

“The Good News of Thomas”

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1 John 1:1-3

John 20:19-31

Then [Jesus] said to Thomas,

“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand,
and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.” John 20:27

Let us pray... O God,

In our daily walk of life, help us believe in you even when we don't understand,
but do light our way to be more loving and more like you.

Amen

There is a legend that had its origins during the Crusades of the 12th Century
about a Christian realm beyond the Middle East

whose armies had defeated the Muslims in what is now Iran.

Their king's name was Prester John and

he was said to be a descendant of one of the Magi

and it was hoped that he would be an ally

for the crusaders' fight against the Muslims.

However, it is now believed that Prester John was actually a Mongol ruler;

The Mongols had conquered China and though they were Buddhist,

Nestorian Christians were integrated into their culture as administrators.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/475503/Prester-John>

The Nestorians included communities in India which had been converted by

St. Thomas – the Apostle Thomas, who was one of the Twelve Disciples.

This was “Doubting Thomas” – the disciple who demanded proof

that Christ had actually risen from the dead and

who wouldn't be satisfied unless he saw Jesus' wounds of crucifixion.

In our time, Thomas has become quite popular with progressive Christians

thanks to recent scholarship about the Gospel of Thomas.

This text has a unique perspective that differs significantly

from the traditional Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and especially John.

So much so, that it was condemned as heresy.

We know about it from the discovery of a collection of books discovered in Egypt
in 1945 called the Nag Hammadi Library.

They had been hidden for centuries, apparently because they had been
banned from the Bible.

They have been generally described as “gnostic” – referring to teachings

that emphasized spiritual *knowledge* that comes from personal experience.

This was competitive with the teachings of the early Christian church

which sought unity through shared *belief*.

Willard, p.2

Christian Gnosticism was active from the 2nd to the 4th Centuries CE
an era that saw periodic persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire.
The established Church at that time considered deviations from the basic beliefs
as heretical and therefore a threat to Christian unity – and survival.

The Nestorians were not the same as the Gnostics,
and the Nag Hammadi texts were not necessarily ‘gnostic’,
but they give us a view of early, *alternative* Christian communities.
There was a lot of diversity in how individuals and groups of Christians
believed and expressed their faith despite efforts to limit and codify
exactly what it meant to be ‘a Christian’ – kind of like the times we live in.

The Gospel of John is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke –
the Synoptic Gospels which follow basically the same narrative sequence.
Yet John seems to have a lot in common with the Gospel of Thomas.
It has been said that the Gospel of John was written to counter Gnosticism
which emphasized secret knowledge and individual spirituality.
Author and theologian, Elaine Pagels in her book Beyond Belief,
suggests that the Gospel of John was written specifically
to contend with the Gospel of Thomas.

There are three instances where Thomas is mentioned in the Gospel of John –
all of them less than complementary though short of condemnation.
When, Jesus tells his disciples he is going to Judea to raise Lazarus from death,
Thomas exhorts his fellow disciples to go with Jesus to ‘die with him’
because of the hostile Jewish leaders there.
The subtext, however, is that Thomas doesn’t believe Jesus can help Lazarus.
At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going away from them;
Thomas responds by saying,
“We do not know where you are going; How can we know the way?”
Once again, Thomas doesn’t believe. He wants to know.

The third incident is when Jesus returns
to the upper room after his crucifixion and resurrection
to find 10 of the 11 remaining disciples.
Thomas is out and about – actually quite brave of him at the time,
but he misses receiving the Holy Spirit like the other disciples
whom Jesus breathed upon.

Christ returns a week later when Thomas is there
finally convinced to believe, saying, “My Lord and my God!”

So, what were the principle differences between the two?
According to Elaine Pagels, it is in how the Gospels of John and Thomas
answer these two questions:
“Who is Jesus?” and “What is the Good News?”

Willard, p.3

The Gospel of John emphasizes the divinity of Christ as the Son of God
and that salvation comes from belief in Christ alone.

The Gospel of Thomas is aligned with the belief that human beings
were created in the image of God, as creatures of light,
and that we have the potential to be children of God – like Christ.

The four Gospels of our Bible all agree that the message of the Good News
is about God's Kingdom, to be manifested at the end of time
with a day of judgment.

However, Luke 17:20^b-21, has Jesus saying,

*"The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed;
nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!'
for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."
or another way of saying this is "the kingdom of God is within you".*

This is similar to what is written in the Gospel of Thomas [113]...

His disciples said to him,

"When will the kingdom come?"

[Jesus said,]

"It will not come by watching for it.

It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look, there!'

*Rather, the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth,
and people don't see it."*

This concept of the kingdom – or salvation, being within us
is evident in this reading from Thomas [70]...

Jesus said,

*"If you bring forth what is within you,
what you have will save you.*

*If you do not have that within you,
what you do not have within you [will] kill you."*

The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus,
with some being very hard to understand –

like the most obscure poetry in a graduate level literature class!

Some of them, though, sound very familiar to Jesus' sayings & parables in our Bible;
like this one from Thomas [76]...

Jesus said,

*"The Father's kingdom is like a merchant who had a supply of merchandise
and found a pearl.*

That merchant was prudent;

he sold the merchandise and bought the single pearl for himself.

