

“In Praise of Heretics”

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“Today we are not dependent upon any text or the letter of any book. It is the spirit that giveth life and the spirit speaks to our souls with every breath that blows.” These words from Reverend Olympia Brown sound like something straight out of the *Gnostic Gospels*, the very books that we’ll be exploring this morning.

Like the Gnostics, Reverend Brown lifts up the value of *individual* spiritual experience. She celebrates our independence from the dictates of sacred texts. Even today this sounds like heresy to folks who hold to a literal interpretation of their chosen text, whether it be the Qur’an or the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament. Reverend Brown reminds us that *our* faith journey is not dictated by an outside authority. It’s something we develop and explore and *reconsider* throughout our lives, as “the spirit speaks to our souls.”

This kind of independent, free-thinking faith is not a Unitarian Universalist innovation – though we sometimes act like we invented it. We find it among the early Christians, during the first three centuries following the death of Jesus. These brave folks are feeling their way into a new way of being in the world. They’re defying the authorities, thinking for themselves, building a new understanding of the Divine even as they are hounded, persecuted, and condemned. Perhaps it’s that threat to their community that leads to the creation of creeds, of rules and boundaries and gate-keeping. Perhaps it’s *fear* that leads the mainstream Christian church to reject the free-thinking Gnostic Christians who thrived for just 300 years before their beautiful, wide-ranging faith was rejected as heresy and Christianity became institutionalized and *regulated*.

Let’s take a quick look at the timeline to make sure we’re all on the same page. Here’s a breakdown of events:

- Jesus begins teaching when he’s about 30, teaches for just three years, and is a heretic himself, denounced by both Jewish and Roman authorities.
- At 33, he is executed.
- But. His teachings are too powerful to die. Depending on how you look at it, Jesus is either literally or metaphorically resurrected.
- His teachings become the foundation for a new *Jewish* sect which later expands to include Gentiles – non-Jews.
- Eventually this Jewish sect breaks away and becomes known as Christianity.
- Over the first two centuries, different “schools” of Christianity develop. Each of these schools uses the name of an apostle to give it credence.
- Thus the Gospel of Matthew is not actually written by the Apostle Matthew but emerges from the Matthew school. The same for the gospels of Mark, Luke, and John.

- We know those four gospels because they're included in the New Testament but there are others emerging at the same time, like The Gospel of Judas, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, and... the Gospel of Thomas.
- These are the *Gnostic* Gospels. Gnosis in Greek is Knowledge. So these are the Gospels of Knowing. They promote individual thinking, and an individual experience of the divine.
- As such, they're a threat to the developing hierarchy of church authority. If you can think for yourself, you don't need priests or bishops or popes.
- And so, in 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, in collaboration with church leaders, declares that only four gospels will be included in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- Everything else is Heresy. Heresy in Greek means Choice. So Athanasius and his colleagues essentially remove Choice from the people.
- And they do so by decreeing that the Gnostic Gospels, are to be burned, all of them, destroyed utterly.
- That would be the end of the story except that a bunch of monks saved 52 of those forbidden documents, sealed them in jars, buried them on the side of a cliff, and left them there to be found 1600 years later.
- Thus, in 1945 near the village of Nag Hammadi the Gnostic Gospels are discovered – and we're given an entirely new vision of early Christianity.
- One of the most provocative and most beautiful of those hidden manuscripts is The Gospel of Thomas, which we're going to look at today.

The key difference between the Gospel of Thomas and the four gospels of the New Testament is this: The New Testament emphasizes the vast divide between a Divine Jesus and a fallen humanity. You can see this in the Christmas story and the miracle of a virgin birth. Jesus is totally different from us – set apart. The Gospel of Thomas says the opposite. It demonstrates how *we* are divine, we are the “twin” of Jesus in our *shared* divinity. The divine light is within us all.

In language that hints at the work of the great William Ellery Channing and other Unitarians, The Gospel of Thomas tells us: “If they say to you, ‘Where have you come from?’ say to them, ‘We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being.’” Thomas further suggests that this light shines through all things. “Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.” All things are pervaded by this divine energy. It's *very* Ralph Waldo Emerson, *very* Walt Whitman, *very* Olympia Brown.

It's also *very* First and Seventh Principle. If we are all creatures of the same divine light, we are indeed of “inherent worth and dignity” and we are indeed an “interdependent web of existence.”

