

“Pure Jesus”
delivered by Shari Woodbury on December 28, 2014
at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington

Select Service Elements

Thanks to Rev. Doug Wadkins for acting as the voice of Jesus / Gospel of Thomas in the sermon (reading the text in red below), and to the pick-up choir for performing the chant.

READING from “The Mystical Core of Organized Religion”
by David Steindl-Rast
(full text at <http://csp.org/experience/docs/steindl-mystical.html>
or http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr_mystic_core.htm)

David Steindl-Rast, a Catholic monk and Zen Buddhist practitioner, asserts that mysticism is at the heart of religion. “We’ve come to understand mysticism,” he says, “as the experience of communion with Ultimate Reality (i.e., with ‘God,’ if you feel comfortable with this time-honored, but also time-distorted term).” This meditating monk suggests that founders and great teachers, like Jesus, are inspired by their experience of a oneness with all life – something many of us feel in smaller doses at some point in our lives.

Brother Steindl-Rast describes how the heart of religion, which comes from the founder’s mystical perspective, is inevitably corrupted over time; the mystical light is refracted by our minds and warped by the forces of human history and social institutions. Religion, he says, “can, however, be purified and renewed whenever a faithful heart recognizes, in spite of all distortions, the original light.”

Steindl-Rast offers one more metaphor for understanding this process. He says,

“The light of doctrine, the glow of ethical commitment, and the fire of ritual celebration were expressions that gushed forth red hot from the depths of mystical consciousness. But, as that stream of lava flowed down the sides of the

mountain, it began to cool off. The farther it got from its origins, the less it looked like fire; it turned into rock. Dogmatism, moralism, ritualism: all are layers of ash deposits and volcanic rock that separate us from the fiery magma [of mystical awareness] deep down below. But there are fissures and clefts in the igneous rock of the old lava flows; there are hot springs, fumaroles, and geysers; there are even occasional earthquakes and minor eruptions. These represent the great men and women who reformed and renewed religious tradition from within.”

And we might add that, whether they intended it or not, those who seek to purify their tradition often end up founding new religious orders, new sects or denominations. At least, that is what can happen if established institutions resist calls for renewal rather than respond to them. Brother Steindl-Rast concludes that “The challenge is to find access to [the mystical core of religion] and to live in its power. In this sense, every generation... is challenged anew to make its religion truly religious.”

You might look upon today’s service as an invitation to do just that. There is a vast spiritual literature associated with Jesus that can help with this – certainly including spiritually-charged passages in the Bible, like the Sermon on the Mount. But let us draw upon the Gospel of Thomas and other long-suppressed early Christian teachings, as well, to reclaim and renew the mystical core of Christianity. For this may be pure Jesus, on fire with Truth.

SERMON

Why do kids love Christmas? I loved Christmas as a child, and now my daughter does too. It’s not just because of the pretty decorations and presents from Santa, the family traditions and the time off from school – but also, I think, because of the starring role that Jesus plays. After all, a *baby* is at the center of the Christmas story – someone even smaller than a child. In the nativity scene, it is the tiny figure in the humble manger who brings hope to all of humankind.

Our daughter Avonelle seemed to bond with baby Jesus before she even knew his story. A couple years ago, when she was two, on Christmas eve we came here to

the “Away in a Manger” service. It’s a kind of informal nativity pageant in which all the kids can spontaneously play a part. Avonelle spontaneously played a part, alright – just not the one assigned for her age group, which if I recall correctly, was an angel. Not one to be typecast, she scooped baby Jesus up out of the manger and strode around cuddling the little guy for the remainder of the service. ☺ Baby Jesus has inspired hope in different ways down the centuries. Kids might relate to him as a friend or superhero (or at 2, as just another baby doll). Many are taught to see him as the messiah or savior. Early Unitarians looked upon Jesus as an example of what we all can be, at our best.

