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Don't Worry. Be Happy.

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The title I've given this talk today is - Don't Worry. Be Happy!

Today's talk is going to begin in the territory of theological technicality, meander through an amusing landscape of religious ridiculousness and end up in, hopefully, solid and comforting truth that will contribute to your living life with a heart as light as a feather.

We begin with William James.

(I encourage you to read this article about him - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_James)

William James, whether you are aware of him or not, has had an influence on your life. Born in 1842, this graduate of Harvard, has had an profound influence on Western Philosophy and our understanding of religion. It was not, and likely is not possible now, to graduate from any credible school of theology in this country, or perhaps in Europe, without being required to read James' book, "Varieties of Religious Experience."

I have in my library numerous books with some of his most outstanding, at least to me, lines underscored and notebooks filled with ancient lecture notes where my professors quoted him.

Here are a few of my favorites:

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Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.

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The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.

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The world we see that seems so insane is the result of a belief system that is not working. To perceive the world differently, we must be willing to change our belief system, let the past slip away, expand our sense of now, and dissolve the fear in our minds.

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It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult task which, more than anything else, will affect its successful outcome.

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The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.

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Acceptance of what has happened is the first step to overcoming the consequences of any misfortune.

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Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.

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A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.

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There's nothing so absurd that if you repeat it often enough, people will believe it.

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Though he was trained as a physician, James is better known as a philosopher and psychologist. Indeed, he was the first person to offer a course in psychology in the United States. He is one of the most frequently cited psychologists of the 20th century. His two most influential books are his groundbreaking text, "The Principles of Psychology" and, the the required reading when I was in graduate school, "The Varieties of Religious Experience." He wrote a lot. Someone compiled a bibliography of his writings. It is 47 pages long!

I begin with William James today because his definition of religion has been one that has guided me in one way or another since I first read it. Here it is:

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Religion, in the original sense of the word - re-ligare - to re-connect - is the attempt to be in harmony with the unseen order of things.

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When most people hear or use the word "religion" this is not what comes to mind. What comes to mind is a church building, a denominational label, a set of beliefs of practices - things like this. This is understandable because every effort we make to connect or re-connect with the unseen order of things must reside within some framework. What ends up for many, many people who call themselves "religious" in this world is that they argue over the validity or rightness of their framework without seriously assessing whether they are connected with what is that unseen order or not. Received tribal teachings are accepted by many without question as "the truth."

I truly want when happens in here and between us to contribute to our being in harmony with the unseen order of things.

How can we break through the walls created by this illusion?

One of the ways, I think, is with a sense of humor.

Among those of us who actually work for religious institutions, there is an underground treasure-trove of stories having to do with open-mike gaffs, sermonic

bloopers, errors in church newsletters and orders of service and, horror of horrors!, in children's sermons.

The worst open mike story, and I swear this is true, that I know of is of the minister who, after a wedding retreated to the sacristy to disrobe while the wedding party returned to the sanctuary for the traditional after-wedding photographs. The minister said, with his mike still on, to one of the Wedding Guild assistants, "Good grief! I thought all brides were supposed to be beautiful."

Just the simple matter of leaving out a single letter in a word can make a ton of difference. After we switched to the e-mail list provider we are currently using and I was just getting the hang of the program, I sent more than one Preview or Summary out to the "Ordinary Lie" group.

This appeared in a church bulletin: Thursday night, potluck supper. Prayer and medication to follow.

Or, this: At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be "What is Hell?" Come early and listen to our choir practice.

Scouts are saving aluminum cans, bottles, and other items to be recycled. Proceeds will be used to cripple children.

The outreach committee has enlisted 25 visitors to make calls on people who are not afflicted with any church.

The Ladies Bible Study will be held Thursday morning at 10. All ladies are invited to the Fellowship Hall after the B.S. is done.

Ushers will eat latecomers.

The choir invites any member of the congregation who enjoys sinning to join the choir.

Weight Watchers will meet at 7 p.m. Please use the large double door at the side entrance.

Then, of course, there are the outdoor signs that some churches put out for people to see. I've taken some and had some sent to me.
(Go to the Ordinary Life website to see these.)

Now is a good time to visit. Our pastor is on vacation.

Best sausage supper in St. Louis. Come and eat Pastor Thomas Ressler.

Don't Let Worry Kill You. Come and Let The Church Help.

There is not enough time to recite all the tragedies that have occurred during children's sermons. Children's sermons are bad ideas. Period.

You know what a children's sermon is, right? One of the ministers invites the children to come forward and sit on the chancel steps while he or she gives them a simplified version of the day's sermon or an easy-to-understand interpretation of the text for the day.

