

"The Gospel of Thomas, Pema Chödrön and Me"

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Bedford Presbyterian Church

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Scripture Reading Gospel of Thomas, Logion 3 Translation (mostly) by Lynn Bauman

Jesus says,
 If your spiritual guides say to you,
 "Look, the Kingdom is in the sky,"
 well then the birds
 will get there ahead of you.
 If they say, "It is in the sea,"
 then the fish will precede you.

No, the divine Realm is
 inside and all around you.
 When you come to know yourself
 you will be known,
 realizing at last that you
 are a child of the Living One.
 If, however, you never come to know
 who you truly are,
 you are a poverty-stricken being,
 and it is your "self"
 which lies impoverished.

When I was ordained here in November of 2002, a few people gave me gifts. One of those gifts, from Elizabeth Messinger, was a book by Pema Chödrön, entitled *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Why Elizabeth felt I needed a book about "difficult times" on the occasion of my ordination to ministry is an interesting question, but not one that I'm going to ponder now. That book was my first encounter with Pema Chödrön, and for that encounter I'm eternally grateful to Elizabeth. Since that time, I've read several of Pema's books, listened to many of her CDs over and over again, and over the years have attended three weekend workshops given by her at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck. If I had to make a list of the five most important spiritual teachers in my life, Pema Chödrön would be on it. Ironically, I was at one of

the workshops a few years ago, when I encountered Don Herner's wife Susan. Don sings in our choir and was dropping Susan off for the weekend. Our usual context is Bedford Presbyterian Church. Susan and I were surprised to see each other. "I thought you were a Christian," Susan said, with a laugh.

Well, I am a Christian. I'm a Christian who finds value in Buddhist teaching and practice, as it happens. For me, Buddhist practice and Christianity are not mutually exclusive. For me, the Mosaic laws of the Old Testament and Jesus' teaching in the Gospels lay a framework for leading a moral, compassionate, God-centered life. For me it's the framework within which I try to make my choices and lead my life. But in some ways, it's a skeletal architecture. The moral guideposts are mostly clear: Love your neighbor as yourself; Do unto others as you would have others do unto you; love God with all your heart, mind and strength; do not kill, do not covet; take care of the poor and vulnerable, seek the kingdom of God; love your enemies, do not be afraid. The "what" of the moral guideposts is pretty clear, but the "how" isn't made explicit at all. How on earth do I actually love the neighbor who drives me nuts with her petty, small-minded, completely selfish and constant complaining? The Bible doesn't help me out here. It just tells me to do it. Love your neighbor. But HOW? When it's difficult, how do you do it? We're not talking about behavior here. Jesus doesn't say to ACT like you love your neighbor while secretly hating her guts. He says to LOVE your neighbor. Just DO it. And what about the 10th commandment, that you shouldn't covet your neighbors goods. That's not an action, that's a feeling. How do I stop from coveting my friend's boat? Or my friend's good looks? I'd like to be a good-looking young person in my own boat. How do you make yourself feel differently than you do? The Bible doesn't tell you how.

Pema Chödrön does tell you how. She gives you very specific things to do. That doesn't make it easy, but it gives you a method, a way to practice toward moving away from blame, judgment, jealousy, and resentment, and toward equanimity, peace and transformation of consciousness. For those of you who don't know of Pema Chödrön, she's an American woman who became a Buddhist nun in 1974 in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In 1984 she became the Director of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia. She teaches all over the world and has published 10 books and 11 CD sets. I want to read you some of the subheads from her book titles and CDs, to give you a sense of the

content of her teaching: *A Guide to Compassionate Living; Practicing Peace in Times of War; Freeing Ourselves from Old Habits and Fears; Meditation Practice for Difficult Times; Finding Freedom from Anger, Resentment and Other Destructive Emotions; Pure Meditation: The Tibetan Buddhist Practice of Inner Peace; and Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*. From these titles, you can get a sense of the kinds of things she focuses on.

