

First United Methodist Church-Omaha
Dr. Jane Florence
April 28, 2013
Sermon Title: "Gnostic Jesus"
Text: Various readings from the Gospels of John and of Thomas



Week before last, I made a trip to Texas. It was my first trip back in six years. As I drove further and further into south Texas, it was interesting what thoughts and remembrances swam to the surface from a lifetime of residency there. While walking along the surf of Padre Island one evening, a song from a church retreat I had attended a long time back sprang to mind:

Have you ever stood in the ocean, with the white foam at your feet, felt the endless thundering motion? Then I say... You've seen Jesus my Lord. Have you ever looked at the sunset, with the sky mellowing red, and the clouds suspended like feathers... then I say... You've seen Jesus my Lord. Refrain: Have you seen Jesus my Lord? He's here in plain view. Take a Look, Open your eyes, He'll show it to you.

There I stood with the white foam of the surf at my feet and the sky mellowing red overhead, and Jesus incarnate in creation was certainly in my view.

There's a bit of irony in the whole song/story though. The church retreat where I first heard it is of a rather unique movement. They have their own culture and their secret code word used to greet others who have participated in their weekend experiences. They have their own way of creating emotional experiences for pilgrims on the retreat weekend. On the religious spectrum of Christianity, they would be in the "Methodist Middle". I find their language somewhere right of center. Yet, here is a song from them that bubbled to my memory and mingled with the Gnostic gospel readings of my afternoon, to resound with all authenticity. I doubt they heard in the song what I heard; two ways of hearing; each according to our own experiences.

That really is reflective of the early church. Those folks who began the Jesus Movement in the first and second centuries after Jesus was executed were expressing their attempts to describe their own experiences, their own cultures, their own listening for God's Spirit and discerning. Some used the same words as others, but they didn't all understand things the same. The church grew out of such diversity. After two or three hundred years, some ways of thinking became more dominate. Some became more silenced. That doesn't necessarily make one right or one wrong.

One group of devout Jesus followers emphasized that God and humanity are of very different substances. From them, the Divine and human came to be considered opposites. They taught that God (the Divine) and humanity are separated by human sin. In their teachings, humanity cannot cross this chasm to God. Jesus was a unique being somehow both fully human and fully Divine who could bridge the gap. For them, Jesus came from God to save us from our sins. His death is seen as Sacrifice of atonement like the slaughter of an animal (or a person) in an ancient practice of blood sacrifice to appease a distant god in the heavens.

Other early followers of Jesus taught something quite different. They emphasized that humans are made in likeness of God, in the image of God. However, it's a likeness that we have forgotten. We've been lulled to a state of sleep to the point that we aren't even aware of it anymore. They taught that searching within for self-knowledge and recovering the purest form

of knowing ourselves can lead us to knowledge of the One who made us. Just like studying an object of art (sculpture, painting, and music) can reveal a sense of knowing its creator, the Artist. In these other community ways of understanding, the Living Jesus is about enlightenment. Instead of coming to save us from our sins, Jesus saves us from ignorance about who we are. When we awaken to the image of God within us, we are free to live fully. For them, Jesus comes as a spiritual guide to “open access to spiritual understanding.” For them, Jesus was not something of a substance different from humanity; he was a fully awakened, fully human which might just be what it means to be fully Divine. For them, Jesus shows us how we all can awake and unite with God. When we realize/awaken, we become one with Jesus, one with God, and one with all others.¹

These other Christians speak of ignorance, being asleep, “drunkenness”—“blindness”—as our separation. Our sin is we are asleep. From the Gospel of Truth: “Ignorance... brought about anguish and terror. And the anguish grew solid like a fog, so that no one was able to see. ...”² “Many people live, then, in oblivion—or “unconsciousness”. Remaining unaware of their own selves, they have “no root”. The Gospel of Truth describes such existence as living a “nightmare.”³

As Jesus is the one who enlightens humanity, a prevailing image for Jesus is the Light. We heard it in the scriptures for today both from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas and from the familiar Gospel of John.

Jesus is the Light that reveals these truths. When we compare John’s Gospel, which is found in the church-authorized book of scripture, to the Gospel of Thomas which was excluded from it, they sound very much the same. Many believe that John was a Gnostic, one of these who believed differently than those who became the majority voice of the church. His writing made it into the Bible—perhaps because it was vague enough on the institutional criticism and dense enough for others to not fully appreciate his message.

John wrote, “What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” John continued, “¹²Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’” *Gospel of John 8:12*
The Gospel of Thomas reads, “One who is whole will be filled with light, but one who is fragmented will be filled with darkness.” *saying 61*

The one who is whole is filled with light. The one who is fragmented is filled with darkness. We live in a fragmented world. We’ve forgotten who we are. We look and search in so many places trying to find that which will give us meaning, that which will quiet the inner chatter calling us this way and that—pulling us in so many directions at once. We are creatures that have a deep longing within—a longing that gnaws at us—a longing that takes great effort to ignore. We are creatures that long for the Light—physically and spiritually. It’s been a hard winter this year. It’s not that it’s been extremely cold. Other winters have been colder. But this one has been so long. There was such a stretch of gray cloudy days when we didn’t get sun, when the light seemed like it would never shine forth again. Our bodies know we need to see the light, pure and bright and streaming. Our bodies know our souls need that too. The pure and bright and

¹Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House.

²Pagels, p. 125

³Ibid

streaming Light to bring wholeness to our fragmentation—to bring light/enlightenment, to bring wisdom/knowledge, to bring awakening—to our slumbered days.

For many, Jesus accomplished union with the Light in his earthly presence. Jesus became one with the Light. Jesus became the Light. Jesus proclaimed the Light for all to know the kingdom of God personally within and socially in the world—captives to darkness shall gain freedom in the light, oppressed by unconsciousness will know release through awakening, the kingdom of God is within you, the light of Christ is in you. Abide in me and I abide in you and creator God, Abba, Father, will live in us.

Christ is our Light giving us life, awakening our souls to the wonder, mystery, glory. May it be so.