Once, for example, the text was on prayer so the children were invited forward and told about prayer and the importance of praying for people. The minister concluded his remarks and said something like, "So, it is important that we pray for people, especially people in need. For example, for people who are sick or in the hospital. Do any of you know of anyone in the hospital?" One little girl shot her hand up and the minister asked, "You know someone in the hospital?" The little girl said, "Yes, my mommy is in the hospital for surgery." The minister was stunned. He thought he knew his congregation well and was unaware of any problem with this particular family. Reflexively, he said, "Really? What's she in the hospital for?" "She's having a boob job."

I have a dear friend who was a Methodist minister in a somewhat similar position as mine. He was in private practice and connected to a Methodist church in the city where he practiced and lived. One Sunday he was asked to give the sermon at the University Methodist Church, so named because it was virtually on the campus of the University of Washington in Seattle. One of the lectionary readings for that Sunday was the Gospel where it is stated that Jesus taught in parables. That was

going to be his sermon theme. He decided that he would make the children's sermon be about riddles. A riddle, he thought, was close enough to a parable to explain the concept to children.

When time came for the children's sermon he invited the children forward and he asked them if any of them knew what a riddle was. No hands went up. He explained that a riddle was like a word puzzle. It sounded like it meant one thing but could actually mean something else entirely. He said to them that an example of a riddle, perhaps the best one he could think of, was this: "What is black and white and red/read all over?" He was hoping they all knew that the answer was, "A newspaper." A newspaper is black and white and read all over. No hands went up.

Finally, one little girl raised her hand and with relief he stuck the microphone in front of her little face. She said as a question, "Two nuns in a chainsaw fight?"

He said the congregation never recovered, that there were explosions of nervous laughter that broke out all over the congregation for the rest of the service - what there was of it.

A colleague of mine was going to give a sermon on the value of work and frugality so he decided to use the squirrel as an example of those qualities.

He called all the children to the chancel and sat them on the steps and began to talk about an animal that worked very hard storing nuts in the Fall so it would have food for the winter months. He described the animal as having a bushy tail and being able to climb trees. Then, he asked the children what animal they thought it was.

In a group like that, you have two types of children. First, those who wave their hands frantically in the air hoping you will call on them for the answer. Or, second, a group of very shy and timid children who are hesitant to speak out for fear of being wrong. He had that type of a group that day. Finally, one little boy raised his hand and he was called on. The boy said into the microphone, "I know the answer is Jesus but it sounds like a squirrel to me."

"I know the answer is Jesus but . . ."

Religion ought to be about reconnecting us with the unseen order of things but it has in so many places and for many people become not merely ridiculous but also dangerous and damaging. That it has become, on the one hand, so superficial and shallow and, on the other, so destructive, is causing more and more people to give up on seeking and following a truly wise and useful spiritual path altogether. Lenny Bruce, a comedian popular in my young adulthood, once said, "Every day people are staying away from church and going back to God."

The religious arena in which I live and move is that labeled "Christianity." I say "labeled" because there is wide disagreement on what it means to be Christian. When the Christian movement became concerned with making Jesus into its God and making sure everybody believed that Jesus was God, the movement also began to ignore his very practical and clear teachings. Christianity has not been known for loving its enemies or building bridges. Just this week someone sent me two telling pictures. One of the Pope and one of Creflow Dollar. The Pope is in his Fiat and Creflow Dollar is in his Lamborghini. Quite a contrast.

Thank God for this Pope. He is changing the religious conversation all over the world.

I was moved to tears this week by the video of the Pope walking into the senate chambers to address congress. You might be aware that it is not allowed for anyone to touch the Pope except at his instigation. Two body guards walked beside him as he went forward to give his address. Three short years ago, though it goes back to the president campaign of 2004, the Vatican said that John Kerry should not be allowed to take communion because of his stance on abortion. There was even talk that he be excommunicated. As he approached the podium, the Pope stopped and shook one person's hand - John Kerry's.

So much of Christianity's history has been about arguing about the truth of various doctrine - which asks absolutely nothing of us. Besides, no one ever wins at these matters. All it leads to is division.

You know that in Christian writings, the early church was referred to as "the bride of Christ." One of the funny lines Shane Claiborne got off at the recent conference

where we heard him speak was that Jesus is coming back to be with his bride, not a harem. Yet, the church is splintered into a multitude of groups each claiming superiority for its doctrinal position.

