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Bucket List Morality

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We are spiritual beings seeking to have an experience of being human.

We are human beings - not human “doings” or human “havings” - which is what our culture seeks to seduce us into believing - we are human beings seeking to experience our spiritual nature in the living of Ordinary Life.

This is what mysticism is. Mysticism is the human longing, that is infinitely deep and as long as human consciousness, that seeks to experience the Sacred in Ordinary Life.

That is what we are attempting to do in these times together and I have been using The Gospel of Thomas as a road map to guide us along the way. Actually, the road map analogy is not accurate because the sayings in the Gospel of Thomas are not logically connected. The Gospel of Thomas is nothing like the Gospels most people are used to. It is not a narrative. The Gospel of Thomas is more like land mines that we step on along the way. They they are designed to disturb, to upset. After all, that was the purpose of Jesus. He didn't come saying, “You guys are doing a great job. Let me organize a fund-raiser to keep you going.”

Jesus wanted to break through things as they were to a much larger view. He wanted to move from an understanding of God, as if God could be understood, as a “being” out there, uninvolved, who needed appeasing. Jesus wanted to move people to an understanding of Sacred Mystery as being infinite and safe love.

Jesus was a history maker. It is stunning how many of his followers, or people who claim to be, seem to want to be history stoppers. They use God, Jesus and religion as a way to protect their own interests and the status quo. At times they seem to want to destroy the very world that brought them into being and that sustains them. Many of them are nice people. Some of them are like members of ISIS. Nice or not, they are very frightened and frightening people.

What they are missing is the foundational virtue, and this talk is going to be about virtue and morality, what they are missing is the foundational virtue of courage. Without courage faith, hope and love do not stand a chance.

It seems to just fly under the radar that there are people who claim to admire Jesus yet who seem to lack the courage to do what he did and that is to live without the reassurance of any religious system. The only safety net that Jesus talked about was God's love and mercy and not what you believed or what group you belonged to.

Let me say a couple of things about the Gospel of Thomas.

The Gospel of Thomas is part of a discovery of ancient manuscripts that was made in 1945. Most of the manuscripts are considered to be part of what is referred to in biblical scholarship as Gnostic writings. We haven't talked about Gnosticism in here yet but we will. These writings are referred to as the Nag Hammadi Library because they were found near a town in Egypt by that name, Nag Hammadi. This discovery of manuscripts is frequently confused with another discovery that began around the same time and which was a much larger find; that of what is called the Dead Sea Scrolls near the city of Qumran near the Dead Sea.

The Nag Hammadi discovery consists of about 45 manuscripts, if you eliminate the duplicates. The Dead Sea Scrolls consist of over 800 documents and date much earlier than the Nag Hammadi collection. The Dead Sea Scrolls are mostly what we would refer to as Old Testament documents. They reflect how accurately these documents have been copied over the centuries. There is nothing "new" in them. A very early copy of Mark is found in this collection.

Authorities believe that both of these collections were hidden away during the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and, then, early persecution of members of the Jesus communities.

It is from the Nag Hammadi Library that we get the Gospel of Thomas.

I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago that we are privileged to be part of what I called "the great turning" where, influenced by the discoveries in the fields of

astrophysics and quantum theory many people are turning to a much larger understanding and view of the world in which we live and the laws that govern it. There seems to be an enlarging split between those who welcome these new understandings and those who fear them and their implications. You see the destructive power of this fear in groups like ISIS and the Taliban all the way to so-called Christian group who do incredibly damaging and destructive things in expression their opposition to matters like abortion and homosexuality.

I think that one of the reasons, not the only one to be sure, that many people who seek to follow Jesus have turned to the Gospel of Thomas is that there are people and movements that are refusing to be confined by or defined by labels, beliefs and behaviors that divide and judge.

The radical, revolutionary, mystical teacher Jesus went about teaching that healing and wholeness was to be found through inclusion and forgiveness. Wendall Berry, the poet says, "Every thing and every one is Sacred. We have just desecrated some of it and some of them."

Every day that we wake up, we have a chance to decide which one of these movements we will commit our life energy to: desecration and degradation or to take up the beautiful and life-giving challenge to see that the realm of freedom, joy and love that Jesus taught about by deed and word is already here both within and around us. Our task is to realize this and express this.

I have spent a lot of my life's energy and time teaching about the Jesus of history. I don't repudiate or regret a second of that. I think it is crucially important to know who the man Jesus was and what he said. The Christian movement hi-jacked the real Jesus and shaped him into something to be worshipped or believed in rather than someone to follow. The church has made Jesus into a very individualistic enterprise: do this, believe this and YOU will go to heaven when you die. The Jewish people didn't think that way. Jesus didn't think that way. They believed, he taught and lived, that the promises and power of God - I know, talking about God is a problem - were available to the people, were to be lived out among the people. Again, - I had a homiletics professor in the seminary who said, "Never repeat for emphasis. Understand? Never repeat for emphasis." - the promises and power of the Sacred had to do with finding wholeness through inclusion and forgiveness.

