

INNER VIEWS

I've spent the last couple of weeks talking about learning how to read the Gospels. While I am writing and reflecting upon this I am very much aware that the thing that has helped me the most is having to preach on the Gospels. From the beginning of my priesthood I've felt that preaching is the most important thing I do. I've felt that I owe my very best to you. And I've always been acutely aware that my very best falls short of the Gospels.

It didn't take me long to wake up to the fact that I could not and should not preach anything less than what I sincerely believe and my willing to learn how to live. Preaching with integrity means that I must challenge myself to the truth embedded within the Gospels. It is never enough to simply preach what I've been taught or something I've read – no matter how clever and learned the writer was. To preach means I must immerse myself in the Gospels and open myself to a point of view and wisdom that expands the littleness of my personality. The Gospels expand every bit of who we are – not just our mind, not just our emotions, not just our moral sense and creative involvement. The Gospels build on all of who we are and transform that into a new creation.

Hidden as a backdrop to what I'm saying, and learning to preach, is the awareness that there is a consciousness, a divine presence, that is far more than I can imagine or put into words. As I write this I am aware that I feel about as young as I did when I began preaching. Maybe "innocent" is a better description. When I read the scriptures I feel innocent and naive, like I must listen intently to something I can't quite understand. I feel that the Gospels radiate a divine presence that is trying to expand my consciousness, open my point of view, and transform my willingness to live in a more courageous and generous way. I am being taught to be present in the same way that the Divine is present to me.

Let me give you an example for the Gospels awakening themselves within me. Earlier last week the daily Gospel was from Matthew (10:34-1:11). After reading it three or four times and then reading a commentary and then letting go by listening to music, I finally caught this: Jesus tells us "if you follow a prophet you'll get a prophet's reward. If you follow a righteous man you'll get a righteous man's reward. But if you give a glass of water to someone who is like you, just one of the common folk, you'll be living in the Kingdom of heaven and earth.

Our religious tradition holds up prophets as exemplars of openness to God's revelation. Our religious tradition also holds up righteous people, holy people as goals for our own living. But Jesus says there is far more in store for you – just give a glass of water to one of your sisters or brothers, to someone who needs what you can give, and you will be living in the Kingdom of God – because you are part of creating it. That's the way I would summarize it. But you can see how much more elegant and meaningful Jesus' words are. If you hold this image in your awareness you'll feel it healing and transforming you.

This simple passage radiates with light and inspiration. It presents Jesus' whole message in a few simple phrases. I feel like I've been privileged to catch a glimpse through Jesus' eyes. In that brief moment, with little effort on my part, but a relaxed openness to grace I was inspired to feel alive in a new way. You can tell when this happens because it usually brings a feeling of empowerment and gratitude mixed together.

I believe that my role is to follow Jesus in his work of awakening us to his perspective and experience of living in our Father's presence. I know that I can't do this for you, nor is it my responsibility to teach you. At least not in the way we usually talk about teaching – as a passing on of information. Jesus didn't settle for that kind of teaching, although much preaching settles

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for it. Jesus used stories and parables or make us do our own work and awaken to God our Father's presence alive within us. I need to continue to reflect on this. Next week we'll see where it leads.

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Reading the Gospels with Imagination

Spirituality and Religion are about connecting with a Divine Reality bigger than ourselves. They use stories, images, rituals and beliefs to take us to that place deep inside where the Divine is the Source of our lives and is creating our lives as an expression of Divine Love. Our scriptures use stories, images, rituals and beliefs to actively engage our imagination and sensitize us to the Divine activity in our life.

Imagination makes connections between what seems to be disparate realities' and expresses them in more holistic and inclusive ways. Imagination draws us into a process that loosens the rigidity of our stories so that we are able to receive love as an inclusion of reality in our awareness. To do this it needs to shift between the levels of our consciousness. Images bridge the narrow point of view of our accustomed story to the spacious inner awareness of Jesus' experience of the interdependence of living with God as our Source. I believe that this is how the Gospels lead us to their revelation. They use imagination to agitate our awareness by getting us connected to the images, stories and parables as an expression of a deeply sacred and loving energy looking to express itself as us.