Debates about the meaning of this enigmatic figure date to the earliest days of Christianity. This is evident in a collection of long-hidden texts from early Christian communities that was found near Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt, in the last century. Among these suppressed secret writings, which the founders of the orthodox church perceived as dangerous, one that stands out is the Gospel of Thomas. This short collection consists of 114 verses. It simply recites Jesus’ spoken teachings. Considered one of the earliest Christian writings, and a likely source for later gospels like those in the Bible, the Gospel of Thomas might seem rather plain on the surface. Gone is the biography of Jesus and interpretations of what those events mean. There is no miraculous birth, no precocious childhood. We get no description of Jesus’ death by crucifixion, much less a resurrection. Gone, we might say, are the hard “accretions” added over centuries of creating a religious institution. All we have is what Jesus said.

But upon deeper examination, there is nothing simple about these sayings. In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus offers parables, metaphors and koans to open the heart and stretch the mind. It’s the sort of “lava” Brother Steindl-Rast described in our reading. Here Jesus sounds like a mystic – a Middle Eastern guru – trying to teach earnest seekers how they, too, might experience this spiritual fire. The goal he holds out is not to go to heaven upon death, or to be resurrected in body at some end-time; rather, it is to recognize and live from one’s spiritual essence, here in the eternal now. One might argue that this is pure Christianity. Pure Jesus.

I invite you to imagine yourself coming across this Jesus in your search. Suppose you are going from place to place, like a citizen of the ancient Roman empire, zig-zagging past temples for this god and that. You see a group of people, men and women

of all classes of society, clustered around a plain figure. They are engrossed by the presence of this person with gentle yet penetrating eyes. You sit down for a moment to hear if this teacher has anything to say that sparks something in you.

Perhaps, as described in the Gospel of Thomas, you hear the disciples offering their guesses as to who Jesus is: righteous messenger? wise philosopher? master? But Jesus rejects these labels. He says, **“I am not your master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.”**ⁱ Later in the sayings, the disciples assert that Jesus is the messiah, saying, “Twenty-four prophets have spoken in Israel, and they all spoke of you.” But Jesus implies that he, too, is a prophet, not a savior or messiah, answering them: **“You have disregarded the living one who is in your presence and have spoken of the dead.”**ⁱⁱ Instead of a messiah, here Jesus is a spreader of spiritual fire, saying **“I have cast fire upon the world, and look, I am guarding it until it blazes.”**ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps most startling to modern Christian ears is the idea that the disciples need not look outside themselves for a savior. Rather, Jesus tells them, **“If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”**^{iv} **“If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you.”**^v

The disciples seem to find it particularly difficult to grasp the idea that they can attain the same state as their teacher. Exasperated, Jesus says, **“You search the face of heaven and earth, but you have not come to know the one who stands before you, and you do not know how to understand the present moment.”**^{vi} In modern parlance, the disciples just don’t “get it!” But Jesus assures them that the knowledge he possesses is available to all: **“One who seeks will find, and for [one who knocks] it will be opened.”**^{vii} Repeatedly he tells them, **“Whoever has ears to hear, let [them] hear!”**^{viii} Is this Jesus like a Buddhist bodhisattva – spiritually awake, and doing his best to help others wake up, too? That is how he occurs to me in the Gospel of Thomas.

The way that Jesus speaks of the disciples sheds more light on what this spiritual fire is that he is trying to stoke in them. Like other proponents of the perennial philosophy^{ix}, he wants people to discover who they really are. Jesus says, **“the Kingdom is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know**

yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are poverty.”^x Later, Jesus tells the disciples that if they are asked about their origins, they should answer, “We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image... we are the chosen of the living father.”^{xi} Jesus revealed to the disciples the true identity of *all* human beings, telling them to say, “we have come from the light.”

