

August 23, 2015 Pentecost 13

Thomas 89

Summertime and these scripture passages take me back to my childhood days at the cottage. Our cottage was on a small island in the Georgian Bay with no electricity. Boiling water on the wood stove after dinner and washing the dishes was the hated chore we three boys always tried to wriggle out of. One washed, another dried and one got the evening off. I hated the drying much more than the washing. What about you?

Sometimes it got pretty dark before we were finished. And of course there was the inspection to see if everything was cleaned and dried properly. Now let me tell you, the outside of the pots were a real bone of contention. Sort of like our scripture readings today.

As with many of the sayings in Thomas, this saying of **Jesus** comes without a narrative context or a moralizing conclusion. As we will see this is not the case with Matthew and Luke. In this simple saying the outside and the inside of the cup are declared equal, because they are both made by the same Creator. By mentioning the Creator instead of a potter, **Jesus** elevated the discussion to metaphorical dimensions, to the divine potter of humanity and shifts the emphasis to the inner life.

It may have been uttered initially as a criticism of the ritual washing of vessels such as cups, with an undue emphasis on external purity. However, it is here that we come closest to the core value of **Jesus**' teaching. According to Thomas the core value of **Jesus**' teaching is *Purity of Heart*.

The religious establishment of his day stressed purity on the outside – in external behaviour. Here **Jesus** reverses it. It is not the outside that needed attention most. It is the inside. It is not the external rules but the inner motivation that make the difference. This is the basis of **Jesus**' "*interiorised Judaism*" which returned religion to a spirituality and turned practice into an action where an inner relationship with the divine Reality was key. Everything else was secondary.

Who could dispute the simple culinary practice where it is the cleanness of the inside of a vessel that is most important in any kitchen?

Now sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where art imitates reality. Last evening, we hosted a birthday party for Vicki's daughter. There were seven of us around the table. We had a great time, but earlier in the day the sound of water in the basement revealed that the booster hot water heater for the dishwasher had

sprung a leak. So you know who washed all the dishes last night. It wasn't quite as big a chore as I remembered, but I sure paid attention to how I washed everything.

I also came across this quote on the internet this week that puts the attention in the right place for our time.

“Before you speak to me about your religion, first show it to me in how you treat other people.

Before you tell me how much you love your God, show me how much you love all God's children.

Before you preach to me of your passion for your faith, teach me about it through your compassion for your neighbors.

In the end, I'm not as interested in what you have to tell or sell as in how you choose to live and give.

- Cory Booker, Mayor of Newark N. J.

Application for Today

Tell and sell are on the outside. Live and give come from the inside. After all, the Christian life is an inside out activity. Amen.

Matthew 23: 25, 26 & Luke 11: 39-41

After spending ten days with my extended family this summer, I couldn't help but notice, yet again, how we become or remain accommodating of unusual or even unacceptable behaviours. “Oh, that is just the way so and so is.” I don't want to go into detail here but you get my drift? We often excuse aberrant or inappropriate behaviours in those whom we have lived with for a long time. In family dynamics the baby of the family may always remain a baby. Or the abusive parent remains that way with impunity through the generations. Or sibling rivalries continue on long into adulthood. But get a little distance and what seemed normal suddenly isn't anymore.

When we put this little family of three versions of a **Jesus** saying together these last two just aren't as acceptable as once thought. This is what I mean.

Matthew and Luke recorded their versions of **Jesus**' mission and teaching one and a half, and three generations after Thomas. That is 30 and 60 plus years after Thomas. Over that span the early faith communities had been caught up in controversy with the Scribes and the Pharisees of their shared Jewish faith. The people of the Way, the way of **Jesus** had lost the contest by the time Matthew wrote his version of the good news in 86 C.E. Followers of the Way of **Jesus** were

expelled from the Synagogue tradition and were now on their own. So what was first a straight forward saying collects a lot of antagonistic baggage in the retelling. We can see how each evangelist takes different parts of the initial saying recorded in Thomas and exploits them for different purposes.

Matthew attacks the Scribes and Pharisees with brutal invective over ritual washing with no hint of divine connection. Matthew has added a moralizing judgement: the outside is ritually clean after washing, but, inside those, who practice such rites there is greed and dissipation. The result is a mixed metaphor; the outside refers to cups, the inside denotes persons. What's more, in Matthew's conclusion the inside and the outside both refer to persons.

The Scribes and Pharisees get a bad rap because of religious differences, whereas the real culprits in the death of **Jesus**, the Sadducees and the Romans are ignored.

Luke attacks only the Pharisees. But he too mixes his metaphors. Ritual purity is the starting point but inner corruption is the real issue. He keeps the insight from Thomas that **God** the potter of humanity makes both the inside and the outside. Then Luke adds his favourite theme against riches and directs the content of the cups and plates amassed through what he calls violence and evil be given to the poor and everything will be made clean.

So, we have quite a lot of invective, moralizing and judgement added into Matthew and Luke. In fact this is just the beginning of their long diatribes condemning the way the Pharisees walk around in public, attend feasts, pray and even wear their clothes. But we are so used to the history of scapegoating the Pharisees that it isn't until we get a fresh look through Thomas' version that we see the unacceptable nature of these two gospel redactions. It all starts to feel more than a little petty. Like family dynamics, we accept as o.k. what we wouldn't put up with from outside sources. And here is the rub. Where is the love and wisdom we associated with **Jesus**' mission and message?

Now, in light of all this, if we accept Thomas' version that the potter of humanity created the inside and the outside dimensions of our life to be in spiritual relationship to **God**, then it follows as the old adage so clearly suggests
“If we don't have something good to say, then don't say it.”

Application for Today

I find the people who consistently practice this tend to be the most **Christ** like folk in or midst.

Clean inside and out. Amen.