

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 27, 2017

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Thomas 97 (The Five Gospels)

(1945 Nag Hammadi Library) recorded only in Thomas

FOR REFLECTION

"Since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special attention to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstances, are brought into closer connection with you."

- Saint Augustine (354-430)

Profession: Saint ☺

Early Christian theologian and philosopher

Paying Attention

On the way to summer school this week one of our topics was the British Monarchy. Peter wanted to know how long Queen Elizabeth had been queen – which evolved into an explanation of family rule for hundreds of years – and her decision last week to skip a generation. Charles is no longer next in line; his son William will rule when Elizabeth dies. Peter was concerned about how Charles felt and I reassured him that he probably helped to make that decision. [NOTE: It turns out that by law Charles cannot be bypassed – it was a well-publicized rumor!] We also talked about how Princess Diana dies and how the royal family is not fond of paparazzi. I'm pretty sure Peter wanted to know how he might become part of a royal family...ignoring the fact that he already is... ☺

The parable we are looking at today is only found in the Gospel of Thomas, a text found in 1945 in what we now call the Nag Hammadi Library. These are "thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices buried in a sealed jar were found by a local farmer named Muhammed al-Samman." They are mostly from the Gnostic tradition and were never included in the biblical canon. But Thomas is believed to have been written before our four guys – and perhaps source material for some of them.

This parable – like so many familiar ones – is describing the nature of the "Kingdom of G-d." We citizens of democracy like to downplay the idea of a KINGDOM – preferring a more collegial G-d with whom we are Partners in Creation. You may have noticed the re-spelling of the word as KIN-DOM inspiring us to see Christian life as a Beloved Community rather than a monarchy.

But a KINGDOM with a top down hierarchy was the norm for many ancient societies. And our ancestors in faith – who had created the dual nation of Israel/Judah – were

concerned with the health of their government – their monarchy. What Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries referred to...

...is tied to Jewish understanding that through the messiah, God will restore the Kingdom of Israel, following the Davidic covenant [with G-d]. ...In later Judaism (after the destruction of the First Temple) a more “national” view was assigned to God's kingship in which the awaited messiah may be seen as a liberator and the founder of a new state of Israel. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingship_of_God_\(Judaism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingship_of_God_(Judaism))

They were remembering a better time, a Camelot monarchy, a Davidic kingdom. They longed for a return to greatness as a nation (sound familiar?) – but also the rule of a wise and compassionate king guided by G-d's intentions for the world.

The coming of the kingdom of G-d involved G-d finally taking back the reins of history, which he had allowed to slacken as pagan Empires had ruled the nations. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_God_\(Christianity\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_God_(Christianity))

So, Jesus, seen by many as the person who had come to reestablish the Davidic line of monarchy (see his family tree in Matthew chapter 1), referenced the Kingdom of G-d A LOT. Matthew 13 is the largest collection of kingdom parables in our canon. It includes the:

Parable of the sower
Parable of the weeds
Parables of growth: mustard seed, yeast
Parables of hidden treasures
Parable of the good fish, bad fish

<https://www.gci.org/bible/matthew13>

Many of these parables draw our attention to the Kingdom as something UNNOTICED and/or UNEXPECTED. But there is always an outcome that seems to be larger or bigger. Which makes this parable in Thomas even more interesting – as it describes emptiness and loss.

1 The [Father's] imperial rule is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. 2 While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. 3 She didn't know it; she hadn't noticed a problem. 4 When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered that it was empty. [Thomas 97 The Five Gospels](#)

However, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar aka Westar Institute gave this parable a “pink” designation – meaning most of them believed this was something Jesus is likely to have actually said. A few scholars thought it was a parody of Elijah and the starving widow in 1 Kings 17:8-16 – where she is instructed to feed Elijah – and by doing so she is granted an unending supply of meal so she will never starve. But not all the scholars agreed.

Which leaves us with a mystery to decipher.
How is the Kingdom of G-d to be understood here?
What is it like?

- A woman
- Carrying a full jar of meal
- Walking along a distant road
- Not noticing that the jar has broken and is spilling
- Reaching home and unburdening herself
- Discovering the jar is empty

It's a woman!
It travels a distance.
It carries a life-giving substance that is spread across the land.
It is unaware of what it is doing?!

It's the jar.
It empties itself of its gifts as it is taken from one place to another
It is neglected until too late.
It is ultimately empty for the one who took it on that journey.?

It's the meal – a nourishing food.
It finds its way out of unexpected brokenness into the world.
It feeds creatures equally indiscriminately – laying itself along the road for travelers to find.
You have to pay attention if you are going to get any of it in the end?

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“The term ‘kingdom of God’ has been used to mean Christian lifestyle, a method of world evangelization, the rediscovery of charismatic gifts and many other things. Others relate it not to our present or future earthly situation, but to the world to come. The interpretation of the phrase is often based on the theological leanings of the scholar-interpreter.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_God_\(Christianity\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_God_(Christianity))