[CHANT – 1ST TIME]

“Tell them, we have come from the light.” To my ears, Thomas’s Jesus is, in his own way, saying something similar to the Chandogya Upanishad. He is affirming an identification between the individual and the ultimate – your atman is Brahman, you too are of the Light. Scholar Elaine Pagels offers a similar interpretation of the message of this long-lost gospel. “According to Thomas,” she explains, “Jesus declares that we must find out first where we came from.”^{xii} We must “go back and take our place ‘in the beginning’” – referring to the Judeo-Christian creation story in Genesis – when “God created us in the image of the primordial light.”^{xiii}

How is this different than so-called orthodox Christianity? “Thomas’s gospel,” Pagels says, “encourages the hearer not so much to *believe in Jesus*, as John requires, as to *seek to know God* through one’s own, divinely given capacity, since all are created in the image of God.”^{xiv} Why does this matter now? Because “those who later enshrined the Gospel of John within the New Testament and denounced Thomas’s gospel as ‘heresy’ decisively shaped – and inevitably limited – what would become Western Christianity.”^{xv}

The plot thickens – or the lava cools – as the story of the development of historical Christianity unfolds further. Like several other scholars, through diligent research Pagels came to the shocking conclusion that John’s gospel was actually written specifically “to refute what Thomas teaches.”^{xvi} In fact it is John who carries out a smear campaign against Thomas, labeling him “the doubter.”^{xvii} Among all the gospels, John is the only one preoccupied with asserting the unique divinity of Jesus: “I am the

way; I am the truth; I am the light; I am the vine.”^{xviii} Only John puts such exclusive words on Jesus’ lips.

In contrast, Thomas’ gospel expresses the central mystical idea: the idea, as Pagels puts it, “that the ‘image of God’ is hidden within *everyone*, although most people remain unaware of its presence.”^{xix} We all have a divine spark within us. Though the Gospel of Thomas and other mystical writings were suppressed over and over again by those who called themselves orthodox, such ideas kept resurfacing. In 13th century Germany, for example, Meister Eckhart offered a particularly powerful expression of this idea from within the mainstream Christian tradition. “The seed of God is in us,” Eckhart said. “Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer, it will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is, and accordingly its fruits will be God-nature. Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and God-seed into God.”^{xx} Each child is born with this God-seed, this original goodness.

Variations on this theme appear at the beginning of our tradition as well. William Ellery Channing, founder of Unitarianism, expounded on our “Likeness to God” in a sermon so titled in 1828. “The idea of God,” Channing explained, “is the idea of our own spiritual nature, purified and enlarged to infinity. In ourselves are the elements of the Divinity... We see God around us because He dwells within us.”^{xxi} The Transcendentalists were even bolder. A few years after Channing’s “Likeness to God” sermon, young Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson had written in his journal, “The highest revelation is that God is in every [person].”^{xxii} In his famous Divinity School address of 1838, Emerson spoke publicly about how “Jesus proclaimed his own divinity, taught others to see God in him, and urged them to follow him by seeing God in themselves.”^{xxiii} But the church, Emerson complained, “restricted the divine indwelling to one or two persons” and “it limited inspiration to [the] closed canon” of the Bible.^{xxiv} Emerson instead encouraged budding clergy to “recover true, rather than historical Christianity.”^{xxv}

[REPRISE OF CHANT]

In the Gospel of Thomas, when the disciples want to know what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, Jesus reorients them. Rather than viewing the spiritual destination as a place and time, he wants them to understand it as a state of being... a form of consciousness... an intimate relationship. He tells them, “nursing babies are like those who enter the Kingdom.”^{xxvi} They try to take this literally but Jesus explains that what is important about the image of nursing babies is that the babe and mother make “the two into one” – a dissolving of separate identity into loving unity.^{xxvii} Likewise, Jesus says, “when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and you make male and female into a single one” – when all these dualities are overcome, you have achieved the goal, which is a state of unity.^{xxviii} This true awareness, this “Kingdom of the Father,” is unrealized by many: Jesus says, “the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, but the people do not see it.”^{xxix}

So how can one experience unitive awareness? In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus offers much guidance on how to attain this *gnosis* – how, in the image of Meister Eckhart, to cultivate the God-seed within ourselves. For example, Jesus tells us, “Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father.”^{xxx} So mundane living, focused on material values, is not the way. Instead of outward treasures, he wants us to attend to what we “store up” in our hearts, because it is from the “overflow of the heart” that good or evil actions arise.^{xxxi} Prayer, meditation, practices of gratitude and connection are some of the ways we might “store up” love and wisdom in our hearts.

