



Thanksgiving is just around the corner and this year I'm particularly thankful for pinto beans and cornbread and internet shopping and online banking and good cell phone reception and Aunt Betty's pound cake recipe, but I find myself also extremely thankful for the synoptics by which I mean Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are called the synoptic gospels because, for the most part, they have the same story line. Jesus does his ministry in Galilee and then toward the end of the gospels goes to Jerusalem where he is killed. John's gospel, though, is a totally different animal in several respects, including the plot line. Early on in John's gospel Jesus goes to Jerusalem and he goes there more than once. But whether there's one trip to Jerusalem or several jaunts to Jerusalem is not the issue for me. The issue is that the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are so appealing, captivating, motivating, alluring they make me want to follow Jesus whereas the gospel of John has an opposite effect due primarily to the fact that it portrays Christianity primarily in terms of belief. For God so loved the world that whosoever BELIEVETH in him shall have everlasting life. Believe. Believe this. Believe that. Believe Jesus is who he said he was and you are in the pearly gates. Christianity, from this perspective, is more about getting our ideas, our thoughts, our theology correct than it is about practicing the faith, doing what Jesus said to do.

Don't get me wrong. What we believe can be important. If I believe you are a jerk, if I believe you are evil incarnated, and if I believe it is justifiable to act violently against evil jerks, then we've got a mess on our hands. What we believe about ourselves, about God, about our world, about each other is important. But getting our beliefs right is not all-important.

I don't think when we die and we are before our Creator that our belief structure is what is going to be examined. Let's see here. Ayers. Yes, Chris Ayers, 6132 Gate Post Road, Charlotte, North Carolina. Ummmm. Let's see, did you believe Jesus was God? Did you believe Jesus was the only way to God? Did you believe in the virgin birth? Did you believe the Bible was inerrant and infallible? Did you believe in the Trinity? Did you believe in miracles? Did you believe in creationism? Did you believe the ten commandments should be displayed in public places? Did you believe in predestination? Did you believe every word of the Bible?

If you think the purpose of Christianity is to sit around in a Sunday School classroom and talk and discuss religious ideas and or that being Christian means getting yourself indoctrinated with doctrine and that's the sum total of it, then I think you've missed the boat. And yet, John's gospel, taken alone, taken by itself, might lead us to that conclusion.

Before finishing his gospel John tells us why he wrote in the first place. He comments: "These are written that you may BELIEVE that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that BELIEVING you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31)

That's the point, according to John, BELIEVING. I, however, beg to differ. The point is to practice, to practice the faith, to put flesh on our beliefs, to be like Jesus, to love the world as God loved the world. And how do we do this? We practice the practices: the practice of worship, the practice of prayer, the practice of reading scripture, the practice of stewardship, the practice of the Lord's Table, the practice of Baptism, the practice of missions, the practice of charity, the practices of feeding and clothing and visiting. We practice the practices to be like

Jesus for a world that desperately needs Jesus. And in the process of practicing, our beliefs change, migrate, and wander around.

If your views haven't changed in the last twenty years would you raise your hand.

If you have it all figured out, would you raise your hand.

Our beliefs change as we get our hands dirty, as we apply our beliefs to real sweat and blood life and all its messiness. I've learned that.

I've also learned how a focus on everyone in a congregation having the same beliefs can quickly divide a faith community.

We don't have all the same beliefs, do we? And the chances of it ever happening are about as good as my chance of being given the job of interior decorator for the White House.

(A big thank you to all you decorators for setting us up for The Hanging of the Greens.)

Listen to me. I've been at Wedgewood since 1989. I've seen people come and go. I haven't seen anyone "pass go and collect \$200", but I've seen them come and go. And I've noticed people go for two primary reasons. This is an oversimplification, but stay with me anyway. Some of the Christians left because they didn't get any special privileges. They were upset because they didn't receive any more power, any more say, any more of their way because of what they put in the plate or because of the many years they had been at Wedgewood. That was one group I saw go. Another group left, however, because they became very frustrated with the theological zoo, frustrated that everyone else did not believe like them, frustrated we would allow people to have certain beliefs at Wedgewood. And so they left too. We were too liberal and so they left to find some steeples in which everybody believed, or seemed to believe, the same way.

I use the word "seem" because you know as well as I do that there's diversity even in the cookie cutter churches. It's just beneath the surface. It's hidden. It's "in the closet".

And so I say be careful. Be careful about focusing too much on what you believe and on what others believe. Instead of going in that direction, instead of putting all your money on the gospel of John, I'd like to suggest we see Christianity more as a journey, more as a search, more as a rummaging around together.

Which leads me to say that as we approach Thanksgiving I'm finding myself thankful not only for pinto beans and cornbread and internet shopping and online banking and good cell phone reception and Aunt Betty's pound cake recipe and the Synoptic gospels, I'm also finding myself thankful for the Gospel of Thomas, a gospel that, unfortunately, was not included in our Bible.

Elaine Pagels, professor of Religion at Princeton, has written a book titled *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* in which she compares the gospel of John to the Gospel of Thomas. John, she points out, gives assurances that those who believe will be saved and those who don't

believe will be condemned. "Thomas's gospel encourages the hearer not so much to believe in Jesus, as John requires, as to seek to know God through one's own, divinely given capacity, since all are created in the image of God."

Now whether or not you are a fan of the Gospel of Thomas as I am, you need to know that it was not until the fourth century that uniformity of belief was agreed upon by church leaders. Actually, it wasn't agreed upon by all even at that time, but Constantine, the Roman Emperor, recently converted to Christianity, thought it would be a good thing for the empire if the Christians quit bickering amongst themselves on theology. So a creed was forced. First, the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed and so on and so on. And it was a great misfortune, a tragedy, a catastrophe because Christianity became equated with having right belief. And those who did not accept the orthodoxy of each particular moment----You know what happened to them, don't you?-----those who did not accept the orthodoxy of each particular moment were killed or silenced or what happened to them is all the things the Church does to its minorities. And even today the Methodist and Lutheran bishops send those clergy rebels who do not sign the creed---they send them to small parishes out in the cow pastures.

Believe or else. Accept these conclusions. Acknowledge these truths. And the Church forgot that it was a journey, a search, a seeking.

I like the prayer from the pen of Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, writer, and contemplative. "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing." (*Thoughts in Solitude*, New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1983, 83.)

Thomas Merton.

And this from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

As Pilgrim felt the forward pull of his journey, the question was put to him by an Evangelist, "Do you see yonder wicket gate?" He answered, "No." Just No. He knew the power of the negative. But then the Evangelist said to him, "Do you see yonder shining light?" He said, "I think I do." Then said the Evangelist, "Keep that light in your eye, and go directly thereto, so shalt thou then see the Gate. . ."

Do you see yonder wicket gate?-----No.

Do you see yonder shining light?----I think I do.

There is an ancient Greek legend that when the gods made the human species, they fell to arguing where to put the answers to life so the humans would have to search for them. One god said, "Let's put the answers on top of a mountain. They will never look for them there." "No," said the others. "They'll find them right away." Another of the gods said, "Let's put them in the center of the earth. They will never look for them there." "No," said the others. "They'll find

them right away." Then another spoke. "Let's put them in the bottom of the sea. They will never look for them there." "No," said the others. "They'll find them right away." Silence fell. . . After a while, another god spoke. "We can put the answers to life within them. They will never look for them there." And so they did.

That sounds like the Gospel of Thomas. In the gospel of Thomas Jesus says, "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."

I like that.

We will never all believe the same things. Never. Never in a million years. But maybe it's not all important that we do. Maybe what is important is that we love ourselves and each other on the journey.