The title I’ve given this talk is “The Best Advice In The World.” It is also the best advice for the world. It is based on one of the most difficult to grasp spiritual teachings there is in any tradition. I’m taking it from the list of questions Jesus asked. You will, however, find this teaching in all of the great religious traditions that evolved in what is referred to now as “the first Axial Age.”

I mentioned last week that at a certain point in human evolution a new religious consciousness emerged all over the globe. This happened simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Judea and Greece. I gave it the label last week “the evolution of religious rightness.” It can be summarized in what we know as “the Golden Rule.” “Do not do to another what you would not want done to yourself.”

I’ll read this teaching in the context in which it appears in the Jesus’ narrative we know as Matthew.

“Be on the lookout for phony prophets, who make their pitch disguised as sheep; inside they are really voracious wolves. You’ll know who they are by what they produce. Since when do people pick grapes from thorns or figs from thistles? Every healthy tree produces choice fruit, but the diseased tree produces rotten fruit. A sound tree cannot produce rotten fruit, any more than a rotten tree can produce choice fruit. Every tree that does not produce choice fruit gets cut down and tossed on the fire. Remember, you’ll know who they are by what they produce.”


What makes this such a difficult spiritual teaching is that if you go to a spiritual director or teacher, and at the moment at least I am that for you, and say, “Okay. I want to do that. I want to be a produce good fruit.
What do I do?” The answer is, “Nothing. There is nothing you can do to be. Though people who produce good fruit do do certain things there is absolutely no guarantee that if you do those things you will produce good fruit. Just be your Self.”

Just to get the biblical literacy stuff out of the way, this saying about “not getting grapes from thorns or figs from thistles” is considered a genuine Jesus saying. It is so particularly evocative, almost absurd. The saying appears at least four times in various Jesus narratives and it is used for different purposes each time. Matthew uses it to warn people about false prophets or people who appear to be spiritual teachers but who use their position or power to accomplish things that are clearly contrary to teachings of love, compassion and justice.

In Luke’s telling of the Jesus story this saying is used in reference not to religious leaders but, rather, about individual character. What comes out of a person reveals the content of that person’s heart and mind.

This teaching not only seems to involve judging - which Jesus and every other spiritual teacher advises against - it also seems to push us to take a hard look at who we are and what we do. And, to make evaluations about others as well.

So, the risk here, and what makes this teaching so tough, is that it tempts us to be moralistic in the worst sense of that word. That is to say, on the one hand it tempts us to evaluate whether we are “worthy” or not based on what we do, or don’t do. On the other hand, it tempts us to come up with a list of rules and regulations to say who is in or who is out.

Either way, this business of trying to walk a spiritual path without being and becoming either judgmental or moralistic is like negotiating a minefield. But, there it stands:

By their fruits you will know them.
A good tree produces good fruit.

We are called to produce good fruit and we are called to be able to evaluate what “good fruits” means.

We need to hear this correctly. The implied advice here is NOT “just be yourself.” That’s the worst advice you could give someone. The advice is “just be your Self.” Following that path is healing for you and for the world.

Over the years in my counseling practice I have heard people explain away or excuse the most reprehensible behavior imaginable by saying, often to their intimate partner, “Well, this is just the way I am. You’ll have to accept me as I am.”

It is my deeply held belief that not knowing who we truly are and failing to live our true identity is the root source of all our difficulties.

I can’t vouch for the authenticity of this story but it is told that when George Bush was campaigning for president, he made a stop at a senior citizens home in North Carolina. When he came upon an elderly gentleman sitting in his wheelchair, Bush leaned over and shook the man’s hand and said, “Sir, do you know who I am?” The man looked up and responded, “No. But, if you go to the nurses’ station, they can tell you.”

Were it only that easy!

This saying of Jesus is not about being good. It is about being.

This is virtually impossible for the dualistic mind to hear.

It would, I believe, help us to grasp this teaching if we keep in mind that Jesus lived at a level of consciousness that we do not.
We can so easily fall into the illusion that Jesus taught *about* the “kingdom of God.” No. Jesus taught from “the kingdom *from* God.” Huge difference.

I think that one of my top teaching goals as a spiritual teacher is to put firmly in place the teaching that what Jesus referred to as “the kingdom of God” is not a place to get to. It is a place we come from to live out our lives in a trusting way in this world.

