

Seeking Thomas: Good News for Unitarian Universalists
Rev. Megan Lloyd Joiner
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
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Opening Words:

by Tim Haley

Amid all the noise in our lives, we take this moment to sit in silence --
to give thanks for another day; to give thanks for all those in our lives
who have brought us warmth and love; to give thanks for the gift of life.

We know we are on our pilgrimage here but a brief moment in time.
Let us open ourselves, here, now, to the process of becoming more whole --
of living more fully; of giving and forgiving more freely;
of understanding more completely the meaning of our lives here on this earth.

Story for All Ages: The Messiah Among Us (adapted)

Unknown Origin

From Doorways to the Soul: 52 Wisdom Tales from Around the World

Edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain

Our story this morning has been told by people for many years, so long in fact, that we don't know where it comes from. My guess is that it comes from the Jewish tradition because it is about a rabbi and about a group of people waiting for the Messiah. Messiah means a great leader, and many people through history have believed that the Messiah would come to bring a new age of peace and prosperity when all would be well and all people would be free. It was a mystery who the Messiah would be and it was believed that the Messiah might come into the world at any place, at any time!

Our story takes place in a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. In this monastery, some of the younger people had left the community in dissatisfaction and no new people were joining. There were only a few people and their leader, the abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on someone else.

One day, a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night's rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on his journey, the abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery and asked for his observations and for some advice to share with his people. Upon hearing the abbot's woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time.

"Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again?" the abbot begged.

"Your monks will not listen to my advice," the rabbi replied. "But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery."

"One of us?" asked the abbot astonished. "Which one?"

"Oh, that I cannot say," the rabbi answered. "Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you."

The abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered all the people of his community who listened in amazement to the news. "One of us! But who? Each one asked out loud.

Then to themselves they wondered, "It couldn't be Brother Robert—or could it?

"Surely not Sister Henrietta, but there are times when..."

"Not the youngest, well, maybe..."

"The abbot himself?"

"Could it be me?"

Soon things began to change at the monastery as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah's words in each word spoken. Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time, new people joined and the monastery thrived.

Reading: *The Gospel of Thomas*, 1-3a.

These are the secret sayings that Yeshua, who lives, spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas (the Twin) recorded.

1. And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

2. Yeshua says, If you are searching you must not stop until you find. When you find, however, you will become troubled. Your confusion will give way to wonder. In wonder you will reign over all things.

3. Yeshua said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, God's 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, God's kingdom is within you and outside you.

Reflections: Seeking Thomas

If you are searching, you must not stop...until you find.

However we came to be here this morning, we are here, in part, because we are searching.
We are seekers.

Seeking community.

Seeking meaningful lives and a better world.
Seeking to know ourselves better.

We seek truth in its many forms, and we seek connection with the source of life with its many names.
You are a seeker, and you have found this place.

Like you, I make it a habit to hang out with seekers. We are all looking, and praise be for when we find something! A few years ago, I had a finding moment on a non-descript Tuesday evening in the basement of All Souls Church on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan.

Sometimes people do a double take when I tell them that I love the UU Bible Study groups I've led. *UU Bible Study*, they ask, *Is there such a thing?* By all means.

The bible study group at All Souls was adventurous. We read Hebrew and Christian scriptures, exploring the historical context of biblical texts, examining where they have influenced our culture, and exploring how they impacted our own spiritual lives. The group was curious about texts outside the biblical canon, and so we dove into the Gospel of Thomas.

This gospel, a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth, was discovered by accident in 1945. An Egyptian farmer, Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman, was digging for fertilizer in the hills near the village of Nag Hammadi. His shovel hit the side of a large earthenware jar, and he and his brothers pulled it from the ground. The brothers feared that the tall jar might contain *jinn*, evil spirits, and so they hesitated to open it. Then, they decided it might contain treasure, and they pried open the lid. As the story goes, gold flakes flew up from the jar's mouth, and Muhammad Ali was *certain* it was filled with gold. It was filled with treasure alright, but it wasn't gold.

Inside were a collection of ancient papyrus codices or books most likely hidden in the jar, by monks from a nearby monastery, centuries before, as the battles between different factions of the early Christian church raged full force.

The jar contained fifty-two previously unknown Christian texts, including a collection of gospels. Among the books were those that came to be known as "gnostic gospels." As you may know, the word "gnostic" comes from the Greek term for knowledge, *gnosis*, and was used to describe early Christians who sought knowledge of God through experience in the world. More recent scholarship tells us that these folks did not call themselves gnostics. The term was an insult by the church fathers to as scholar Elaine Pagels puts it, "refer to those they dismissed as people claiming to 'know it all.'"

