

The Frontier Within

To kick this discussion off, I thought I would show one of the final scenes from the series finale of Star Trek: The Next Generation. By show of hands, I wonder, how many of you have watched this series, either in part or in full? I debated whether or not I should show it because it's kind of long, running a little over two minutes. But for me it so beautifully illustrates what I take to be the chief insight of the Gospel of Thomas that I decided I need you to see this clip. So let's play this scene. [Pause to see scene from ["All Good Things."](#)]

For the uninitiated (or even for the initiated), allow me to break down a little of what you've just heard in this exchange here. Q, the rather ostentatiously dressed figure in the scene, is like a trickster deity who haunts and taunts Captain Jean-Luc Picard from the beginning of the series through to this finale. The series begins with Q putting humanity (who is haplessly represented by Captain Picard and his crew from the U.S.S. Enterprise) on some kind of cosmic trial for its many failures as a species. The trial appears to conclude and Q shows up sporadically throughout the series to heckle and tempt Captain Picard and his crew. But as we see here in the concluding episode, the trial never ended, and the crew had never ceased to be scrutinized as it went about its mission of exploring and learning more about the universe. Indeed, as Q tells Picard, the trial never ends; it begins anew over and over again. But the revelation that's key here, the culminating insight of every learning, every excursion into uncharted territory, every encounter with an alien race, every adventure that leaves its indelible mark on the crew of the Enterprise is this: whatever the show's opening lines may be, the final frontier is not space. As Q suggests to Picard, you can explore, research, and study all

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020

the stars and nebulae you want, but you will never even have begun to make sense of that reality until you have begun to open yourself to unknown possibilities. Picard was only able to achieve this when, in his own words, he realized “the paradox.” The paradox forced him to look within and confront the limitations of his way of thinking and being in order to expand his mind and see new possibilities. This is the gift of paradox, and the Gospel of Thomas bears many such gifts.

Often referred to as the Fifth Gospel because of its popularity and the striking resemblance it bears in content to canonical Gospels, especially Matthew and Luke, the Gospel of Thomas is unusual even as a gnostic gospel. In fact, there’s a way in which the Gospel of Thomas cuts against the grain of Gnosticism itself. The most common way Gnostics related their views was not by stating them as “doctrines” to be believed, but by creating and sharing myths. Not so, the Gospel of Thomas. You won’t find here any harrowing stories, gripping miraculous accounts, or seamless transitions from thought to thought. The author of the Gospel of Thomas is not interested in smoothing out the rough edges of Jesus’s often mystifying words; on the contrary, the author wants us to stare right into the face of these sayings. Thomas’s Gospel is quite fond of paradox. In fact, if you take the view that many do that Thomas’s Gospel is based on Matthew and/ or Luke, it seems unmistakable that the author is deliberately adapting these scriptures in a way that emphasizes or perhaps even creates paradoxes where they did not exist. And so without further ado, we’ll make some comparisons. Let’s start with today’s passage, Luke 17:20: In this verse, the pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come, and he responds in much the same way he does in the

Matthew Jason Deen

Centre Congregational Church, UCC

Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020

Gospel of Thomas, with one striking difference: In Saying 113 of the Gospel of Thomas,

it is his disciples who ask the question, not the pharisees:

His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" Jesus said, "It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'here it is' or 'there it is.' Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

At least one implication of Jesus answering the question for disciples rather than pharisees becomes clear when we look at Saying 3, where we see a more whimsical side of Jesus than we normally get elsewhere:

Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. (Thomas3:1-3)

The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. The answer is consistent in that it is not specific to time or space. The expectation of such is what renders Jesus's answer something of a paradox. How can both be true at the same time?

Let's look at another scripture: In Matthew 24, Jesus's disciples ask him when the end of the age will come, and he happily obliges. Well let me tell you (he says): some imposters are going to come claiming to be the Messiah, there are going to be wars and famine and earthquakes, people are going to hate you for my sake and some of you will probably be tortured and killed. After all this, then the end will come. Jesus offers a lot of very specific details in response to their question. Not so, the Jesus of Thomas. Here's what we find in saying 18:

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us how our end will be." Jesus said, "Have you discovered, then, the beginning, that you look for the end? For where the beginning is, there will the end be. Blessed are they who will take their place in the beginning; they will know the end and will not experience death.

