

The Gospel of Thomas ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

Sunday November 11, 2018

News whiplash. Anybody suffering from that malady this week? I certainly am. How in the world do we take care of ourselves, each other, and our world, when we are constantly assaulted with terrible, terrible news? Sometimes you just have to turn it off – the TV, the radio, the social media. You must turn it off and give some air time to stories of healing and even just distraction. This month our ministry theme is memory. So hear now this ancient story; you might call it a story of a memory lost and found.

And lo, it came to pass that among the plethora of apocalyptic preachers walking the hills of Palestine warning of all kinds of dire things, casting all kinds of fantastic visions, and urging people to repentance, there was one who stood out. He was enigmatic, wry in wit, kind and compassionate to the most unlikely people. He didn't suffer fools gladly and wasn't afraid to speak the truth to power. People started paying attention to what he said, even going out of their way to hear him. Now in those days the people suffered greatly from the lack of digital recording equipment, so they had to remember what he said. They did the best they could, told other people, even jotted down some notes. Unfortunately this man didn't last long in the politically charged atmosphere of the times. But after his death at the hands of the powers that be, the people who had listened to him most carefully tried to hold onto his sayings. "Remember that time when he stood on the plain and gave that great stump speech?"

Long before there were stories about virgin births and empty tombs there were written records of the words this man Jesus spoke. But then a decree went out that all the so-called Christians were to agree on only one set of stories and all others were to disappear from the face of the earth. All over the known world,

Christian communities that had loved and been faithful to ‘other evangelists’ – Thomas notable among them – had to destroy their records and affirm their loyalty to the new powers that be. How ironic that in just a few centuries, the followers of the man who was put to death for speaking the truth to power became the people that exercised the power to put to death those who disagreed with them!

In a monastery in Upper Egypt named after St. Pachomius, the monks placed their condemned writings in a clay jar and buried them, hoping that when the danger passed they could go back and reclaim them. They did not live to see the time when it would be safe to do so; eventually the location was lost to the ages. Nearly two millennia later, in December 1945, an Arab peasant digging for fertilizer in the hills outside the village of Nag Hamadi found a clay jar stuffed with old papyrus leaves and books. He brought it home, having no idea of the origin or worth of the contents. Legend even says that his mom used some of the papers to dry dishes. Eventually, through a convoluted and mostly illegal process, the books finally fell into the hands of biblical scholars who were amazed, as they began translating the ancient Coptic manuscripts, to discover one that began, “These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and which the twin, Judas Thomas, wrote down.” One of the sayings collections had been recovered! The Gospel of Thomas.

The Thomas Christians were one of many groups of early Jesus followers. Their community was in Syria, and though it is unlikely that their founder was really the apostle Thomas, they claimed apostolic succession through him. The Thomas brand of Christianity was distinctive due to two major influences: Eastern Buddhism and Gnosticism. Thomas was said to have gone to India to evangelize; there are Christian communities in India even today who trace their history all the way back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the Common Era. But the religious influence seemed to have worked both ways. The evangelists who returned from India brought with

them some of the beliefs and practices of Buddhism which found their way into the spirituality of the Thomas Christian community. (Thomas 18, for example: The disciples said to Jesus, “Tell us how our end will be.” Jesus said, “Have you discovered, then, the beginning that you look for the end? For where the beginning is, there will the end be. Blessed is he who will take his place in the beginning, he will know the end and will not experience death.”) Pretty Zen-like!

A more powerful influence in the Gospel of Thomas is Gnosticism, a form of Greek mysticism. The word *gnosis* translates as the act of knowing, a process that brings insight. This act of knowing is very personal and experiential. *Gnosis* does not come from facts or empirical reason; it is based on intuition and perception. It reminds me very much of the First Source of authority identified in the Unitarian Universalist Statement of Principles and Purposes: Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. (If you are relatively new to Unitarian Universalism, this Statement of Principles and Purposes can be found on the frontispiece of your hymnals.)

I have sometimes thought that the Gospel of Thomas might be the most UU gospel. It assumes that religious truth is something that each person arrives at on their own. Thomas 3: “Jesus said, “If those who lead you say to you, ‘See, the Kingdom is in the sky,’ then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are the poverty.” That sounds UU-like, doesn’t it?

