

I usually begin this time by inviting you into a brief period of silence. Our goal is to be present, to be open, to be awake.

I want to do a smidgen of amplification of this.

I want to say something here about these times together as I currently am seeing and seeing them.

I am working with the assumption that what I want for myself and for those of you who attend these sessions, whether you are here in person, participating via live stream, listen to the podcasts of this or watch the video later or read the transcript - in whatever form, whenever; that our ultimate goal is to turn information into transformation.

I keep remembering, then forgetting, then remembering something I heard from Richard Rohr over twenty five years ago - there is no detour around the hard stuff to get to where we hope to be. You can't get on a plane and fly over several stages of development to get to bliss. At some point we have, all of us, to take a deep look at the very things that motivated us to come to a gathering like this in the first place. There is a kind of faith and trust to be involved in this process.

I am laboring under the illusion that I am figuring this stuff out. It is the same illusion I had, say, ten years ago. I can go back and look at the text of classes I taught here ten years ago

and see that I am no longer that person but, at the time, I thought I was figuring it out. It is embarrassing to read that material now.

If you kept a journal and went back to read it from ten years ago - what you thought was important, what you worried about, what you wanted - you would see what I mean. And, if that person could have read what the person you are now wants, worries about, thinks is important, that person would faint. And, if we could see the person who will read ten years from now what we are writing today, that person would faint.

So what are we up to? Thomas Merton said, "Is it possible you could live your whole life without ever having met the person who lived your life?" And, the answer is, "Yes." So one of the things we are about is being present to who we currently are with an awareness of the transformative process we are in. We are not who we were. We are not who we will be. We are in the process of becoming centers of freedom, honesty and love.

If I didn't think some of you, I don't know how many, would bolt for the door, I'd risk making an opening time of silence and meditation longer. This work we are doing in here, I'm just planting seeds. You've got to do the tending to the garden. It is hard, but fun and exciting, work.

It is needed, because we suffer from depth deprivation. These talks I offer are intended to help us break through whatever habits of mind and heart we have that keep us from a

deep experience with the Sacred and with life itself. All of us, your teacher included - maybe your teacher especially - have to be open to the possibility that what we are doing here can change our lives. Though I'm going to offer a couple of other definitions of practice later in this talk, one understanding is that a spiritual practice is any way we have of penetrating the illusions that keep us from touching and being touched by reality.

So, now, let's be here.

May Grace be in our heads, and in our thinking.

Grace be in our eyes, and in our seeing.

Grace be in our ears, and in our hearing.

Grace be in our mouths, and in our speaking.

Grace be in our hearts, and in our understanding.

Grace be in our ends, and at our departing.

Nothing To Hold On To

In mystical prophetic spiritual teachings there is nothing to hold on to.

Hang on to that.

In mystical prophetic spiritual teachings there is nothing to hold on to.

In mystical prophetic religious teachings there is also nothing to hold on to.

And, insofar as Jesus is concerned as our religious guide we keep in mind that he was a Jewish mystic in the prophetic tradition of his religion.

And, that mystics, whatever religious tradition they are in, scare us and prophets offend us.

This somewhat summarizes much of what we have covered so far in this theme of living in the Sacred Stream.

Today I want to talk about why “nothing to hold on to” is an important teaching. Next week we’ll go deeper and explore what happens when we try to violate this spiritual truth - that is, why people believe weird stuff - as well as what it means to, following the suggestion of religious scholar Huston Smith, to dig one well sixty feet deep rather than six that are ten feet deep.

Last week I raised a question for you to ponder. Why was it that Buddha lived into old age, dying of old age conditions and Jesus was executed at an age younger than most of us are now?

Though exact details about the historical life of Siddhartha Gautama, who is commonly referred to as “the Buddha,” are vague; it is generally agreed that he lived to be about eighty

years old being born between 563 to 480 BCE and dying somewhere around 483 to 400 BCE.

According to tradition, he was born in what is now Nepal to royal parents but renounced his home-life to live as a wandering ascetic. After years of searching, he attained enlightenment in what is now India. He taught a way of mindfulness known as the Eightfold Path. It was not until a couple of centuries after his death that he became to be known by the title Buddha. “Buddha” simply means “awakened one” or “enlightened one.”

Few people in this country, outside of academic circles, knew or cared much about religions other than rather individualistic or tribal understandings of Christianity until the 1960s.