A lot of people think that the Gospel of Thomas is just another Gospel to be added to the four that are already in the Christian Testament. The Jesus Seminar contributed to this notion by putting out a book called “The Five Gospels.” (Which, by the way, is a book you should have in your library.)

The Gospel of Thomas is not that. Nor is it simply a collection of the sayings of Jesus. It is a book of spiritual exercises designed to awaken us to our true identity. The Gospel of Thomas gives us an insight into one of the world’s supreme mystical revolutionaries. I got that phrase from Andrew Harvey. Let me quote him.

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To those who learn to unpack its sometimes cryptic sayings, the Gospel of Thomas offers a naked and dazzlingly subversive representation of Jesus’ defining and most radical discovery: that the living Kingdom of God burns in us and surrounds us in the glory at all moments, and the vast and passionate love-consciousness - what you might call “Kingdom-consciousness” - can help birth it into reality. This discovery is the spiritual equivalent of Albert Einstein’s and J. Robert Oppenheimer’s uncovering of the potential of nuclear fission; it makes available to all humanity a wholly new level of sacred power. By fusing together a vision of God’s divine world with a knowledge of how this divine world could emerge into and transfigure the human one, the Gospel of Thomas makes clear that Jesus discovered the alchemical secret of transformation that could have permanently altered history, had it been implemented with the passion and on the scale that Jesus knew was possible. Its betrayal by the churches erected in Jesus’ name has been an unmitigated disaster: one major reason for our contemporary catastrophe.

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Strong words!

(Here is a link to more about Andrew Harvey, a teacher of mysticism and activism.
<http://www.andrewharvey.net>)

So here is the land mine we are stepping on today.

(You know what you get when you throw a hand-grenade into a kitchen in Paris?
Linoleum Blown-Apart.)

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Miriam said,

Then tell us, Master,
what your students are like?
How would describe them?

He answered,
"They are like small children
living in a field not their own.
When the landlords return and demand,
"Give us back our field!"
the children return it by
simply stripping themselves
and standing naked before them.

So then, I must also tell you this:
If a householder knows for sure that
thieves are coming to steal his goods,
he will keep careful watch before they
get there to prevent them from tunneling
in and taking his possessions.
You, too, from your beginnings,
must keep a watchful eye on the cosmos,
binding great power to yourselves
so that thieves cannot find a way
to get to you.
Pay attention then.
Any outside help you look for
they will try to seize first.
May there be someone among you

who truly understands this.

So listen carefully,
if you have an ear for this!
When the fruit was ripe,
ready to burst,
the harvester came quickly,
sickle in hand,
and took it.

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If you own any version of the Gospel of Thomas, you know that some of the “sayings,” called “Logions,” are very brief. Some, like this one, are much longer.

This is the first time in the Gospel of Thomas that we are introduced to a character named Miriam, or Mary. “Mary” was a very common name given to Jewish girls. Still is.

There are several “Mary’s” mentioned in the Jesus story and most scholars are in agreement that this “Miriam” is the one referred to as Mary Magdalene which simply means “Mary, the one from the town of Magdala.” As we go through the sayings in Thomas, Miriam will play and a more and more prominent role. Some have conjectured that she was Jesus’ wife. There is a growing consensus that she was an older woman who had money, a successful business woman, and was a close companion to Jesus. Because the Gospel of Thomas opens us to the study of Christian mysticism - a mystic is a person who is committed to seeing the Sacred in “ordinary life” - she is also a symbol of the divine feminine.

Later we will come back and talk about this Mary - who was she historically and the role of the Sacred Feminine - then and now. Just a casual reading of the Jesus story shows the critical role women play. It was the women in the story who didn’t turn and run at his execution. It was to Mary that the risen Christ first appears. She is the one who takes the word of this to his disciples. It will be Mary that Jesus will point as someone to become like.

The Jesus movement, because it is highly patriarchal, and still is - like most all religions - has, for the most part, edited the women and the feminine out of the story. So that through much of its history the church has been like a person walking with one leg and using half its brain. One of the major reasons this world is so screwed up and in the mess we are is that we are immersed in a sea of competing men's clubs to see who is the bravest and best.

A mystic is a person who is committed to seeing the Sacred in "ordinary life."

Because of the line of work I am in, that of being a spiritual teacher and psychotherapist, more often than not, when people find out this about me I'll get one of two kind of responses. These are from today strangers, not people I know.

One is, "A psychotherapist? Listen, I have a friend who . . ." Then they ask me for the most personal of advice.

The other is a rather defensive one, sometimes even aggressive. It is, "Well, I'm spiritual but I'm certainly not religious."

I understand that stance. I usually say things like, "I don't blame you." "I completely understand."

One of the major wounds that many, many people in this world carry is that of being wounded by religion. I got it. Though I believe all humans are hard-wired for some kind of religion, that's not my point today.

Occasionally, when I get the "I'm spiritual but not religious" comment, I'll say, "That's wonderful. How do you practice this spirituality of yours?" Then there is a long silence. I might ask, "Do you have a spiritual practice?" More often than not the answer is something like, "Well, I just don't seem to be able to find time for that."

Time is not found like stumbling across a twenty dollar bill that has fallen out of someone's pocket on the sidewalk.