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020

Rather than validate the question with a straightforward answer, Jesus (again) replies by emphasizing the limitation of the question and revealing how the question is in a real sense part of the problem. The end and the beginning are one, where one thing begins, another ends. The way the disciples are framing this question betrays a linearity and single-mindedness that is in a real sense perpetuating the problem to which they're seeking resolution. One final comparison may suffice to illustrate what the Gospel is up to here. In Matthew 7:4-5, Jesus famously asks how someone with a beam in their own eye can presume to remove the speck in their neighbor's eye. For Matthew, the takeaway is don't be a hypocrite, and these are indeed words to live by. But in the Gospel of Thomas, we glimpse something else at work; the saying seems not so much about hypocrisy but, rather straightforwardly, about perspective and clarity of insight:

Jesus said, "You see the mote in your brother's eye, but you do not see the beam in your own eye. When you cast the beam out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to cast the mote from your brother's eye."

Put another way, we cannot clearly see the world around us until we have understood what is happening within ourselves. It is only by turning inward that we first glimpse the disconnect between our expectations of the world and our actual experience of the world. This disconnect is often felt in the form of a problem we cannot seem to overcome, a problem that seems only ever to get worse as we attempt to solve it using the same thinking that led to the problem. Now I didn't get into it before, and I promise to spare you all the tedious details, but this is pretty much exactly what happened to Captain Picard. He was trapped in a causal loop of his own making, and he could not escape it and save humanity until he realized the paradox he was living. Captain Picard's realization of the paradox he faced and the insight that gave him to expand the

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020

horizons of his thinking could only have happened as a result of reflecting on his own life. To paraphrase what Q tells Picard, the true exploration awaits within.

Much like the disciples, I find myself these days really fixated on what seems for all the world like the end—of civilization, of a habitable planet, of life as we know it. Amid all else that's happening in our world, and woefully underreported, our beloved Earth continues her hasty decline. Last week I read that even the pitifully modest regulations that remained to keep methane emissions in check were eliminated so that oil and gas companies no longer have to identify and repair methane leaks. And to be totally vulnerable with you, it sent me into a depression. Bad news for the Earth just continues piling up, and this despite the fact that there has never been greater consensus among the public about the need to address the climate crisis. There has never been greater empirical clarity as to precisely what is causing the crisis. And there has never been more investment in solutions to address this crisis. It would seem we find ourselves slap in the middle of a paradox.

I cannot tell you how many times I've been recruited to a workgroup or committee with brilliant and dedicated folks to dream up achievable, local (but scalable, always "scalable") solutions to the crisis. Just this past week, in fact, I was on one such call with faith leaders. Our mission, to explore new approaches to galvanizing the public to take critical action for the climate. Make no mistake, this is a wonderful group, one that frankly, I don't feel worthy to be part of. But lately the questions we're asking strike me as very limited, indeed. I'll give you an example: "What are the best strategies for mobilizing faith communities to act on climate change?" With the Jesus of Thomas, I want to break the cycle of answers and ask in response: What if this frantic search for

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020

solutions is part of the problem we face? And to what extent is the rapid pace of ecological devastation simply mirroring back to us the unsustainable pace of our own lives? This question attempts to exit the causal loop of the problem-solution cycle; the source of the problem is not in the atmosphere, but in our hearts and minds. What if our first response to crisis was not to spring into action—any action, just do something!—but instead to take time to understand the crisis, inside and out. I'm reminded of the words Fr. Dan Berrigan* used to say: "Don't just do something, stand there." I might revise slightly by saying, don't just do something, sit there. Stop. Just stop.

I know it sounds for all the world like madness, but what if when we find ourselves inundated with crises and overwhelmed by the imperative to pour ourselves into solving them, we just stop? What if in the midst of the paradoxes of our times, we deferred to the wisdom of our silence? It is not just OK to be stumped; it is sometimes essential. The silence of uncertainty, of indeterminacy, of unanswerability can be a gift. And so often, it is little more than a sign that we need to embrace the rest that is our inheritance. Rest is the work of Sabbath, and, to be sure, in a culture like ours, rest is *work*. How many times have you tried to rest only to find yourself drawn right back into a problem that's nagging at you? When we cannot see our way clear to break away from the struggles that beset us, we cannot see clearly what is right in front of us. As we see in saying 27:

Jesus said, "If you do not fast as regards the world, you will not find the kingdom. If you do not observe the Sabbath as a Sabbath, you will not see the father."

There is no escaping it, we are steeped in the logic of our world, and this logic bears in countless ways on our perspective, limiting the range of possibilities we see and reach for in each moment. But our faith calls us to see beyond the constraints of questions

Matthew Jason Deen

Centre Congregational Church, UCC

Delivered on Sunday, August 16, 2020

framed by the powers of this world. May we find the courage to claim rest the that is our due so that we may find new possibilities hiding in plain sight. Amen.

[*CORRECTION: During the sermon, I attributed this quote to Thomas Merton when it was, in fact, Fr. Daniel Berrigan who said it.]