What is now referred to as “the sixties” was a time of cultural revolution in many areas. The Beatles brought with them a guru who introduced thousands to a practice called TM or “transcendental meditation.” Alan Watts became an incredibly popular figure with his many books and radio programs on Zen. (All of these programs are still available on a free podcast. I recommend them.) Jack Kornfield, with whom I got to do a smidgen of training, brought into public awareness Vipassana Meditation. The word “vipassanasa” means “what is.”

It was out of my own personal involvement with and practice of this form of meditation that I came up with my

definition, at that time, of a spiritual practice as being - The central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” and developing the resources to be present to “what is.” Central to this spiritual practice is growing in the capacity to be non-judgmental.

Jesus of Nazareth was likely born sometime around 4 BC and was executed around 30 AD at around the age of 33.

My question was, why was it that Buddha got to die of old age at around 80 and Jesus got executed at an age younger than most of us are now?

I personally have benefited enormously from my exposure to and involvement in Buddhist teachings. Today’s time is not about Buddhism.

There are a number of correct answers to my question about why Buddha lived a long and, evidently, happy life and why Jesus was executed at an early age. Their cultures were very different. The eras in which they lived were very different. The religious contexts in which they taught were very different. There are other reasons as well.

The reason I had in mind was that Buddha achieved enlightenment and then taught that others could do the same. Life is suffering, he taught. The way to live life in light of this

and achieve liberation is to follow what he taught as The Eightfold Path.

On the other hand, Jesus achieved and experienced that he was a child of God - and, so was everyone else. That was the heart of his message and he taught this in word and deed. His deeds were more upsetting than his words.

According to the parable created by the early Jesus movement about him, which we talked about last week as The Temptation of Jesus, he came out of that experience with this realization and then he began to see God in everything and in everyone. Further, he deputized certain individuals to take this message to others.

Since I'm ranting about it all the time, I want to say a few more words about spiritual practice.

Just a few minutes ago I mention a definition of spiritual practice that grew out of my experience with Buddhist meditation practice. It is:

The central truth of and for spiritual practice is “paying attention” and developing the resources to be present to “what is.” Central to this spiritual practice is growing in the capacity to be non-judgmental.

This is still one valid description of spiritual practice.

Spiritual practice has a rhythm. It usually involves taking in some information and knowledge, like we mention last week. Then, the work of meditation, contemplation, and action that requires the courage and endurance we also talked about last week.

There is another definition or description of spiritual practice that I also use and I came up with this because our egos so love to be in charge and cook things up, which we also talked about last week and will continue to do so today. Our need to be right and in control screws up so much. So here is another definition:

A spiritual practice is that which we habitually enter into with our whole heart in which we assume the inner stance that offers the least resistance to our being over taken by the experience of Sacred Mystery which we are powerless by our own efforts to obtain.

Two people in love cannot force the loving encounter to happen between them but they can create the circumstances or container that provides the least resistance to that experience happening.

The poet cannot force a poem to come but she or he can put herself or himself in the place that provides the least resistance for the poetic experience to happen.

I will keep gently reminding you that this being here is just part of the work.

Back to the difference(s) between Buddha and Jesus.

Without going into the history or detail of it, the person who several centuries after the fact was declared to be “the Buddha” came out of his experience of being enlightened with an understanding of what he called the Four Noble Truths: People suffer, suffering has a cause, suffering has a end, and there is a way to bring about the end of suffering. That way is what is know as The Eightfold Path. He began to teach this. Some people got it and some didn’t. He had disciples. They wrote a lot of his teachings down. He lived a long, happy life. Most images or statues of the Buddha have him smiling or laughing.

Jesus came out of his experience of enlightenment, if you want to call it that, with a new self-understanding. “I am the child of God” - don’t worry about a definition of “god” right now - “and so are you.” This message is what got him executed.

We honestly have no idea how many people responded to Jesus. But, enough. Jesus deputized people to go out and do his work. Buddha taught for fifty years. Died of old age. Never had apostles. Jesus taught for perhaps three years and then was executed.

Of all the major religions in the world Christianity is the only one whose founder was executed. No other founder of any major religion was executed by the established political power. In addition to that, the second major figure in the Christian movement - Paul - was also executed. The third major leader of the Christian movement - Peter - was executed. The fourth major leader of the Christian movement - James - was executed. That is about as bleak as it can get.

And, honestly, if you were next in line for leadership of this movement, you would likely remember something that you left in the oven and have to get back home.