The crucial questions of wise and useful spirituality are first of all psychological and personal, here and now. The teachings of Jesus are about finding freedom and love here and now. Whatever else Jesus taught about what he called “the kingdom of God” was that it is here and now, around and within us. The church made it about something off out in the distance somewhere. Richard Rohr teaches that this “huge misplacement of attention, anesthetized and weakened the actual transformative power of Christianity.” It got moved not only to later but only for a few.

Consequently, when people do now hear the teachings of Jesus they get rejected out of hand. Even people who remain in the church look at or listen to the teachings of Jesus and say things like, “That’s just not part of the real world.” “That might have been true and useful at one time but not now.” You could not find a more perfect example of this than the teaching from the Gospel of Thomas we are up to for today and which has been the impetus for my starting with William James and spending time with the funny, and hopefully disarming, stuff. Here it is -

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Do not spend your time
from one day to the next
worrying about your
outer appearance, what you will wear and
what you look like.

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How well do you think this will play in this culture?

Among most people who call themselves “Christian”?

Even among those who say about themselves, “I’m spiritual but not religious”?

Jesus was not talking about wardrobe choices here. He was teaching something about God, about Sacred Mystery.

What he was teaching, I believe, was that the God who gave Jesus his identity - as in "I am the child of God and so are you" - was not a god who was, or is, enmeshed in and allied to systems of wealth, family, religion or nation. Here is what I think this teaching means: It is what we put at the center of our lives that determines how we define and experience security, guidance, wisdom and power.

Security is one's sense of worth, identity and self-esteem.

Guidance is one's sense of direction and the principles by which one lives.

Wisdom is the perspective one has on life.

Power is one's ability to act.

If, for example, we put money at the center of our lives, that gives one outcome.

If we put being an esteemed member of the tribe at the center, that gives another.

Family was a crucial focus of life in the time of Jesus. But, he rejected family as a core value. Many people in our time who stress "family values" as being central to being what their definition of Christian is, clearly aren't familiar with the Jesus who when told, "Your mother, brothers and sisters are outside and want to talk to you," looked about at the people who were listening to him and said, "These are my mother, my brothers and sisters." Then he added the kicker, "Those who do the will of my father." He didn't say, "Those who believe the right things about me."

As you know, Jesus referred to God as "daddy." That's what the word "abba" means. He was not endorsing a male view of God. Abba is a term that seeks to define a relationship. Many people have an "I - it" relationship to whatever they mean by God. God is an object out there somewhere that one either does or does not believe in. "Do you believe in God?" What Jesus is teaching is more like what the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber referred to as an "I - Thou" relationship.

This provides us with a very different understanding both of Sacred Mystery and our relationship with Sacred Mystery. It means both that God is approachable, not to be feared, and that God is everywhere. The mighty power that created, and continues to create, all that is and all who are can be safely approached. As Jim Finley puts it, "I am not God. But, I am not other than God either."

This couple had been married for many years. They lived out on a farm. One day they were coming back from their shopping. Henry was driving the pickup truck. Martha was seated far over on the other side, scrunched up against the passenger door. She said, "Henry, do you remember when we were first together and courting?"

"Yep."

"We used to sit close together when we would go places in the truck. Sometimes you would put your arm around me, or your hand on my leg. Occasionally, you would even kiss me. Remember?"

"Yep."

Then he added, "Wasn't me who moved."

Same in our relationship with Sacred Mystery. If we experience distance, it wasn't God who moved.

God is a caring, guiding, providing parent who loves all her children, even those who have gone astray.

There is nothing we have to do or believe to be in God's loving presence. We don't go to God. God doesn't come to us. God is all-inclusive and everywhere.

All people everywhere belong to this God. This God is on no one's side. This God does not participate in acts of aggression or violence. Like a good parent God wills and seeks the good of all. How does God do this? Through the acts of love, kindness, compassion and justice we carry out.

One of the things I want to accomplish in my teaching is to keep reminding anyone who shows up that the church's emphasis on being saved as having something to do with believing right things or going to heaven when you die is about as far from the teaching of Jesus as you can get. Being saved is being open to life as it is. Being saved is loving and living like Jesus wanted and wants people to love and live. The way to this life, to this being saved, is no secret except in the fact that it consists of truths about ourselves and others and life that we ourselves keep hiding from ourselves.

So, here it is again:

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Do not spend your time
from one day to the next
worrying about your
outer appearance, what you will wear and
what you look like.

* * *

It is almost impossible for us to comprehend the kind of world in which Jesus lived. Or, his lifestyle. It was such a precarious world that scholars say the most authentic line of his is found in what we call "the Lord's Prayer" where he says, "Give us bread for today." It was a desperate plea with no Central Market just blocks away by air-conditioned car.