This first book that Elizabeth gave me had practical advice on how to move toward a more spiritually mature orientation; a place from which I *might* be able to soften my heart toward my complaining neighbor or stop being jealous of my young friend's boat. It had instructions for the beginner on how to live with, and even embrace the daily problems that beset us all, as opportunities for learning and spiritual development. It had teachings about how to move through life with an open and soft heart; about developing compassion for others. It all begins with meditation, of course, with sitting still, paying attention to breath, and bringing oneself to the present moment over and over again; with accepting suffering as a part of life; and with recognizing and letting go of habitual patterns. It continues with developing compassion or loving kindness for oneself, which is the key toward having compassion and loving kindness for other people. I believe that these teachings and this practice helped me to become a better follower of Jesus and his ethical teachings. Not that I'm all the way there yet, or ever will be, but what I've learned is that that's OK. There is no "there." Another thing you learn from Buddhist teaching is that there is no destination -- it's all journey, and you learn to develop patience along the way and to stop judging yourself for not having arrived yet. I'm not any kind of expert on Buddhist teaching or theology -- far from it. I'm not even a very self-disciplined practitioner. But these teachings and the practice that I have done have been exceedingly helpful to me and to others I know who use them. If you haven't tried them, I commend them to you.

But what about Jesus? How does he fit into this? A great breakthrough for me was discovering the work of Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault through a book called *The Wisdom Jesus*. I've talked about her work here before. Through very careful scholarship, and incorporating scripture that didn't make it into the Bible, like the Gospel of Thomas, she paints a portrait of Jesus that is different from anything I had encountered before. For me, it was a welcome synthesis of east and west because it presents Jesus as a wisdom teacher in the Hebrew tradition, but not so unlike some of the wisdom traditions of the

east. Dr. Bourgeault's understanding of Jesus is as a teacher of transformation of consciousness. I don't have time in a sermon to make the case that she makes to support this understanding, so I hope you'll trust that it is grounded in first-rate scholarship and very compelling.

This spring I did an online course with Dr. Bourgeault on the *Gospel of Thomas*, which is one of the gospels that was found in Nag Hammadi Egypt in the 1950s. It is an authentic gospel and is now believed by some scholars to have come from the first century of the common era. It may be the earliest witness to the life of Jesus. It is a book that consists mainly of his sayings or teachings, and many of the sayings point clearly to the transformation of consciousness. Or maybe not so clearly, because a lot of it is very dense, very advanced spiritual teaching that is not easy to grasp on first reading. I have three different books on the Gospel of Thomas and I have to admit that there is much of it that I still don't understand. But that's the beauty of it -- with a talented teacher leading the way, the understanding is there to be had if you dig for it.

Here's a quote from Dr. Bourgeault from her course on the Gospel of Thomas: "one thing is certain: this struggle to awaken to a different way of knowing (and being known!) is for Thomas the whole point of the human journey. . . In the Gospel of Thomas [Jesus says] that we are here to *do* something, to participate in some sacred transformation of consciousness which will ultimately reveal both our deepest personal identity and our collective human responsibility."

I realize that this is a pretty dry sermon, and I apologize for that. If you've stuck with me, I congratulate you. I was wrestling with how to communicate to you something that has been so important to me, but when I try to summarize it, it's all tied up in high falutin' philosophical language, and may seem boring, which it's definitely not. But I don't know how else to talk about it. The thing to do is not to talk about it, but to dive into it. For me, the diving has included meditation, Pema Chödrön, the Gospel of Thomas, and Cynthia Bourgeault. This diving has helped me flesh out the moral architecture of my life. It has provided me with the HOW of spiritual growth. I have a long way to go, but I'm working on it. How about you? How's the HOW of your spiritual life going? What deep is calling to you today?

I want to close with three short readings.

The first one is a zen story as told by Pema Chödrön:

A big, burly samurai comes to a Zen master and says, "Tell me the nature of heaven and hell." The Zen master looks him in the face and says, "Why should I tell a scruffy, disgusting, miserable slob like you? A worm like you, do you think I should tell you anything?" Consumed by rage, the samurai draws his sword and raises it to cut off the master's head. The Zen master says, "That's hell." Instantly, the samurai understands that he has just created his own hell -- black and hot, filled with hatred, self-protection, anger, and resentment. He sees that he was so deep in hell that he was ready to kill someone. Tears fill his eyes as he puts his palms together to bow in gratitude for this insight. The Zen master says, "That's heaven."

And the second is this, from our opening sentences, from the Gospel of Luke:

Jesus replied to them by saying, "The kingdom of God does not come with signs to be observed or with visible display. Nor will people say, Look! Here it is! or See, it is there! For behold, the kingdom of God is within you and among you."

And finally, this portion of Logion 3 from the Gospel of Thomas

. . . the divine Realm is
inside and all around you.
When you come to know yourself
you will be known,
realizing at last that you
are a child of the Living One.