The Gospel of Thomas also hands us the Fourth Principle loud and clear – the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The second saying in the book tells

us, "Let one who seeks, not stop seeking until one finds. When one finds, one will be troubled. When one is troubled, one will marvel..."

But the quote from the Gospel of Thomas that folks are most likely to know is saying #70. "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

These are words to live by! If you have a gift or a talent and keep it to yourself, but don't use it, don't let it breathe, don't let it serve the world – it will eat you up. If you have regret or guilt or shame that you're keeping hidden from others – or from yourself – it, too, will destroy you.

But these words from The Gospel of Thomas also encompass something deeper than that. If this divine light shines through us – as it does through all of Creation – and we choose to deny or dismiss or ignore it – we are in danger of living limited, proscribed, diminished lives.

And I want to be clear. When I speak of a divine light that shines through all things, I am not excluding any belief system. You can be an atheist or agnostic and partake in such things. We can remove the word divine from this conversation and still be aware of our common miracle – the shared act of *being*, of *existing*, of participating in a life force that touches all things, rock and wood and water and quarks and black holes and dark matter.

"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

The beauty of this thinking, this all-encompassing theology, was decried as heresy by the men – and it was men – in power. They replaced the individual experience of the divine with a hierarchy that grants revelation to some and denies it to others, that keeps some people on top and others at the bottom. It's Religion gone wrong.

Thinking about the Gospel of Thomas sent my mind – my spirit – wandering in new directions. I began to think about all the other heretics who insisted on their right to think for themselves, to form their own belief systems, to experience the divine in their own way.

Joan of Arc has always fascinated and moved me. You probably know that she was burned at the stake. You may not know that she was only 19 at the time. Her heresy was her insistence that the divine voices she heard were real, and that her belief in them outweighed the clergy's insistence that they didn't exist. She thought for herself. Her other great crime – and a major element in the case against her – was the fact that she insisted on dressing in men's clothes.

If only her accusers had read The Gospel of Thomas. It tells us "When you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female

female . . . then you will enter the kingdom.” A celebration of Gender Fluidity in a text two thousand years old.

Other heretics. Martin Luther famously nails 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, calling for a debate of church practices and officially launching the Reformation. Giordano Bruno, burned at the stake for proposing that the stars were distant suns with planets of their own. Crazy, right? The list goes on – and, of course, reaches far beyond the Christian faith. The philosopher Baruch Spinoza, one of the great minds of the Enlightenment, was expelled from the Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1656, at the ripe old age of 23, for the "abominable heresies that he practiced and taught." To Islamic extremists, such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, Sufis – the faith of Rumi – are considered heretics and are, today, the target of suicide bombings, even in the sanctuaries of their own mosques.

Rumi, himself, has been called a heretic for his insistence on a direct experience of the divine, and for his love for another man so beautifully expressed in his poetry. Most disturbing, I think, are those who are denounced as heretics but who later become the authority figures who denounce others. We see this most clearly in John Calvin, one of the leaders of the Reformation, who condemns our own Michael Servetus to the flames.

As Unitarians and Universalists we have a long and proud history of heresy. Here in the United States folks like William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker were named heretics for rejecting the Trinity. I loved my studying at my very liberal Methodist seminary and so was surprised to hear my professor of Church History name my own beloved faith tradition – this faith tradition - heretical. He even added how important it was to identify heretics, because it helps “strengthen the base.”

We’re a threat! Hallelujah! We’re a threat to binary thinking. We’re a threat to creeds that serve as gatekeepers, determining who’s in the club and who’s out. We’re a threat to folks who want easy answers, because we are the Church of the Open Question. We are the Church of the Open Question. And that scares people. It takes courage to say, “We don’t have the answers but, man, do we love asking the questions.”

Heretics are those who have the courage to question the status quo, to speak truth to power, to offer a new way of thinking – of *being*. Thanks to our heretical fore-mothers and fore-fathers we have something called Unitarian Universalism. Thanks to a handful of heretical monks – nearly two millennia ago – we have access to this great, hidden trove of exquisite heresy called the Gnostic Gospels.

Let our forebears and those brave monks be our example. Let us be ready, always, to speak our truth and – just as important - to protect the voice that is marginalized, the voice that is silenced. Let us always be ready to listen, to consider, to admit to all that we don’t know. Let us be proud members of the Church of the Open Question. May it be so. Amen.