Muhammad's jar contained the books that the church authorities had branded heretical and dangerous. They told different stories of Jesus and his disciples. They emphasized self-knowledge and professed to hold the *secret* teachings of a very human Jesus. These books had gotten the men who wrote them, read them, studied

and preserved them, killed.

The Gospel of Thomas is just one piece of the treasure of Nag Hammadi. Probably written around the year 165, Thomas didn't make the cut for the Bible we know today. In part because they are so strange, scholars think that the Jesus sayings found in Thomas' gospel are some of the most original and early sayings of Jesus of Nazareth. They would have been part of the oral tradition that followed his ministry and would have been written down first, they think, in Syria in Aramaic, the language Jesus would have spoken. The book then made its way to a community of Coptic Christians in Egypt. And now, only the Coptic copies remain.

So why might this all be good news for Unitarian Universalists and other seekers? Because the Gospel of Thomas offers us glimpses of a Christian faith that explicitly values the spiritual search, the light of the divine in each person, and the knowledge of self.

Thomas reminds us that we join a rich heritage of seekers and reveals some of what was lost in the early battles over what Jesus said and who he was. The fighting began early in the first century, soon after a rabble-rouser named Jesus from the city of Nazareth was executed. Two hundred to three hundred years after his death, the church fathers had put together collections of texts that they claimed told the authoritative story of this Jesus they called the Messiah, the Christ, the anointed one.

In the end, only four of the many books that told the good news, or gospel, of Jesus were chosen by the orthodox establishment – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three draw from similar sources and impart similar narratives: A teacher and healer from Nazareth, Jesus speaks in riddles, parables; he claims that the Kingdom of God – as opposed to kingdom of the Roman Emperor – is at hand.

He is called the Messiah, the anointed King from the line of David, come to save the people of Israel. He is crucified, and, in two out of three, is resurrected.

The fourth and latest New Testament gospel, John's, diverges from the narrative and makes bold claims about Jesus' divinity. Jesus, was, for John, not only the Messiah, he was God. And humanity, for John, was utterly base. Only God was good. John's "good news" was that Jesus was the "light of the world," Redeeming humanity through his death and resurrection, The trick was that he would grant eternal life only to those who believed correctly – that he was God.

John's interpretation of the Christian story became the foundation of the orthodox church. And while this good news is exactly that and is saving for many people, it is also the basis for much of what many others have rejected in Christianity. In some ways, we see ourselves as countering John's view by celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of each human person, by seeing the light of the divine in all people, by proclaiming a human Jesus – if we want to talk about him at all.

More often we don't.

As my colleague Edmund Robinson puts it, many of us throw the baby Jesus out with the bathwater of the church that claimed to speak in his name. We shouldn't.

The finds at Nag Hammadi re-introduce the first century rabbi as prophet who pushed people to discover God within themselves. A man who, as Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "saw with open eye the mystery of the soul ... and had his being there."

The Gospel of Thomas invites us to join him. Like John's Gospel, it begins with a promise of eternal life, but not by believing that Jesus is God, instead, by finding meaning in what he said. Some of Thomas' parables are familiar, some are unique. Many of the sayings are riddles that read like Buddhist *koans*, questions without answers, analogies that make your head spin.

Thomas encourages readers to know God by knowing the divinity within ourselves. In her book on Thomas's gospel, *Beyond Belief*, Elaine Pagels asserts that the authors of John and Thomas were in conversation—or, more accurately, in heated debate.

The Gospel of John, she says, was written in direct opposition to "Thomas Christians," and "helped provide a foundation for a unified church, which Thomas, with its emphasis on each person's search for God, did not."

What Thomas did do and does still, is affirm the search for truth. Thomas paints a picture of a Jesus who invites us to participate in the wholeness and oneness of all creation. Thomas, known as the twin, is thought by some to be Jesus' twin brother. In the gospel that bears his name, each person has the opportunity to be the "twin" of the teacher, to stand as his equal.

Back to my finding moment... In the introductions to their books, Thomas scholars tend to encourage readers to let the text work on one's heart. I tried to do this during the weeks we spent with it in Bible Study at All Souls, but I got bogged down in the history, the language, the riddles.

My heart didn't get involved until we read saying #77:

Yeshua said: "I am the light that is over all things.

I am all.

From me all came forth, and to me all extends.

Split a piece of wood, and I am there.

Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

“What do you think?” I asked the group. One woman said: “It feels different than Jesus saying that it’s him, that he is the light, but I don’t know why.”

