are the poor - in spirit.” That addition is not historically continuous with what we know about the spirit of Jesus, the man.

The saying that we are looking at today falls into the category of multiple attestation. It is not only found multiple places it is also part of the stance of trust and faith demonstrated by Jesus. The church very early made faith into something else. So, though it this sort of academic information about the historicity of Jesus, his deeds and sayings is vitally important; if it stops there, so what?

I’m also not just interested in why it was that some people who were with Jesus, who heard what he said, who saw what he did, claimed to have experienced in him, God. Though that interests me more.

What I’m interested in is what that experience was like. What happened to those people? If I were to believe in the God Jesus talked about and prayed to, in what sort of God would I believe? More, how would that affect my life? What was it about this man that caused some who came in contact with him to say that through him they had come to know God in a more authentic way? Can that be available to us?

Jesus clearly taught to ask for what we want, to be continually seeking - this is such a repeated teaching - and to knock on what appear to be closed doors and they will open to us.

My hunch is that most of us have had disappointing experiences with this.

Like some of you I was brought up, as they say, in a religious, church attending family. Early on I heard the teaching, which is in the Jesus collection, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Be moved into the sea’ and it will go.” I tried that a couple of times and concluded that I didn’t have much faith.

What Jesus is teaching in all of these sayings is something about trust. If we trust that we are connected to, entangled with the Sacred, everything is okay, we are safe. This does not mean that the ego always gets what it wants or that we are in control.

Jesus encouraged those who followed him to switch from the fixing, fully understanding and controlling mode to the trusting, listening and allowing mode.

The mystics understand that God is in everything. (Jesus was a Jewish mystic.) They teach about this spiritual reality in ways that can be confusing and, even, frightening when we hear these teachings at the ego level. This doesn’t mean that we cannot work to change things. Quite the contrary. It means that we step into the present moment as simply being “what is.” We trust the moment and if there are changes that have to be made, can be made, we make them in the appropriate, calm and positive way modeled by Jesus. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the prayer that best reflects this. It is the one adopted and used by AA.

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

This is what characterizes a mature believer in any tradition.

This is what faith is. Organized religion, operating from the level of the ego, made faith into believing doctrines to be true. Believing doctrines to be true requires no ego-surrender. Quite the opposite.

The faith Jesus taught and demonstrated is: God is good, God can be trusted, God is actively involved in my life, even when I can’t see it.

In addition to the mistake the church made by stressing that faith is believing the correct doctrines another unfortunate thing occurred when mysticism was distorted to mean something relegated to some distant realm available to only a very few. Mysticism simply means experiential knowledge of spiritual things. It is not academic knowledge, second hand knowledge or even church knowledge. Most Christian expressions of religion, both Catholic and Protestant, have actually discouraged people from taking a mystical path by teaching people not to trust their inner authority or experience. Rather, people have been taught to trust outer authority - the church or the Bible.

I keep coming back again and again to the way Jesus healed people. He said, "I do not let your outer circumstances define you for me and if you have faith in the you that I see in you, you will realize your wholeness." He said this to people who had made no dogmatic affirmations of faith, who did not think he was God, who certainly did not pass any moral checklist, and more often than not did not belong to the correct group.

In this asking, seeking, knocking process what is required of us?

The first thing required is to wake up to what is. I know, I know, we all think we are so awake, present and aware.

Wendell Berry, a poet whom I consider one of the mystics of our time wrote:

Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,  
as in love or sleep, hold  
them to their way, clear  
in the ancient faith: what we need  
is here. And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye  
clear. What we need is here.

Of course, if we are not here, we won't know that. One of the greatest moments in a person's life is when we decide to show up. When we desire to move from sleep-walking to wakefulness. We have our spiritual aspirations and we have the lives we live. I aspire to know God, to live in ever widening and deeper circles of peace, love and joy. That's on one hand. And, on the other hand is the way I live my daily life. In spiritual work, we want these hands to meet so that there is no space between them. To arrive at what is already here, we need some skills.

I ran across a great quote by Yogi Berra this week that I had never heard before. You may remember Yogi Berra who was catcher and then coach for the Yankees years ago. He was known for his colorful sayings that made your brain sore. He said things like:

You can observe a lot just by watching.