One of the biggest and most damaging lies the Christian church has foisted onto people is the notion that the primary function of religion is to make it possible for its adherents to make it safely into the afterlife. This nonsense reached its apex in practices that led to the Protestant Reformation. People, if they could afford it, bought what were called “indulgences” to get, at first, loved ones out of purgatory and hell and, then, buying these “pardons” for themselves so that they could freely sin without eternal consequences. The church took advantage of this to enrich its own coffers.

Jesus taught that the realm of justice and compassion that was his mission to convey was a present and internal matter. The church made it all about the next world. To hell with this one and it seems that is the way it is playing out in our time as well.

Further, this emphasis taught the horrible theology that the God of Jesus was an angry god and one to be feared and not, as both Jesus and his first followers clearly apprehended, to be best described by the word “love.”

My hunch is that just as the very word “God” prompts people to think of a being off and out there somewhere so does the word “heaven” cause people to think of some fluffy gated community somewhere in the clouds reserved for “good people.” You know, those who bring forth good fruits.
Here is what I believe and it is a mystery: Right now we are in what Jesus called “God’s kingdom” Right now we can begin to realize this if we step outside the ego’s self-seeking and seek to live God’s will with a pure heart.

This is so simple. It’s so simple that it has taken me nearly eighty years to figure it out.

It is true, isn’t it, that each of us knows what is good and what contributes to our well-being and the well-being of others. We know what it means to live with a pure heart. And, each of us knows what is harmful to us and to others. When we do what is good we and the world benefit and we contribute meaning to life. When we don’t, we contribute to our self-destruction. Sometimes its takes decades for us to discover this but we know it.

Heaven is living in harmony with the Divine Presence that gives birth to and sustains all existence. Heaven is the Sacred Mystery that both seeks to come alive within us and that we are called to come alive in.

Though I cannot speak non-dual mind, I continue to try. So here goes another attempt:

Because Divine Presence is everywhere Divine Presence is also nowhere. That is, there is no “where” in which we can see Divine Presence “out there.” Divine Presence, Sacred Mystery, God - whatever word you want to use - is closer to us than we are to ourselves. Divine Presence, Sacred Mystery, God is too close to see.

So, where can you go to see Divine Presence? Nowhere. What can you do to possess Sacred Mystery? Nothing. All we can do, and this takes enormous courage and practice, is to abandon doing and be who we are
in relation to Divine Presence and to the life of Divine Presence within us.

There is nowhere to go. There is nothing to do. The ego hates this. But, I am convinced it is what Paul meant when he said, “It is not I who live but Christ who lives within me.”

The key to entering into the new world Jesus taught about is never a discovery of our worthiness but a surrender of trust to Divine Presence. If you try to understand the world Jesus talked about by any “getting it right” process, you’ll never get it. Without this trustful surrender everything devolves into smallness, hurt, victimhood and blame. When we stop weighing and measuring, we are free to enter the infinite ocean of grace. Unlike us, God doesn’t even know how to count. The point is, we don’t earn our identity. We pay attention to it. We rest in it. We trust it. We allow it to guide us. This is why the best advice in the world: Be your Self.

I believe that what Jesus taught is what we are now learning from the various scientific disciplines that are presenting us with so much new information about our cosmos: the energy I call Sacred Mystery or Divine Present is in ever person, in every thing, in every moment. We are invited to be in harmony with this energy. This is what it means to “enter the kingdom of God.” I have long believed that the tools and insights from psychology can get us to the door of this kingdom but what it takes to enter it is courage and persistence and patience and endurance and the realization that it is a process we never finish in the finite amount of time we have on this planet.

Isn’t that good news! Even in our worst moments, our darkest times, the most difficult and troubled seas we are tossed about in, this life-giving presence is with us. All we have to do is be there. Or, rather, be here. This, I have come to see, is the metaphorical meaning of Jesus saying from the cross, “Today you shall be with me in paradise.” The promise is
not that things will get better when you die but that there is another reality right here, right now.

Several years ago I saw a bumper sticker that puts the essence of the teaching of Jesus we are look at today succinctly: What God wants is spiritual fruit, not religious nuts.

