

Some of you may be thinking right now -  
"Jane, don't we have enough material  
in the Old and New Testaments to keep us busy  
exploring how to be followers of Jesus –  
how to be Christian – how to be faithful people?"

I believe theology – like all fields of study –  
must always submit itself to study - and it does.

But sometimes Christians are a little afraid to step outside of  
opinions that were established by the very early church  
and actually dictated to believers.

The early Roman church fathers –  
established the norms for believing and practicing Christianity.  
We call that orthodoxy.

But history unfolds – and the earth itself gives up its treasures -  
as with the Dead Sea Scrolls – and documents like this Gospel of Thomas.

While the scroll was unearthed in 1947 -  
it was not published for anyone to read until the late 1800's -  
but really did not make it to wide distribution until the seventies.

We have learned from documents like the Gospel of Thomas  
about other groups of people who remembered Jesus –  
followed Jesus – and were students or disciples of Jesus.

They did not all fit the mold  
of those who came to define the Roman church  
or the Roman Catholic Church.

To the church's credit – they were seeking  
some kind of order or accepted practice –  
some accepted belief – by which to define what it meant - to become Christian.

What did you need to do if you were a Jew  
and you wanted to become this new kind of religious person?  
Or – if you were a Roman of no particular religious bent -  
or a follower of one of the Greek religious practices -  
what constituted entry into Christian faith?  
What was settled on by the most powerful bishops  
was a matter of belief - that made you a Christian.

And yet - many people were writing about this teacher Jesus –  
and what he taught.

Not nearly all of the material that was written  
or the oral traditions were carried forth into the New Testament.

This is not to say that all writings were valuable -  
but the fact that they were not approved of by the early church  
does not mean they were not authentic and valuable for our learning.

When it came to establishing a set of scrolls that told the story -  
they chose from many – and discarded - and tried to destroy others.



Some of the teachings that were suppressed -  
and then hidden in monasteries -  
tell us about different ways of being Christian.  
Some writings just did not fit into the ways  
the founders wanted to do church.

What were some of those things?

One of those things that the early Roman church did not value for its followers was education. So you have the mass in Latin - not something that could be understood by the common people.

What else?

Another was formulating an image of God as being something that was out there – up there – away from us.

People needed mediators through which to relate to God.

The Roman church and the priests became the mediator.

It is not that the people determining which teachings and which scrolls would be included in the canon – did not attempt – at least to some extent -

to include some diverse voices – because they did.

But there were power struggles – as there are in all organizations - and there were traditions that were suppressed – and even outlawed.

There were efforts to destroy their writings – but not all were destroyed. Some were buried – to be found later.



So – why read them?

The Gospel of Thomas – may be the earliest record of the Jesus experience.

So would it not be our responsibility to pay attention to it?

You will need to make your own decisions about that -

but I think it is our responsibility as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century -

to become knowledgeable about these texts  
and then evaluate them for their value to our faith journeys.

That is why I bring the Gospel of Thomas to you.



Now – I want to shift here – and ask what you heard -  
when Dave read from Mark -  
and when he read from Thomas.  
Did anything catch your attention?  
Mark is in narrative form – and Thomas is a series of sayings.



What is the setting in Mark?  
Some teachers of the law –  
gathered around Jesus and said something.  
Some of his disciples were not doing the ceremonial washing  
of their hands before eating food.  
As a result – they were unclean.  
(Now remember this is long before soap –  
so it was not clearly a sanitation practice.)  
Although washing hands even with water was a good thing.  
It is the ceremony that is being talked about here.

They questioned why Jesus' disciples did not abide by this ceremony.

Jesus says to them:

"You honor God with you lips – but your hearts are far away.

You worship rules taught by men.

You've let go of what God wants - and hold to the traditions of men."

He is taking the conversation to the personal -  
what is happening inside the person.

He wants them to look inside themselves – to what was in their hearts.



The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of sayings –  
and they are not necessarily in any particular order.

This is the beginning – and we read the first three.  
I'll share a few of them with you from time to time.

Just adding to the lectionary – you might say.

I hope you find them valuable.



"These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke."

Mark writes in Chapter 4:33 about Jesus teaching in parables to the crowds -  
but that he explained everything to his disciples.

This could be what a phrase like that means.

This is how it begins:

"These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke –  
and the twin - Didymos Judas Thomas wrote them down."

Then there follows a list of the sayings of Jesus.

Could Jesus possibly have had a twin?

The name itself means twin.

And there is reference to this twin in the Gospel of John as one of the disciples.

Whoever he is – he appears to know Jesus' secret teachings.

Some teachings are also in Matthew and Luke.

But others are as strange and compelling - as Elaine Pagels.

She says – some are like Zen Koans – mysterious statements to ponder.

I am just reading three of them today.

The first one goes like this:

"Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death."  
Or – whoever understands this will not experience death.

What kind of death is he referring to here?

Words seem to have certain meanings that we will want to learn more about.

But that is for later.

The second goes like this:

"Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds.  
When he finds, he will become troubled.  
When he becomes troubled - he will be astonished -  
and he will rule over the All."

The third is this:

If those who lead you say to you –  
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.  
When you come to know yourselves – they you will become known –  
and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father.  
But if you will not know yourselves –  
you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.

What do you think "poverty" means here? It means "ignorance."

Elaine Pagels suggests that Jesus  
may be criticizing views of the kingdom of God  
that appear in the other gospels.

The kingdom is not something out there – like many would think -  
partly because many considered the kingdom as a place devoid of Roman rule.

The kingdom is an interior state – a state of consciousness.

Luke says that too.

The secret teaching at least here has to do with -  
when you know yourself at that level  
you will also come to know God.

Why? Because you will discover that the divine is within you.

There is little about accepted ritual practices or accepted beliefs.

It does not exclude belief or practice –  
but it is primarily about knowing ourselves.

And – we can talk more about how we might do that as a community.



I have given this message the title of "Rule or Relationship"  
because Mark reminds us how important certain external actions were  
within the religious environment in which Jesus lived.  
The real issue here is not the elements of sanitation – which are many.  
The issue is the elevation of form over substance.

It was the deeper meaning that seemed to be gone.  
It is what comes from inside us that is the real test of cleanliness.  
And – we have that in the final passage of the reading from Mark.



What I want to leave you with today  
is a curiosity to go further with this study -  
and to follow it right here in our worship.

For me – it is about getting to know the Jesus we follow - better.

So – if you are willing to be un-orthodox -  
and if you want to learn more about him  
you won't want to miss the next few months.