*So also with you, seek his treasure that is unfailing, that is enduring,
where no moth comes to eat and no worm destroys."*

Willard, p.4

Others start out differently, but come around to recognizable Gospel sayings [106]...

Jesus said,

*"When you make the two into one, you will become children of Adam,
and when you say, 'Mountain, move from here!' it will move."*

A familiar scene from the synoptic Gospels is when Jesus asks his disciples,

"Who do people say that I am?"

This takes a different turn with Thomas [13]...

Jesus said to his disciples,

"Compare me to something and tell me what I am like."

Simon Peter said to him,

"You are like a just messenger."

Matthew said to him,

"You are like a wise philosopher."

Thomas said to him,

"Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like."

Jesus said,

*"I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk,
you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring
that I have tended."*

And he took him, and withdrew, and spoke three sayings to him.

When Thomas came back to his friends they asked him,

"What did Jesus say to you?"

Thomas said to them,

*"If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me,
you will pick up rocks and stone me,
and fire will come from the rocks and devour you."*

In the Biblical Gospels, Jesus' message includes a warning
that the return of the Son of Man will be a day of judgment
as God's Kingdom is established.

But like the Gospel of John's reference to the Word present at Creation,
Thomas links salvation to 'the Beginning' [18]...

The disciples said to Jesus,

"Tell us, how will our end come?"

Jesus said,

*"Have you found the beginning, then, that you are looking for the end?
You see, the end will be where the beginning is.*

*Congratulations to the one who stands at the beginning:
that one will know the end and will not taste death."*

Willard, p.5

Another text from Thomas [22]...

Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his disciples,

"These nursing babies are like those who enter the (Father's) kingdom."

They said to him,

"Then shall we enter the (Father's) kingdom as babies?"

Jesus said to them,

"When you make the two into one,

*and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner,
and the upper like the lower,*

and when you make male and female into a single one,

so that the male will not be male nor the female be female,

when you make eyes in place of an eye,

a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot,

an image in place of an image, then you will enter [the kingdom]."

Did you follow all that? I believe the key to that passage is this:

'...when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner...'

which is to say that when our thoughts match our deeds,

when who you are inside is matched by how you live,

then you are in the God's Kingdom as a social reality.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to this effect,

to worship God, we must do so 'in spirit and truth'.

Actually, Thomas sounds like the United Church of Christ in the 21st Century.

Thomas was inclusive and way ahead of his time.

I am not suggesting we abandon the traditional teachings of the Gospels,

but we are in a position to think for ourselves and to choose.

The Gospel of Thomas and other so-called 'gnostic' writings

offer us an alternative view of the rich diversity of early Christian community

and the possibilities of what the Church can yet become.

Any group can harden into extremism saying,

'Ours alone is the one true way!'

Perhaps the Gospel of John was an appeal to avoid the extremes of Gnosticism –

while acknowledging those like Thomas still had something important to say.

As a congregation of the United Church of Christ,

we keep the door open for both practical Martha and spiritual Mary, by saying,

'Don't put a period where God has placed a comma,

for God is still speaking.'

Amen

*Our lesson today from 1 John 1:1-2:3 is a 'Christian manifesto',
setting forth the principles of what it meant to be a Christian
in the community that aligned themselves with the Apostle John...*

[1:1] We announce to you what existed from the beginning,
what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes,
what we have seen and our hands handled, about the word of life.

[2] The life was revealed, and we have seen,
and we testify and announce to you the eternal life
that was with the Father and was revealed to us.

[3] What we have seen and heard,
we also announce it to you so that you can have fellowship with us.
Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

[4] We are writing these things so that our joy can be complete.

[5] This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you:
"God is light and there is no darkness in him at all."

[6] If we claim,
"We have fellowship with him," and live in the darkness,
we are lying and do not act truthfully.

[7] But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light,
we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son,
cleanses us from every sin.

[8] If we claim,
"We don't have any sin," we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

[9] But if we confess our sins,
he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins
and cleanse us from everything we've done wrong.

[10] If we claim,
"We have never sinned," we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

[2:1] My little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you don't sin.
But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father,
Jesus Christ the righteous one.

[2] He is God's way of dealing with our sins,
not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

[3] This is how we know that we know him: if we keep his commandments.

John 20:19-31

[19] On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,
the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews,
Jesus came and stood among them and said to them,
“Peace be with you.”

[20] When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side.
Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

[21] Jesus said to them again,
“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.”

[22] And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them,
“Receive the Holy Spirit.

[23] If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;
if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

[24] Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin,
was not with them when Jesus came.

[25] So the other disciples told him,
“We have seen the Lord.”

But he said to them,
“Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails,
and place my finger in the mark of the nails,
and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

[26] Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house,
and Thomas was with them.
The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said,
“Peace be with you.”

[27] Then he said to Thomas,
“Put your finger here, and see my hands;
and put out your hand, and place it in my side;
do not be faithless, but believing.”

[28] Thomas answered him,
“My Lord and my God!”

[29] Jesus said to him,
“Have you believed because you have seen me?
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples,
which are not written in this book;

[31] but these are written that you may believe
that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,
and that believing you may have life in his name.