

“Whoever Drinks from My Mouth”[©]
First of a Sermon Series on the Gospel of Thomas
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INTRODUCTION

One of most ancient secrets of the world’s religions is not a secret at all. The secret is a secret because it becomes hidden by the claims of truth of various organized religions. This secret, this bit of esoteric knowledge, is a secret because it undercuts organized religion’s need to have doctrines of belief and professions of faith. The secret is fundamental to Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, and earth-centered traditions. The secret is found in the sacred texts of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. This secret became a heresy of the Roman Catholic church in the fourth century.

The secret, that is not a secret at all, is this: the kingdom of God, enlightenment, salvation, oneness with the universe, cosmic consciousness, or whatever—you want to call it—is not found by looking outside ourselves to religious authorities, rituals, or religious dogma; it is found within each one of us in the place where we can come closest to God. Buddha said, “Be ye lamps unto yourselves.” The Tao Te Ching says, “If the modern [person] would use [the right key to knowledge, that person] could find old wisdom in [their] heart and clear vision enough to see from start to finish and finish to start the circle rounding perfectly.”¹ And from the Upanishads of Hinduism, “That which is awake in us even while we sleep . . . that indeed is pure . . . that verily is called the Immortal. All worlds have their being in that . . . That is the Self.”² In Hebrew scripture in Deuteronomy, it reads: “ But the word [of God] is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.”³ From Islam, in the writings of the Sufis, “The true lover [of Allah] finds [Allah’s] light only if, like a candle, he is his own fuel.”⁴ And in Christianity, from Luke, “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 within you.”⁵

¹Tao Te Ching #65.

²Katha Upanishad, p 22.

³Deut. 30:14

⁴The Way of the Sufi. 71.

⁵ (Luke 17:20, *entos* meaning “within” or “among us”

Traditional Christianity views these ideas of inner access to God as suspect. Traditional Christianity sees access to God as only coming through following certain prescribed, so-called “right” beliefs and following the proper rituals—called sacraments.

Usually this is expressed as Jesus Christ is the one and only Son of God who provides the only access to God the Father. It is through accepting Jesus as your one and only savior (either through a conversion experience or following certain church rituals) that you will find access to God and everlasting life.

Yet there is a Christian tradition just as old and just as theologically sound as traditional Christian beliefs. This other ancient tradition affirms that the kingdom of God is found within each of us. This tradition is reflected in the Gospel of Thomas. <5.5>

The Raiders of the Lost Truth

Yet up until 1945, we didn’t know much about this other ancient Christian tradition. No copy of the Gospel of Thomas was known to exist—a simple scripture of the sayings of Jesus. The story of how a copy was discovered resembles the adventures in the movie *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*—an accidental discovery of a treasure, international smuggling involving people on three continents, train rides at night across Europe, secret meetings in cafes, and international politics.

The story begins in the fourth century when Athanasius the Catholic Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt issued an edict that only certain scriptures were to be considered as authoritative and others were to be considered as heretical. Among those lists of heretical scriptures were a group of texts about the teachings of Jesus termed as gnostic. “Gnostic” in Greek means “to know” and refers to gaining personal knowledge as the path to God through one’s own experience.

So the libraries of churches and monasteries throughout the Christian world were culled of all these scripture and most were destroyed. Among those texts was the Gospel of Thomas.

Scholars knew about the Gospel of Thomas because some of the founders of the early Catholic church ranted about its heretical ideas in their writings. Also in the 1890’s, tantalizing fragments of the Gospel of Thomas were discovered in Egypt, but no complete text.

In December of 1945, two Muslim brothers were digging in a hillside near the town of Nag Hamadi, Egypt to recover a mineral that was high in fertilizer value. While digging, they unearthed several sealed earthenware jars. One of the brothers didn’t want to open them because he feared they contained evil spirits. But the other brother, Muhammad Ali thought they might contain treasure. He was disappointed when he opened them to find not gold and jewels but several leather bound volumes with pages of unfamiliar writing. Muhammad

and his brother took them home. There, several of the volumes were used by Muhammad's mother to light the cooking fire.

Soon several tragedies befell Muhammad and his family that convinced him that his brother must be right: these jars indeed contained evil spirits. Muhammad gave the volumes to a local priest who gave them to a history teacher who thought they might be valuable. The history teacher sent them to a friend in Cairo to find out their value. The volumes were sold on the black market in Cairo which attracted the attention of Egyptian officials who confiscated 13 leather-bound volumes; however, not before another volume was smuggled out of Egypt to the United States and there offered for sale.

Gilles Quispel, a biblical scholar from the Netherlands, heard of the volume and asked Carl Jung, the noted Swiss psychiatrist, to purchase it through the Jung Foundation. When Professor Quispel received the volume, he recognized the Coptic language and began to translate. He soon was astonished to realize he had a complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas.