No, seriously, what you would likely do is go underground. That is, be secret.

Most all of my early religious education, even into seminary, was shaped by understandings of Christianity that developed around the time of the Protestant Reformation and then read back into the early history of the church. This wasn't done, for the most part - there were notable exceptions - with any bad intent. People didn't know better. They weren't stupid. Just ignorant. It is like the practice of medicine before germ theory became a proven fact. People operated out of the knowledge base that they had. However, looking back from this vantage point, it is like trying to build a skyscraper from the top down.

Now, we know better. Now, we are learning, thanks to advances in all the disciplines that affect our learning about the first three hundred years of the Christian movement - before there was “a church.”

Just one of the hundreds of resources available to learn about this is the published work of the Westar Institute’s “Christianity Seminar.” The book that contains papers about this research is “After Jesus, Before Christianity: A historical exploration of the first two centuries of the Jesus movements.” Notice that the word is “movements” not movement.

I was taught that pretty early on there was “a church.” There wasn’t. There were communities. Gatherings.

If, in your religious beliefs or practices, the state - or government, would more than likely get you if you crossed the lines they had drawn, you would keep you line crossings secret. Ken Wilber describes the people who spread the message and works of Jesus as “traveling pneumatics.” That is, they were people in whom “the spirit was alive.” They had a mystical consciousness that affected people. “Let this consciousness be in your which was in Christ Jesus,” Paul would write. They were mystics with prophetic voices.

But, when the movement got sanctioned by the government, that is when Constantine said to leaders of the

movement, “Get your act together!”, then these “traveling pneumatics” got replaced with beliefs and people who could be controlled.

People who love to quote chapter and verse of Christian Scripture more often than not read back into those early days doctrines and beliefs that those Jesus followers would likely be surprised to hear of. The Council of Nicea, which is where the Nicene Creed gets its name was not held until 325. There was no agreement about which writings would be authoritative for the newly formed church until at least seventy years after that; sometime around 393 to 397. So, you’ve got a period of well over three hundred and fifty years in which there was not only no formally organized “church” but also where there was a great variety of both beliefs and behaviors from one community to another. There was nothing to hold on to.

One thing we now know is that women played a much bigger and more important role in the early Jesus movements than the patriarchy would allow when formal organization came. Trying to get back to what actually the Jesus movements were about prior to 325 is one of the ways scholars are trying to experience an “unpolluted stream” as it were.

Okay. Let’s do a situation check.

Though I know that all metaphors are limited, the metaphor I am using for our creating and living a meaningful spiritual and

religious life is “moving into and living in the Sacred Stream.” The image, or metaphor, is of a stream at its point of origin where pure, clear, fresh, refreshing water is coming forth. (These streams can end up having incredible power, by the way. If you have seen images of the waterfall in Yosemite, you know what I mean.)

At any rate, you have the stream at its origin and it flows for a while before being polluted from one source or another. In our lifetime the source of pollution is usually human. We also know, and this is one of the exciting things actually happening in some places in our world today, that streams can be cleaned up.

This “cleaning up,” when it comes to the Christian religious tradition, is what religious and biblical scholars are attempting to do.

John Dominic Crossan is the living authority on the Jesus of history today. He is going to be offering an online course on the historical Jesus during this upcoming Lenten season. I am signed up for it. In the past I’ve done a lot of teaching on this topic which I don’t intend to repeat in this current theme. We’ll touch on some of it. If you are interested in exploring taking this course, click here.

<https://homebrewedchristianity.lpages.co/the-historical-jesus-info-page/>

Prior to 325 there was no “church doctrine.” There were some writings that came into existence. There were some, what we would now call, “affirmations of faith.” But, these were brief and more like “code words” that signified belonging. “Jesus is Lord” was one of them.

Prior to 325 it would have been unthinkable for a follower of Jesus to, for example, “take up arms.” The Jesus movement was non-violent and non-militaristic. It would have been unheard of to have, for example, a heresy trial. There was no unified doctrine to take exception to. There were no scriptures to argue about. There was nothing to “hang on to” except the love they had for each other and the joy they shared among a common acceptance and mutuality of support.

There were, by the way, writings. But they were, at first, sayings remembered. Then stories remembered or created. Then narratives. Actually, the first writings we have that are now considered sacred were e-mails. Well, actually letters, were written from one person to a small group of people that we have now frozen in time and made applicable to everybody.