Half the lies they tell about me aren't true.

That place is so popular no one goes there any more.

Ninety percent of this game is half mental

The one that was new to me this week is:

In theory there is no difference between theory and practice.

In practice there is.

We can't wish ourselves awake. We have to work at it. To be present, aware and awake requires some sort of practice that will, to use Berry's words, enable the heart to be quiet and the eye to be clear. I cannot simply wish to know God or to widen and deepen peace, love and joy in my life and it will become so. We can't use the ego to move beyond the ego. As Kathleen Singh says, "We don't need to change the circumstances of our lives, necessarily; we simply need to insert the causes of transformation into them."

I've been doing this work for decades. Every authentic religious and spiritual path I've studied offers a practice and teaches that we will likely not awaken without

one. We can call ourselves “spiritual and not religious,” we can even become kinder and wiser people but it is, according to all I’ve read and experienced, not likely we will awaken without a daily practice.

In the literature I’ve seen books, mostly from the Eastern religious perspective, that refer to things like “parenting as a spiritual practice” or “gardening as a spiritual practice” and, no doubt, we can bring higher levels of awareness to these undertakings. But those activities in and of themselves are unable to transform and free our minds.

Jesus walked through the world with clarity and compassion. His practice was what he called “prayer.” Whatever you choose to call it, each of us needs a practice that allows us to look at the workings of our own minds. As one of my teachers put it long ago, “We need a practice we can sustain that will sustain us.” Why? Because we are all, if we are lucky, heading toward that territory where we will get sick, grow old and die. These things just don’t happen to other people. When we or our loved one gets handed over to cancer or senility or immobility, it will be too late to do a crash course in mindfulness.

The awakened state, the Kingdom of God, is already here. It is only our unruly egos that block our seeing this and experiencing this. To practice is to see, to ask, to knock.

I came up with a phrase, I think it is original with me, years ago in doing clinical work. We have “habits of the mind” that keep us ensnared in the same repetitive patterns over and over. Until we put actions into our intention we are all addicted to these “habits of the mind” that give us the same life-experience over and over. We apply solutions that don’t work over and over. That’s nuts. We want to awaken into clarity and sanity.

Everybody says that what they want is “peace of mind.” But, and Richard Rohr was the first one I heard say this, “When you are in your mind, you are never at peace, and when you are at peace, you are never in your mind.” What the Buddhist call the Noble Path can be found in the teachings of the Christian mystics but for at least 800 years it has been lost in most of organized Christian religion. Borrow

from Buddhism. Borrow the path to walk and borrow the practice that provides the foundation for it.

And, have at least one, if not more, person you can talk to about what your intention is: what you are seeking, asking for, where you are knocking. We want to grow older and wiser, not just older. We need to become elders, not just elderly. This is a gift we can offer to each other and the world.

I hope you understand that having a spiritual practice isn't about becoming a good person, or nice, or boring. Or, as one of my mother's favorite admonitions to me, "Now, William, be sweet." It is about becoming free, about becoming loving, about realizing our wholeness, about being free from ignorance.

My first teacher said, "You have two ways to be in this world. Just two. You can be reactive. Or, you can be proactive." As the spiritual beings that we are, we want to be proactive to everyone and everything, especially ourselves, with peace, love and joy. It does not get any simpler or better than this.

We have to work to be involved in the process of getting to the place where we already are.

We know now from the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of Buddha, from people like John of the Cross who talked about various "nights" of the soul, Teresa of Avila who talked about various "mansions" people move through, Jim Finley who talks about various gates we follow the mystics through, the works of Piaget, James Fowler, Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, Carol Gilligan, Bill Plotkin and others (all of these we have talked about at one time or another), that there is a clear direction to the life and living, a life of compassion and kindness, that the spiritual masters talk about.

We also know that though this is our true identity we have not realized it yet. So we work to attain what we already have knowing that we can't attain it because it is a gift. Clear? Confusing?

Unless we have a way to chart this journey into wholeness, we have no way of knowing where we are in the developmental process. This is, thank God, the work of a life time.

I think this ought to be the church's main business; to create whole and whole-making people.

Given all of this, how are we to live with this clear and confusing, confusing and clear spirituality? What is to be our life-style?