One of the things that I think is contributing to much of the nut cases in our time is that our culture seduces people to live on the surface of things. This is what creates so much dualism. To stay on the surface of things, even good things - like, for example, the Bible or the church and all that goes with it - is often to do or say very hurtful, even evil, things and call them good. Fundamentalists stay on the surface of things.

Again, keep in mind that the teachings of Jesus, as indeed from any great spiritual master, are hard for us to hear because they are coming from a much higher developmental level than most of us are. I know, I know - you are an exception to that. However, -

Spiritual growth is about the process of our being progressively more and more conscious of and in touch with our true identity. This is why I’m calling for us to take up the spiritual work of being our true Selves. When this knowledge is total, we can be said to be enlightened. You know anybody who is there?

Looking back from where I am standing now I think that one of the first steps I took into the arena of non-dual mind was because of Thich Nhat Hanh. I heard him at a conference and bought a book of his, the first of many. The book is “Peace Is Every Step.” In that book he says, “There is no way to peace. Peace is the way to be.”

This is what Jesus taught and it is what his first followers understood. They were called “people of the way.” Not, “people of the right belief.” Not “people of the right religion.”
Asking the question, “How can we bring forth good fruit?” is a question that non-dual mind does not understand. It is like asking, “How far is blue?” The question does not compute. And, is therefore unanswerable. See how simple this is?

So if you understand that there is nothing you can do to be, I will attempt to answer the question of what you can do to be.

Two of my favorite spiritual teachers are Thich Nhat Hanh, whom I just mentioned, and Thomas Merton.

Merton once wrote, “To be a saint is to be your Self.”

There is a saying: Repetition is the mother of mastery. So, I repeat -

Saying to someone, “Just be yourself is about the worst advice you can give them.”

Saying to someone “Just be your Self” is the most life-giving advice possible.

I have on the page of things I read every day as part of my spiritual practice, quotes by both of these men. Near the end of his life, he died by accidental electrocution, Merton got interested in Eastern religions and Thich Nhat Hanh came to the monastery in Kentucky where Merton lived in a hermitage. During their visit Merton was inquiring about Buddhist meditation practices. One of the things Thich Nhat Hanh said to him was, “We don’t teach meditation to the young monks. They are not ready for it until they stop slamming doors.”

When we have stopped slamming doors, that is stopped living our lives so reactively, we might then be ready to move to a higher level of awareness. Even this is risky to say though because it can lead us to
thinking that there is something we can do or, in this case, not do that we think will make us good. This is one of the great tricks the ego wants to play on us.

This is the risk of morality, of trying to bear good fruit. The ego can so easily use religion and religious practices to show itself as being good. There is perhaps no better way to remain unconscious than to bless some religious practice or doctrinal position as having made us right or safe. That way we can go on living our lives slamming doors.

I had a friend in graduate school who, when we were reading and studying about dream analysis, told me about a dream he had. Actually, it sounded more like a nightmare. He said he dreamed he was standing in line waiting to be admitted into heaven. He was standing directly behind Mother Teresa. The line slowly inched forward with St. Peter giving evaluations to everyone as their turn came and then rendering a verdict. He heard St. Peter say to Mother Teresa, “You could have done more.” He knew then that he was in trouble. Wouldn’t we all be?!

The ego wants to protect us from self-discovery. I know this to be true because I see this trait in myself. If what we are involved in for our spiritual practice is designed to give us status, stability and security; we are walking the wrong path.

So I repeat: if you are aware, if you understand, if you accept that there is nothing you can do to be; I’ll tell you some of the things that people busy being do.

I began reading and writing a list of the questions of Jesus last year in thinking about using them as a guideline. There are a lot of them. So I try to look ahead at the road map to see what’s coming up. I read this paradoxical stance that Jesus takes, which he more often than not does: “Don’t judge. But, By their fruits you will know them.” In the midst of
this I picked up a journal that I take and it had a photograph of a sculpture and a very brief paragraph about it.

The sculpture is of St. Ignatius. Ignatius was born in 1491 and died in 1556. (The painting I showed of him is by Peter Paul Rubens). Ignatius was the founder of the Jesuit order in the Roman Church. Ignatius is remembered as a talented spiritual director. He recorded his method of spiritual practice in a celebrated treatise called the Spiritual Exercises, a simple set of meditations, prayers, and other mental exercises, first published in 1548. Ignatius developed this set of spiritual exercises as a means to assess oneself - both the positive and negative aspects.