I nodded and jumped in (too early): “Yes,” I said, “bigger than him...*I* see God in this.” (I was excited to show them this different view of God) “I think he’s talking about God as the light that is in all.” I wanted them to see Jesus’ statement as open, radical, busting open old ideas about God. But I had missed the true revelation.

“I don’t see God at all,” another woman said adamantly. I motioned for her to go on. “‘*I am the light,*’ she said, ‘*I am everywhere. Everything comes from and extends to me.*’ It’s not just God. It’s not just Jesus. It’s *me*. It’s *you*. He’s using himself as an example,” she said. “He’s telling us to lift up the stone and split the wood and find ourselves there too.”

I was floored. And I loved it. Emerson also said about Jesus that if he came into the world now, he would say – “You, YOU!” “To his age,” Emerson says, “he said, I.” The Bible studier’s interpretation opened my eyes and then other sayings began to pop off the page like they were in bas-relief—singing the same song of oneness, wholeness, interconnection of self, creation and the divine.

The second saying we read this morning:

“Yeshua said, if your leaders say to you
the Kingdom (the divine realm, the holy)
is in the sky, then birds will precede you.
If they say she is in the sea,
than fish will precede you.”

No, the text tells us, the divine Reality exists within you and outside you. Divine Reality exists now within you and all around you.

This is the same truth we hear the poem by Buddhist teacher Tich Nhat Han:

*“I am the frog swimming in the lake,
but I am also the water snake
who needs to nourish its body
with the body of the frog. ...
I see myself in all species and all species in myself.”*

“Lift up the stone, I am there. Split the piece of wood, I am there.

In Thomas’s Gospel, the disciples are stupid. They don’t get it. In saying 24 they ask Jesus:

“Show us the place where *you* are,
for we must seek it.”

He answers, saying:

“Whoever has ears, listen! There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world.”

You are of holy stuff as much as I am. *You* are a light unto the world.

A little later on in the text is the only real “scene” in the entire gospel. Jesus reclines on the couch of a woman named Salome. She says “Who are you, man?”

His answer is translated literally as: “I am he who exists out of he who is equal.”

He who is equal.

This phrase is translated by some as “equilibrium,” by others as “realm of unity,” “what is undivided,” “what is whole.”

“I am he who comes from that which is whole.”

“I am your disciple,” the woman says.

And Jesus responds: “I say *whoever* is undivided will be full of light...” An invitation to wholeness, to balance.

Tich Nhat Han says: I am one with those who are able to embrace the whole of this world with their heart of love and their two arms of caring action. ... I see that I am not alone. ... I see myself in all the great beings and all the great beings in myself.”
Not only God.
Not only Jesus. Me. You.
The light of the world.

Soon after Pagels’ *Beyond Belief* was published, my colleague Rob Keithan, gave me a copy and wrote this inscription: “Could it be that the religion Jesus meant to found was Unitarian Universalism? Probably not, but it’s fun to pretend.”

Oh, but it’s so good – Thomas, the UU saint! Our very own gospel that echoes so much what we believe! Probably not, but it’s fun to pretend. We do need to take Rob’s tongue and cheek caveat seriously. It is easy to exoticize ancient texts – especially those we like!

Still in Thomas we seek and we can find inspiration for our faith. We find a Jesus once lost to history who invites us into relationship with the oneness of all things, with all that is holy, with ourselves.

Each one of us has a light to shine on the world. The sayings of Thomas were originally secret, meant only for the “know it alls.” But *we* believe that everyone – *everyone* – can know holiness, holiness and wholeness, by looking within: at the mystery of our own souls and without: by living fully engaged with each other and with our world.

We are seekers.

And we are finders.

Together we find new ways of living, new ways of giving and forgiving, of learning, and caring, new ways of loving.

And all are invited to this marvelous way of being alive.

And so let us answer the invitation, here, now, and each of the precious days we are granted upon this earth: Let us open ourselves to the process of becoming more whole.

Resources:

Lynn C. Bauman. *The Gospel of Thomas: Wisdom of the Twin*. White Cloud Press, 2012.

Marvin W. Meyer and James M. Robinson. *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts Complete in One Volume*. HarperOne, 2009

Stephen Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus: A New Translation and Guide to His Essential Teachings for Believers and Unbelievers*. Harper Perennial, 1991.

Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Random House, 2003.

Stephen Patterson and Marvin Meyer, <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/gosthom.html>

Rev. Edmund Robinson, *The Gospel of Thomas*, Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House in Chatham, February 22, 2009.