Jesus teaches that we must be present, because Heaven is here, now if you know how to tune in. Hence, when the disciples ask about the new world to come, Jesus tells them, “What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.”^{xxxii} He does not want his listeners to wait until some future time. This is conveyed in the parable of the rich man, who has wise intentions, but dies before he fulfills them.^{xxxiii} Rather, Jesus lifts up the possibility of unitive consciousness right now, saying, “whoever is [undivided] will be full of light.”^{xxxiv}

Jesus wants his disciples to be like him not only in awareness, but in teaching this wisdom to others. He beseeches them, “let your light shine” and “proclaim it from the rooftops.”^{xxxv} He uses two parables with metaphors of yeast and scattered meal to express how the “Kingdom of the Father” – living from our true nature – is spread.^{xxxvi}

He hopes that the disciples will attain this insight and be an infectious source of it – be a spiritual leaven to humankind – like Jesus. Alas, history suggests that the disciples' efforts met with only limited success. They never fully “got” it. The understandings passed down in the mainstream varied in crucial ways from what we find in Thomas. The hot lava eventually cooled into rock.

Fortunately, the Gospel of Thomas and other long-buried texts from early Christian communities are now available once again. We may use these texts to help realize for ourselves that awareness to which Jesus points in these sayings. In so doing, we can join people like Brother Steindl-Rast, renewing one of the great religious traditions – making the religion of Jesus truly religious in our time.

As we turn to such teachings for insight, for wisdom, and for hope – at Christmas-time or any other time of year – may we come to know the Light that dwells in every child, in every person... in ourselves. And may we answer Jesus' call in the Gospel of Thomas to “[light] up the whole world” with that Light.^{xxxvii} Amen.

BENEDICTION

Let every light remind us, “We have come from the light.”

By the sparkling lights on our Christmas trees,

By the starlight that pierces the darkness of night,

By the daylight that fills more of each day from winter to summer solstice:

May we remember that each one of us, whatever our condition in life, comes from that primordial Light.

Let us cultivate the seeds of original goodness within ourselves.

Let us store up so much love that love overflows from our hearts.

Let us be a leaven in this hungry and hurting world.

May we bring forth what is within us, until it lights up the whole world.

Go in peace.

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- ⁱ Thomas 15.
- ⁱⁱ Thomas 52.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas 10.
- ^{iv} Thomas 70.
- ^v Thomas 70.
- ^{vi} Thomas 91.
- ^{vii} Thomas 94.
- ^{viii} For example, in Thomas 24.
- ^{ix} The perennial philosophy is “the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places [humanity’s] final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being,” a perspective found in mysticism from both the East and the West. (This definition comes from *The Perennial Philosophy* by Aldous Huxley, 1944.)
- ^x Thomas 3.
- ^{xi} Thomas 50.
- ^{xii} Pagels, p. 54-55.
- ^{xiii} Pagels, p. 55.
- ^{xiv} Pagels, p. 34.
- ^{xv} Pagels, p. 29.
- ^{xvi} Pagels, p. 38.
- ^{xvii} Pagels, p. 69.
- ^{xviii} John 14:6
- ^{xix} Pagels, p. 41.
- ^{xx} Quoted in *Original Goodness* by Eknath Easwaran (1989), p. 11.
- ^{xxi} “Likeness to God” by William Ellery Channing (un-paginated at <http://www.americanunitarian.org/likeness.htm>)
- ^{xxii} *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* by Gary Dorrien (2001), p. 62.
- ^{xxiii} Dorrien, p. 73.
- ^{xxiv} Dorrien, p. 73.
- ^{xxv} *American Transcendentalism: A History* by Philip F. Gura, p. 105.
- ^{xxvi} Thomas 22.
- ^{xxvii} Thomas 22.
- ^{xxviii} Thomas 22.
- ^{xxix} Thomas 113.
- ^{xxx} Thomas 62.
- ^{xxxi} Thomas 45.
- ^{xxxii} Thomas 51.
- ^{xxxiii} Thomas 63.
- ^{xxxiv} Thomas 61.
- ^{xxxv} Thomas 33.
- ^{xxxvi} Thomas 96-97.
- ^{xxxvii} Thomas 24.