Time is made for the things we think are important.

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Miriam said,

Then tell us, Master,
what your students are like?
How would describe them?

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Here is a non-dual teaching. Encountering the Sacred is something that happens to us accidentally on the journey. Having a daily discipline, a spiritual practice, makes us accident prone.

“Tell us, Master, what your students are like.” Not your admirers, not those who believe in you, not those who worship you but your students.

There is something pointed, specific and concrete about this, about encounters with the Sacred. They are not ideas or theories about which you can be right or wrong, not something you measure or critique, not an ideology to be debated but a Presence to be encountered. Sacred Mystery is more Someone than something. And as Richard Rohr teaches, it always leads to concrete behavior in the outer world. Acts of love, compassion, kindness, justice, inclusion and so forth. We know in focused moments what is always and everywhere true.

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He answered,
"They are like small children
living in a field not their own.
When the landlords return and demand,
"Give us back our field!"
the children return it by
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and standing naked before them.

* * *

Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas is talking about, among other things, a world where it is safe to come clean and where one is constantly prepared to step into the world of what matters most and where one lives on guard against the danger of being taken over by values that don't belong to the realm of reality Jesus is calling the "rule of God."

In spite of the advice of my homiletics profession, I'm going to repeat this as well.

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Last week after our time together I had an accident - a spiritual accident like I referred to earlier. A student of mine sent me a link to an article in the New York Times by David Brooks. The article was titled, "A Moral Bucket List."

I want to read you the first three paragraphs of that article. See if these words sound like anything you've heard before in here:

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About once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued. You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude. They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all.

When I meet such a person it brightens my whole day. But I confess I often have a sadder thought: It occurs to me that I've achieved a decent level of career success,

but I have not achieved that. I have not achieved that generosity of spirit, or that depth of character.

A few years ago I realized that I wanted to be a bit more like those people. I realized that if I wanted to do that I was going to have to work harder to save my own soul. I was going to have to have the sort of moral adventures that produce that kind of goodness.”

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The article, I found out, is an excerpt from a recent book of his, “The Road to Character.” In it he says that there are two kinds or sets of virtues people live with. One he calls “resume virtues.” These are the things we take to the market place. We use them to get jobs, win friends and influence people. These are the things our culture is becoming increasingly focused on. My research department frequently points out to me how both print and media advertising are increasingly conveying the message “it’s all about you.” There was, allegedly, a debate in the psychiatric community not long ago about taking narcissism out of the diagnostic manual for mental disorders because it is becoming such an epidemic in our culture.

The other set of virtues are the ones Brooks calls “eulogy virtues.” These are the things you would like people to say about you at your funeral.

Brooks conclusion is that wonderful people are made, not born. Interestingly enough, the first character trait he mentions is humility.

(If you want to read the Brook’s opinion piece, click here. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html?_r=0)

Brook’s article kept coming up in one way or another. At least once a day all week someone mentioned it to me in one way or another.

I think that one of the religious wounds many people carry is the belief that “if you are not good and/or don’t believe the right things, you are going to go to hell when you die.” I know language is not adequate for this but under no circumstance is

God someone to be afraid of. It does matter, however, for our well-being and the well-being of the cosmos how we live our lives. How we live our lives even dictates in many cases, how long we will live.

Another example of the synchronicity I mentioned in the preview for this talk is that this past week we watched a program I had recorded from the series, “Bill Weir’s Wonder List.” This particular program was titled “The Island Where People Forget to Die” and was about one of the so-called “blue zones” around the globe where people live for a long time. I mean, into their nineties and beyond. (Here is a link to more information http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Zone)

The people who live in “blue zones” are very like the students in this teaching. No doubt diet plays a part in the nine characteristics that people in these “blue zones” embody. The most important ones, however, are things we would call “spiritual.” They are: move naturally every day, be able to articulate your sense of purpose, have daily rituals that relieve the stress of daily living, have a little wine at five, belong to a faith-based community, put your family first, curate a group of friends who are going to nudge you in the right direction.

Listen.

Hear.

Look.

See.

Pay attention.

Be here

The rule, empire, kingdom, realm, reality - whatever you want to call it - is spread out around us right this minute. And people don’t see it says Jesus. Why is that? Because we don’t expect to be called on to show up?

I don't know how the various sayings or teachings in the Gospel of Thomas fit together. I've studied about and read these teachings for a long time now. What I do know is that these teachings are a path for transformation. The one we look at next, has it laid out.

Jesus is teaching a path for transformation, the necessity of it for ourselves and the world, and the fact that the preciousness of it can be lost. Get a copy of the Gospel of Thomas and read Logion 22. (I entered just that "Logion 22" into Google and got 83,000 hits in less than half a second.)

In the world of non-duality we can relax, we can let go, we are safe. Father Rohr says that we fall up. Like in this teaching he talks about the Naked Now. So, I want to end with a benediction or blessing I got from him.

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May God Bless you with DISCOMFORT . . .
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with ANGER . . .
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS . . .
To shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war.
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And to turn their pain into JOY.

And may God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS . . .
To believe that you can make a difference in this world,
So that you can DO what others claim cannot be done.

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