The sculpture is called Examen. It is by Brooklyn-based artists Joan Benefiel and Jeremy Leichman. I was immediately intrigued. This is a sculpture of St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits. In the sculpture the light from within meets the shadow within.

Our own Brooke Summers-Perry, a certified spiritual director and teacher of Non-Violent Communication, one Sunday not too long ago announced some work she was offering and showed us some work of hers about this very practice.

I asked her if I could have that handout and make copies for all who showed up today. Further, I asked her if she would come and speak to us about it. (You can hear Brooke speak in the audio version of this talk and you can see the poem she wrote on the Ordinary Life site by viewing the presentation slides of this talk. I HIGHLY RECOMMEND THIS!)

If you look carefully at the handout, there is enough information for a lifetime of spiritual practice. Pay particular attention to the links at the bottom of the page. This sheet is a masterpiece. (You can download it from the resources link on the Ordinary Life website.)

I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase before, it comes from the Hebrew creation story, that we are created in “the image and likeness of God.”
Those two words - image and likeness - don’t mean the same thing.

“Image” is that which marks us as aspects of Divine Presence from the very beginning. It is who we are. This is what gives every human being inherent dignity.

“Likeness” is how we say “yes” to who we are. This is why I harp on having a daily spiritual practice. We have to have some way that allows us to connect with who we are. Frankly, the western church has been lousy at helping people with this. The church has taught people to pay attention to differences and to focus on moral achievement.

I try my best not to give a lot of answers in here. Yes, we all want them. But, what might be a good answer for me might not be for you. Besides, so much of what we come up with is provisional.

I know I’m repeating myself: if you understanding that there is nothing you can do to be, I’ll share with you some of the things I notice that people who seem to me to be in the process of being do. Okay?

They laugh a lot, they smile a lot.

They are far more interested in being related to than in being right, more interested in connecting than correctness.

They are more committed to living in what the mystics referred to as “the cloud of unknowing” rather than in being certain.

They are far more interested in being human than being religious.

Though they have a capacity to feel deeply and express their feelings, they don’t base their lives on their feelings. You are aware that if we did base our lives on our feelings, most of us would be in prison.
They clean things up. They are aware of the emotional wake they leave in the lives of others. You know: some people bring happiness wherever they go. Others, whenever they go. They apologize when they’ve hurt others.

People who kill, hate, exclude are not bearing good fruit.

People who gossip, lie, spread fear are not bearing good fruit.

Religious nuts believe that there is a “god” out there who sometimes, depending on our morality or belief, invades our space. People who bear fruit live out of the awareness that we live and move and have our being in Sacred Mystery and that this Divine Presence and Power seeks to find expression through who we are becoming and how we live.

George Bernard Shaw wrote, “The only man I know who behaves sensibly is my tailor. He takes my measurements anew each time he sees me. The rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them.”

Entering the world where we are willing to bear spiritual fruit is waking up to discover that our measurements have changed. What we have been doing for years, we begin to realize, simply does not fit us anymore. We have outgrown the life that we thought would go on forever and have found within us a whole new person. It is yielding to this call to newness, to being our true Selves, that involves us in being and producing spiritual fruit.

Religious nuts want things to stay the same.

I had a conversation with a man not long ago who is about as far right politically as one can get. He is proud about being what he calls “a conservative.” I hadn’t seen him for a while and he asked what was
going on with me and as it goes with these kinds of conversations, one thing led to another. He asked me how I was dealing with what was going on in the Methodist denomination about the LBGTQ+ issue and I tried to explain it as best I could. He said, “You know, I used to be against gay marriage. But, I changed my mind. Why not let people marry the person they love?” Indeed. May our world be gifted with more people on the far right coming to such an enlightened point of view.

The path of producing and being spiritually fruitful involves knowing that assuming that tomorrow will be or should be the same as today is poor preparation for living. That only equips us for disappointment. To live well and with meaning we must learn to realize that life is a work in process.

This is so simple. This is so complex.

Call it complex simplicity or simple complexity.

The truth is that who we are is who we are in relation to Divine Presence. That is the truth about you. That’s the truth about every body else. It's the best advice in and for this world.

All of this, and more, is bringing forth spiritual fruit.

Let’s work for and anticipate a good harvest.

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