To understand the Gospels we need to pay attention to the connections being generated in our imagination. Our imagination creates these connections in response to the stories, parables and images of the Gospel. This means that working with the Gospels is about positioning our self in the space between our story and Jesus' story. In this space we recognize that our story is limited and needs to experience divine inspiration in order to expand it. We can do this by paying attention to and building on the images, feelings, insights, connections and associations coming into consciousness through our imagination. We become involved in an ongoing and unending process of Divine creation through our lives.

This divine unfolding of our personality has been going on all our lives. There was a time when all we knew how to do was to crawl on our hands and knees. And then something shifted within us and we felt an urge to stand up and walk. We were supported by the urging and example of older people around us, but there was also that urge from deep within. Later it urged us to speak and learn to express ourselves and then to make friends by learning to relate to other people. Again there were plenty of examples all around us but these made sense and inspire us to expression as they embody that deep inner urging.

These urges needed the help of people around us. They could be nurtured by these people and also crippled by them. In any case that deeper Divine Source was expressing its life giving energy through us and guiding us to awaken to its love through these inner urges. Our faith and beliefs are meant to help us become aware of the spiritual development of these urges as they encourage our lives to develop more fully.

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When we approach Jesus in the Gospels we are not meant to analyze what is being said and done but to immerse ourselves in its reality. The truth revealed in the Gospels is not a concept we can grasp or information we should collect. The truth revealed in the Gospels is an ability to relate to reality in its wholeness. This demands an inner letting go of our small world. On a personal level the “truth” is an awareness of our essential relationship to the Divine Love that is creating the Kingdom of heaven on earth through our lives. From his own experience Jesus knows that there is no truth separate from our Divine Source. “On that day you will understand that I am in my Father and you in me and I in you.” John 14:20 He also tells us “I have made known to you everything that I have learnt from my Father.” John 15:35

The Gospels use stories, parables and images to do this because stories are basic to our human thinking process. We think and then try to understand our world through stories. And we use the stories we’ve repeated over and over to make sense of new events in our life. Stories are the primary language of our experience. And experience is the substance of faith.

Our stories give some stability to our lives. But they are a temporary interpretation which is meant to grow, develop and expand as we respond to our deep inner urging. Our stories create a commentary on the events of our life and provide interpretation of our actions. And most important, they allow us to say what the experience means to us. But our story is also a spin doctor. It doesn’t report our experience, it interprets that experience so that it fits our way of making sense of our life. When we believe we are being rational and following common sense we are actually being spun by our own thinking. We are believing our own press releases.

Jesus’ stories interpret our story line to open our stories to the divine world. If we rely totally on our story to interpret life we will be reduced to rehashing the way of thinking and the awareness that brought us to this point in the first place.

To think about our thoughts and feelings prevents us from seeing ourselves accurately as we are right now as an extension of our Divine Source. Self-awareness cannot come from mental analysis. When we go deep within ourselves we discover another dimension – the stillness of Divine Presence. Awareness of our divine Self emerges from this inner stillness. This inner stillness is not made up of thoughts, it is the awareness and unconditional love that is beyond thoughts. Because it is more than our thoughts it is not conditioned by past experiences. It is born from the Source of Truth that is the Divine Source of our living.

The Gospels are trying to tune us into our Divine Source. We can do our part to tune in by using our imagination. Images are open ended by their nature while ideas are restricted to single meaning. We build on images through making associations, paying attention to the connections that arise and relaxing in the creative stillness of Divine Presence.

When we think, even though we imagine that we are thinking new thoughts, most of the time our thoughts are nothing more than a rearrangement of the memories stored in our brains. We select memories and then join them in an order that we deem logical. Even though the mind strings memories together in an array of patterns, its range of reference is nevertheless limited to “what has always been true,” actually to what it has always taken to be true within the limitations of its point of view. The mind cannot come up with anything truly original unless the thinking arises

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from inner awareness. In fact, the thinking mind often cannot even clearly perceive what is happening in the present because it sees through windows tainted by the past. This is why all innovation and true progress is born from the stillness of inner Presence. We may believe it is the thinking mind that has come up with new ideas, but the mind is just the recipient of and channel through which these new insights are expressed. Writers talk about this as their “inner muse” because they realize that their writing can lead them to thoughts that they never expected. This is part of the joy and discovery of writing, as well as the adventure of letting the Gospels reveal our lives as expressions of our Divine Source.

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