

First United Methodist Church-Omaha  
Dr. Jane Florence  
April 21, 2013  
Sermon Title: "Treasures in a Clay Jar"  
Text: 1 Corinthians 2



When I was in college, I dated a man of Jewish heritage. To be precise, his father was Jewish; his mother had been reared Roman Catholic, but she converted to Judaism. He rejected both and proclaimed himself an atheist. That was back in my more fundamentalist days. So when he said something one day about Christians leaving out of the Bible the stories about Jesus that they didn't like, I took it as a personal insult. He told me stories about Jesus that I had never heard. I had been reared in Sunday school every Sunday of my life—how dare he presume to tell me about my Jesus! I knew he must be lying; I wouldn't listen to him.

Looking back, even those remarks did not spur in me a question to explore the authorship or compilation of the Bible. As far as I knew, God said it; I believed it; that settled it.

It was many years later before I found myself in seminary. Many years before the Introduction to Biblical Studies course taught me, for the first time, how the Bible came to be. It was then that I learned that it wasn't until 300 years after Jesus, or about 15 generations, before it was decided which of the many different writings circulating in the Christian communities would be made part of the official church scriptures. It was then that I learned about the church councils—of the men (the bishops of the developing institution) who gathered—voted on which writings they found acceptable. It was then that I learned that the white leather book with the gold embossed letters of "Holy Bible"—the one that I had carried to Sunday school every week as a child—was compiled by majority vote.

The axiom goes, "history is written by the winners". Emperor Constantine was definitely considered a "winner". He deemed the "losers" writings were heresy and possession of them was a criminal offense. Copies of the banned books—those other writings of Christian communities—the minority voice—those were burned and destroyed.

"But in Upper Egypt, someone, possibly a monk from a nearby monastery of St. Pachomius, took the banned books and hid them from destruction."<sup>1</sup> He placed his 13 leather-bound papyrus books carefully in a red earthenware jar over three feet tall. He sealed it and buried the large clay jar in the soft soil beside a massive boulder near Nag Hammadi. There it remained safely hidden for almost 1600 years.

In December 1945, an Arab peasant digging around a massive boulder for some soft soil to use as fertilizer for his crop hit hardened clay instead. Brushing away the dirt, he unearthed an earthen jar over three feet tall. Unaware of the importance of his find, some of the papyrus kindled his hearth's fire for supper. After that, for the next many years, several of these ancient writings made their journey through antiquity dealers and smugglers before being collected at the Coptic Museum in Cairo and placed under lock and key for another three decades. It was 1977 before academic scholars from around the world finally accessed the treasures of the hidden clay jar.

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<sup>1</sup>Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979.

The 13 leather-bound “books” contained 52 texts. Multiple early Christian writings had been compiled in each; the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Philip; the Gospel of Truth, the Secret Book of James. Some of them reiterate teachings sounding quite familiar to the Holy Bible scriptures; some of them are quite different; all of them are called gnostic.

Gnosis is a Greek word usually translated as “knowing” or “knowledge”. It’s not the kind of knowledge tested on college entrance exams of language or science or math or logic. Gnosis is an intuitive knowing. It is a knowing of oneself at the deepest level and a knowing of the Divine.

To be certain Gnostic Christianity is a label as diverse as Fundamentalist Christianity and Progressive Christianity and Evangelical Christianity. When we speak of any faith group of Christians or Muslims or Jews, we must remember that *within* any group there are as many differences as *between* the groups.

We could look only at these new writings found at Nag Hammadi, but I think what is perhaps more interesting at first is to look at scriptures that are part of the Bible as we know it. If we look at them—with gnostic eyes—we can see what has been before us all along—which we might have missed.

Although Gnosticism encompasses a broad swath with many different communities and different particular beliefs, in general, Gnostics believed that there are many levels of understanding and knowing. They believed that God’s Spirit leads people into deeper spiritual truths. These spiritual “knowings” or God’s wisdom was a mystery to those who have not yet matured spiritually. Those whose spirit has been opened by God’s Spirit could know—gnosis.

Matthew chapter 13 reports that Jesus told the parable of the sower to a large crowd. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas reports the same parable. Matthew goes on to say,

<sup>10</sup>Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

<sup>11</sup>He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. <sup>12</sup>For to those who have [wisdom], more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have no [understanding], even what they have will be taken away.”

Matthew and Mark and Thomas all say that Jesus spoke of the “secrets” or “mysteries” of the realm of God which some have ears to hear and eyes to see—and some do not. The Apostle Paul also wrote of hidden wisdom and the mysteries of God which some are able to comprehend and some are not. In the scripture that we heard today, Paul wrote to the folks at Corinth:

“I did not come to you to proclaim the mystery of God in lofty words—but with a demonstration of the Spirit... then he spoke of “the mature”—among whom “we do speak wisdom, God’s wisdom, secret and hidden.”

In first Corinthians chapter 3, he continued:

“And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather ... as infants in Christ. <sup>21</sup>I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.”

Paul wrote many times that the Christian goal is to grow up spiritually—to mature—to come to know this deeper level—to allow God’s Spirit to reveal these mysteries that were once hidden, but have been revealed in Christ.

You see these Gnostic writings claim that there is more depth available than what lies on the surface. They claim that some have come to understand.

Some resistance to this kind of thinking emerges if we interpret this as levels of spiritual hierarchy of which we can boast **our** achievement. If we hear in this that some folks are more special than others, God’s favorites get the inside message so to speak. If we begin to think of this as a spiritual snobbery, then an insider/outsider club of the church could form. If some develop a secret signal, a handshake or a code word, to indicate their spiritual advancement makes them better than others—then we fall into a terrible state of spiritual arrogance. That’s not at all what the Gnostics taught. Quite the opposite, they were against hierarchy. Their communities were formed around a common leading of God’s Spirit—not the ancient practices of some (priests) that they were necessary to mediate God to all others.

In Paul’s letter to Colossians, chapter 1, verses 25-28, he says:

<sup>25</sup>I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup>the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints.

He wrote to the Ephesians (4) of the gifts of the Spirit which are “for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. <sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”

What the Nag Hammadi discovery revealed most is that early forms of Christianity were far more diverse than anyone expected. What we call Christianity today actually represents only a small selection of specific sources, chosen, voted acceptable from among dozens of others. The institution which won determined the texts we would read and the lens through which we would read scripture.

Looking at our writings again in light of the writings of the others, we can see the Gnostic message is woven throughout both. The hidden mystery of God is no longer hidden. The Gospel of Thomas spells it out: “The kingdom is inside you and outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and will understand that you are children of the living [God].” (Saying 3)

Paul says it simply in his letters, “<sup>27</sup>the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you.”

Luke proclaims Jesus’ teaching, “For you must know, the Kingdom of God is within you.” (17:21)

When I think back over the tragic events of this week, I notice that the Divine Wisdom was in even those who did such despicable acts. How sad it is when someone cannot see the Goodness that lies within. May we live and grow in the gnosis of Divine wisdom, may we live into the fullness of Christ within. Amen.