What does it mean not to be anxious?

Well, one of the things that is true is that worry doesn't accomplish a thing. Worry is like a superstition. "If I worry about something, it won't happen." I can still hear my mother saying, "Call me when you get home. I'm going to worry about you until I hear from you."

Of course, something much more than that is going on here.

The religion of Jesus' day was one of fear. In a belonging system if you didn't belong, you might as well be dead - or could be. There were hundreds and hundreds of laws, rules and regulations that one had to follow to be part of the "in group." You are aware that Jesus flaunted and broke these rules all the time.

I'm willing to wager that if you grew up in a religion, it was pretty much fear based. I know that mind was. Of course, I was okay because I belonged to the right group. Just insane. Iliia Delio said that God is synonymous with "the Big Bang" which happened some 13.8 billion years ago. It is just insane to believe that God waited until there were Southern Baptists in Tennessee to say something.

There is nothing more upsetting to many people than to remove the element of fear from religion. To announce that there is no hell is not seen by some people as "good news."

One of the things Jesus is teaching here is that when it comes to God and living in God's realm, there is nothing to be afraid of.

The ego cannot hear this. The dualistic mind cannot hear this.

We cannot use the ego to change the ego and the church has been full of egomaniacal misbehavior. Like celibate priests focusing on birth control and abortion, heterosexuals seeing gay marriage as the ultimate threat to society, liberals invested in some current political correctness while living lives of rather total isolation from the actual suffering of this world, Bible thumpers ignoring most of the Bible when it asks them to change, a nation of immigrants being anti-immigration. The ego is still in charge, and it just wears different disguises on both the Left and the Right. (I got these words from a talk I heard Richard Rohr give.)

Jesus is not advising people to live imprudently. Indeed, elsewhere in his teachings he explicitly invites people to consider the cost of any venture they undertake. He is talking here about the values by which one actually lives. Not self-centeredness and an avoidance of personal responsibility but a willingness to be embraced by God's love.

Whereas our culture teaches us to see and be afraid of the enemies and adversaries that are “out there,” Jesus emphasizes that the things to be concerned about are inner issues - anger, jealousy, arrogance and ignorance.

Though it was inevitable that it become an organized movement, Jesus never intended what he taught to become a religion. Rather, it was to be a way of life. Jesus spoke of no left or right, practiced no politics - except to be a trouble maker and against the system, committed no acts of violence no matter how justified. His embrace of humanity included everyone, though he did have harsh words to say about the ungenerous rich and the self-righteously religious. The daily practice he encouraged was to remain childlike, grateful, loving and endlessly forgiving.

Whereas religion seeks to control, Jesus seeks to set people free. The hope of Jesus was not to make people religious or right but to help people see and know their true identity and then to live that identity in the world.

Living in the Kingdom of God doesn't mean living either dumb or numb. It means to live with trust. Trust doesn't mean that we idly sit back and let the future take care of itself. We are to live in ways that reflect that we “got the message” of God's love for everyone. It means not being ignorant. To follow Jesus means asking whether we are creating a safer and better and more abundant future for the children of this world. This teaching is about putting a trusting love in the driver's seat of our lives.

As you may be aware, I came up - with Jim Finley's guidance - a definition of spiritual practice a few weeks ago that I have been using every Sunday. Here it is:

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A daily practice is that which we habitually enter into with our whole heart in which we assume the inner stance that offers the least resistance to our being overtaken by the experience of Sacred Mystery which we are powerless by our own efforts to obtain.

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It took me twenty years to “get this.”

As a result of living with teachings from the Gospel of Thomas, especially this one, I have come up with what, to me, are the two central questions or matters of faith.

Again, the teachings of Jesus are not about what people believe but how they behave.

At the moment, the questions of faith to me are two:

First, can we bless our neighbors? Can we bless our neighbors in this multicultural neighborhood we call the world for who they are and not just for who we wish they were?

Second, can we give ourselves to constructing lives where we are not distracted by petty issues over which we have little or not control and, rather, pay attention to what feeds our soul?

Our culture is full of things that not only do not feed the soul but, rather, insult it: boredom, cruelty, violence, a cold unresponsiveness, self-absorbed narcissism, addictions of all sorts, war, the insane greed of empire, dumbing-down, religious exclusivity. Whatever keeps the Self from moving forward on its path toward freedom and love are blasphemous insults.

Jesus taught and lived the truth that God protects us from nothing but sustains us in everything. In this teaching he is saying, “Don’t get distracted. It’s okay to bet your life on God’s love. Do that and everything else will take care of itself.”

Don't worry. Be Happy.

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