After 325 lines were drawn with the expectation that if “you were one of us,” you would not cross that line. If you did, tough luck.

You may have heard of John Calvin. He was a major figure of the reformation. Calvin not only preached in Geneva,

Switzerland but also was mayor of the town. There was another preacher/theologian, Michael Servetus, who had a theological disagreement with Calvin. These two men exchanged letters for a while each trying to convince the other of his opinion. It turned bitter. Years passed. One day Servetus showed up in Geneva and went to church where Calvin was preaching. Calvin had him arrested and burned alive while Calvin watched. That was just the Christian thing to do.

So how do we work at purifying the Sacred Stream? First of all, we recognize it is risky. As I tried to indicate earlier, everything we come up with is provisional. Ten years from now we'll look back on this and say, "What?" One of the things that is so ludicrous to me about the current arguments over full inclusion is that in the Jesus movement it never was an issue. It would not have even been a possibility.

So, what do we do?

I'll begin by introducing information about "perennial wisdom." This is usually referred to as "perennial philosophy." This is about spirituality. Next week we'll talk about the religious aspect of it.

The word "perennial" comes from the world of botany and originally referred to something that was "ever green" and has come to mean "lasting a long time." Aldous Huxley is generally credited with the phrase but it has a very long history. Though I

heard and read about it in graduate school, the first practical or useful application I got about it came from, and I know I've referred to him a lot today, was Richard Rohr. Rohr's teachings begin with "if something is true, it is always true." And, always has been true.

One exciting thing today is that quantum physics, quantum mechanics, and cosmology are providing evidence for the truth of this. For example: A person now referred to as Saint Clement said, "When you know yourself, you know God." We now have some scientific basis for saying something like this. All great spiritual teachers have said something like this. A Buddhist would say, "Only the ego is vulnerable to the givens of life as only wood is vulnerable to fire. The diamond in the wooden house remains imperishable."

Perennial wisdom is not something old that now is being rediscovered. It always has been and is always renewing and evolving. Something in us is greater than we know. We are in something Greater than we know. We now know this wisdom more profoundly than people did during Jesus time and yet it is the same wisdom. We know the moon better than they did but it is the same moon.

It is very paradoxical. We have this wisdom within us. Yet, we have to receive it. What's more, this wisdom is of such enduring quality that if all teachers, and all books were to be

burned, we would and could reconstruct the entire body of enlightened truth in no time.

Now, here is where the “nothing to hold on to” part comes in: This wisdom is so big that no one person, group, or teaching can contain it. We need one another to put it together and to live it out. You cannot be spiritual by yourself. Why? Because the foundation of perennial wisdom is love and you can’t love by yourself. The Buddha didn’t invent something. He rediscovered it. He said, “I have seen the ancient way, the old road that was taken by all the all-awakened and that is my path too.” Or, as Sarah Grant put it about Jesus and this is one of my favorite spiritual teachings of all time: “It isn’t the way because Jesus took it. Jesus took it because it is the way.” Being able to articulate that way is purifying the stream. And, you can’t hold on to the stream. It flows.

So, if there is nothing to hold on to, what do we hold on to?

Great question.

Some of my answers, at the moment, are:

All reality is one.

This is a spiritual teaching. When we get into the life and teachings of Jesus, we’ll make it a religious teaching.

Jesus used this principle. It was the heart of his message. I am the child of God. Or, as we would put it now: I am one with reality and so are you. “Anyone who has seen me, has seen God.” People who see Christianity as a superior or exclusive religion have a real hard time with this. Jesus didn’t. Look at how, over the centuries, the church has fought about things Jesus would not comprehend now.

Here is another aspect of the perennial wisdom:

Nothing is to be taken literally in the spiritual world.

Another:

Matter is alive and the mirror in which we see ourselves and the Sacred.

Growth and becoming constitute purpose.

This means that, taking the previous principles into account, that we let go of our need to be right, to be in control, to use or abuse others, and so on. “Love one another as I have loved you.”

None of this is hard to understand. It’s hard to live. Because we want to hold on and Jesus says, “Let go. Have faith. Trust.” This is why, at least in Christianity, religion became a problem or problems to be solved rather than a mystery to be involved in.

You don't solve mysteries. As you go deeper into them, they become more mysterious. Not things you can hold to.

Teilhard De Chardin wrote, "I shall savor, with heightened consciousness, the intense yet tranquil rapture of a vision whose coherence and harmonies I can never exhaust."

Hold on to that.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.