My answer at the moment is that we must, absolutely must, develop the spiritual skill of patience. Patience is not a character trait. Patience is a skill.

The biblical word for patience, at least one of them, is “wait.” It is, “wait” is, perhaps the most characteristic word of biblical faith. The Hebrew Scriptures are punctuated with this word.

There is an exquisite passage from the Psalms: “I wait for the Lord, My soul waits. In God's word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning. I say, more than they that watch for the morning.”

Or, take this favorite: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.”

The Christian Scriptures are likewise full of waiting. In the Jesus narratives the disciples are told, as nearly the last thing they will hear from Jesus, “Go to Jerusalem and wait.”

The whole thing seems like some sort of spiritual waiting game and it is. And, until we know how to play it, we don't know what the story is all about or our part in it.

The problem is that we don't know, most of us, how to wait. Nothing in our culture supports it. We want what we want and we want it now. When Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous letter from a Montgomery jail cell, he entitled it, “Why We Can't Wait.”

Like most else that is wise and useful in the spiritual life waiting is paradoxical and contradictory in its meaning.

On the one hand waiting is full of a lot of tension and excitement. Like the eager longing, the passionate waiting of a child at Christmas time. That's the way it is in that beautiful psalm passage: "I wait for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning." You can see the watchman passionately eager for the night to pass, alert to every passing noise, looking for the dawn.

It is a word for us, you know. We ought to be restless, impatient with the way things are, throwing ourselves into the struggle for peace and justice both within our own hearts and in the world where we live. Because if we don't seize and shape things, who will?

But the word "wait" means something else, too. It is a quiet, meditative, passive kind of waiting. It is the kind of waiting that you do in the face of the silence of God or when you are having the experience of God's absence. "They that wait for the Lord shall renew their strength."

This may be the kind of waiting we most need to learn. Our ancestors in the faith, I'm speaking of our Jewish ancestors, experienced a lot of this kind of waiting on their journey from bondage to freedom, from darkness to light, from death to life. Forty years the story says. Forty years! It is the part of the story where life is experienced as just one damned ordinary day after another. And it did seem to be damned for them, with no word, no hint, not even a whisper to indicate God's presence, much less that God cared. It was this dogged-hanging-on-for-dear-life that kept the people of God faithful to God as each day doggedly followed the next and all that was visible to them was the silence of the stars.

We need to know how to do this kind of waiting. It is what we need when we fall into the trap of being disappointed because God is not doing things on our schedule or to our liking and rubbing our face into the fact that we are not in control. We need the realism of knowing that the peace, joy and abundant life Jesus talked about turned out to be a Roman prison for Paul, a crucifixion for Peter, stoning for

Stephen and countless others who had voiced their hopeful expectancy in the fervent prayer, “Thy kingdom come.”

We have each been gifted with an unexpected birth. We each await an unwanted death. In the meantime, what? We develop the faith and resources of knowing that in the meantime we are safe.

On the one hand there is the passionate expectancy that sends us out of here into the world to do the acts of peace, love, joy and justice that is the desire Sacred Mystery wishes to find expression through our lives and living. God is out there ahead of us, you understand this is poetic language, and you and I live out of breath trying to keep up with God, waiting to see where God is going next, confident that the kingdom for which we wait is already present as we climb out on the growing edge of the future.

And, at the same time we wait with the willingness to accept a certain not having and not knowing, willing to leave the end of the story in God’s hands.

It is not one kind of waiting at one time and the other kind at another. It is both together at the same time. It is passionate expectancy on the one hand and standing with awe in the presence of absolute mystery on the world.

Ask, seek, knock.

When Jim Finley was a young monk at the monastery of Gethsemane, he shared with Thomas Merton, his spiritual director, his frustration, his confusion at his seemingly inept efforts to get what he was asking for, find what he was seeking, to have doors opened to him. Merton responded to him: “How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun.”

Not that we don’t need to continue to ask, seek and know. But, by our own efforts alone we cannot achieve spiritual growth. All we can do, must do, is bring ourselves into the Light, where Sacred Mystery's grace ripens us.

Or, as my spiritual teacher said to me decades ago:

When we walk to the edge of all the light we have and take that step into the darkness of the unknown, we must have the faith that one of two things will happen: There will be something solid for us to stand on or we will be taught to fly.

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