Gnostic Christians were excluded from the early church at least partly because their basic assumption about the nature of religious truth was anti-

patriarchal (some of the Gnostics were women!) and anti-authoritarian. If the truth is within each individual, and if every person must find their own spiritual path to that truth, then there is very little value in the authority of an ordained priest or a creed or an official set of doctrines. Furthermore, the Gnostics believed that salvation was a 'this worldly' rather than an other-worldly' experience. They strove for enlightenment and reunification with the divine source in this life; they weren't waiting to get into heaven. They were dedicated to the efficacy of individual revelation and knowledge. They weren't looking for anybody else to save them. Thomas 24: "His disciples said to him, 'Show us the place where you are, since it is necessary for us to seek it. He said to them, 'Whoever has ears, let him hear. There is light within a man of light, and he lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is darkness.'" In other words, to know oneself in the Gnostic sense is to know the divine. Thomas 50: Jesus said, "If they say to you, 'Where did you come from?' say to them, 'We came from the light, the place where the light came into being on its own accord and established itself and became manifest through their image.' If they say to you, 'Is it you?' say, 'We are its children, we are the elect of the living father.' If they ask you, 'What is the sign of your father in you?' say to them, 'It is movement and repose.' That sounds UU-like, doesn't it?

For the Gnostic Christians, Jesus was not so much a savior as the ultimate spiritual guide. They believed that his primary purpose was to lead people to spiritual understanding, rather than to save humanity from sin. The Gospel of Thomas does not deal with sin or atonement. There is no narrative regarding the crucifixion or resurrection, there is no talk about heaven or hell or salvation. The language is the language of enlightenment. That sounds very UU-like, doesn't it?

One more aspect of Gnosticism that seems to be in synch with contemporary Unitarian Universalism. Because of the Gnostic belief in the eventual unity between God and humanity, there is a lot of speculation in Gnostic writings about

how we got into a state of disunity in the first place. One Gnostic text suggests that Adam and Eve were brought into being by a lesser god who actually bungled the job, leading to the mistaken creation of two genders. This mistake, they believe, will be corrected in the ultimate act of salvation when male and female are reunited in one divine entity. Given our modern and evolving understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a dualism, those Gnostic explorations of the nature of gender may have something to teach us today. In ancient Greece these beliefs apparently sometimes led to rituals filled with confusing sexual symbolism that was quite disturbing to non-Gnostic observers. Discomfort is almost always a precursor to change, is it not?

The Gospel of Thomas does not engage in this kind of speculation and re-mything about Creation, nor does it emphasize the evil of the world we live in as some of the other Gnostic gospels do. But the dualism of Gnosticism is there; it is one of the rather non-UU aspects of Gnosticism in general and the Thomas gospel in particular. Thomas 56, for example: Jesus said, ‘Whoever has come to understand the world has found only a corpse and whoever has found a corpse is superior to the world.’ Not very UU-like after all. One of the core assertions of our liberal religious faith is that we are this-worldly; that salvation, if there be such a thing, comes to us as a result of our choices and our actions in this world, at this time.

So we don’t really have a Unitarian Universalist gospel. We are going to have to pick and choose. But isn’t that what heretics are supposed to do? To choose? To sift through the tradition and hold onto that which resonates with our carefully considered personal experiences and our shared experiences? To put aside that which no longer makes sense in the light of how our understanding of the world has evolved? The theological work of the heretic is never done.

And that brings me back to the question of the day: How do we take care of

ourselves, and each other, and the world in a time of news whiplash? The answer is that we become even more regular and intentional in the spiritual practices of our chosen faith. We take care of ourselves by putting aside time for contemplation, meditation, or prayer. A walk in the woods, listening to music, whatever it is that feeds your soul, do more of it during times of stress, not less. Do not neglect your personal spiritual practice. Heed well the words of Thomas, the most skeptical and doubting of the disciples. Thomas, you may remember, was the disciple who did not believe the resurrection had occurred until he had physical proof. So when he says, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you” you would do well to heed his advice. Nurture your inner life; honor your inner wisdom.

And then be sure to come together regularly to learn from each other, to feed each other, and to challenge each other. Whatever wisdom is not within you is certainly among you and between you. That is the reason for houses of worship; to make possible the creative and respectful interchange of beliefs and ideas that leads to salvation.

I want to leave you with some words that I have quoted here before. The same words with which I ended the homily I delivered at the Hour of Power service at Bethel AME church this past Wednesday. “An Invitation to a Brave Space” by Mickey ScottBrey Jones. “Together we will create brave space because there is no such thing as a “safe space”. We exist in the real world. We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds. In this space we seek to turn down the volume of the outside world, we amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere, we call each other to more truth and love. We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow. We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know. We will not be perfect. This space will not be perfect. It will not always be

what we wish it to be. But it will be our brave space together, and we will work in it side by side” Spirit of Life and Love, let it always be so. Amen.