There is much intrigue about how the remaining volumes came to be published. All in all fifty-two early texts were recovered. The source of the volumes was the library of a Christian Coptic Monastery near Nag Hamadi. Rather than destroy the volumes as the Bishop of Alexandria had instructed in the fourth century, the monks of the Monastery decided to bury them, and thus they were preserved. <5.5, =10>

Two Views of the Kingdom

The discovery of these texts has changed the thinking about early Christianity. For centuries, Christians have thought that there was a simple early Christianity. But the reality is quite different. There were many early Christian communities with very different perspectives on who this person Jesus was. A good example of these differing perspectives occurs in two different scripture texts when Jesus asks the question of his disciples "Who am I?" One early Christian perspective is reflected in Matthew Chapter 16 where it is written:

[Jesus] said to [the disciples], "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! . . . I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.⁶

This is the text that is used by the Roman Catholic church to establish the apostolic link with Peter as the first pope.

But listen to this very different response from Jesus in the Thomas Gospel. Jesus asked the same question of his disciples "Who am I?" Peter responded "a just messenger,"

⁶Mt 16:15-18 NRSV

Matthew responded “a wise philosopher,” and Thomas responded “a teacher.” Then Jesus corrected the disciples saying, “you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended.” The Jesus, reflected in this response, is not the one and only Son of God and the founder of the Christian church, but one who tends the bubbling spring of the Spirit of God that we all can drink from!

The Jesus of the Thomas Gospel tends the spring, points the way, and says in effect “If you want a relationship with God, if you want salvation, if you want eternal life, do as I do.” In Thomas, Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed”⁷

The traditional Christian idea that Jesus is the one and only Son of God and the only Christ is absent in Thomas. Rather Jesus said, the kingdom of God “is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father.”⁸ And in another place: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you have will save you.”⁹

When Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed,” now that is a shocking quote! Jesus didn’t say, “Hear my words and you will become like me.” The image is of drinking from Jesus’ mouth. This image means that we receive Jesus’ teaching on a more personal and intimate level than on the intellectual level of just hearing words. Jesus was talking about the direct experience of the spirit moving in our hearts. Then, Jesus said, we will not only be like him—the Christ—but the Christ will become us and all will be revealed. The experience is that of enlightenment when all becomes known. Mystical poet, Rainer Maria Rilke writes of this experience of enlightenment:

Center of all centers, core of cores,
almond self-enclosed and growing sweet—
all this universe, to the furthest stars
and beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit.

How you feel, how nothing clings to you;
your vast shell reaches into endless space,
and there the rich, thick fluids rise and flow,
Illuminated by your infinite peace,

a billion stars go spinning through the night,

⁷Thomas 108.

⁸Th 3.

⁹Th 70.

blazing high above your head,
But in you is the presence that
will be, when all the stars are dead.¹⁰

<5.5, =15.5>

That Certain Knowledge

“In you is the presence that will be, when all the stars are dead.” The certain knowledge of that presence is the Christ in each of us. And how do we get that? The Jesus of the Thomas Gospel answers, “We go within.” The Buddha answers, “Be you lamps unto yourselves. Do not rely on external help.”¹¹ And you do this through praying and listening for, what the Quakers call, that still small voice of the presence of God within each of us. We listen for that presence that “will be [with us] when all the stars are dead.” We sit like the Buddha or pray like Jesus taught—unmoved in our determination through all temptations to get up and do something else. We meditate or pray through that which distracts us until we are quiet enough for the holy presence within us to be heard.

And if we can't find that presence within, we keep the faith. We engage in transformative rituals that point the way—like the ritual of the communion we will experience in a few minutes. Communion is the ritual enactment of Jesus' promise, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed.” Viewed from this perspective the communion bread is not the body of Jesus but the holy Word we take into our beings; and the communion wine is not the blood of Jesus but the Holy Spirit whose presence is revealed to us through our awareness of what is within. And there within, we find the kingdom of Heaven; we find enlightenment. That's the promise and the experience of the Buddha, of the Christ. <2.5, =18>

CONCLUSION

If the Jesus of the Thomas Gospel moves you, if the image of the power of the Christ spirit as being within each of us enhances your faith, if the idea of the kingdom of heaven being here and now rather than at some end of time encourages you, then draw inspiration from these words. The Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas is close to what many Unitarian Universalists have been saying about Jesus for several hundred years.

If however you are moved by the image of Jesus as the one and only son of God through only whose grace we will find God, then may that inspire your life as well and bring you closer to God.

In the end, either way is a path to God and a way to find God's loving presence in your life. One of the beauties of a Unitarian Universalist church is that no one will tell you what you

¹⁰Rikle, Rainer Maria. “Buddha in Glory,” Selected Poetry. Ed. Stephen Mitchell. 69.

¹¹Buddha's Farewell Address. Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha, E.A. Burt, ed. 49

should believe. May the path you choose to walk have heart and give you peace. In a world without end. Amen. <1.5, =19.5>