

Gospel of Matthew Chapter 19:13-15

Then little children were brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them, but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

And from the **Gospel of Thomas**, an ancient gospel long forgotten and found in 1945 hidden in a clay pot in a cave.

Logion 24

His students said to him, "Take us to the place where you are since we are required to seek after it." He answered them, "Whoever has an ear for this should listen carefully! Light shines from the centre of a being of light and illuminates the whole cosmos. Whoever fails to become light is a source of darkness."

Good morning, everyone!

It's a pleasure to connect with you all this morning even if it is remotely. I pray for the day when we can all be together in one place again.

Rev. Shelagh asked me to talk about the power of story this morning and, being the congenial person, I am, I said, "No. I don't want to talk about the power of story. I just want to tell a story." So she said, "Go ahead." I'm going to tell you the adults' story. It goes like this:

Once upon a time [all true stories begin this way] there was a Buddhist monastery in Tibet. And in that monastery, there was a great statue of the Buddha. It was a particularly ugly statue, very old and not very well-made of coarse clay. This great ugly statue was venerated by the monks in the monastery. They considered it to be the greatest statue of the Buddha.

Then one day, a new young monk joined the monastery. He learned his prayers and rituals as all the monks did, but he could never understand why all the other monks venerated this ugly statue. He was a very devout young man and he didn't think that the statue was worthy of the Buddha. So, he asked the head monk why they revered it. The old monk could not tell him the reason. He said it was what they had always been taught and that the young monk should not question ancient wisdom.

But you know, the young monk couldn't help himself. Every time he had to kneel or pray in the presence of the statue, he would look at it and think, "There are hundreds of better Buddhas in the shops. I myself could make a better Buddha." But no matter how often he pleaded with the old monk to replace it with a new and better one, the old monk refused to listen.

As happens to everyone, one day the old monk died. And after a period of mourning, the young monk went to the new head monk and said, "Now, at last, can we get a new and better Buddha?" But the old monk refused. He said, "Out of respect from our dear departed one, we must continue to venerate this Buddha. We have always been taught that it is precious."

Well, the young monk had had enough of this nonsense, and one night, when he couldn't sleep for thinking about the ugliness and unworthiness of the statue, he stole into the holy chamber where it was kept carrying a hammer. He thought, "If I damage the statue, then they will have to replace it." So, he took the sledgehammer to the statue and a great crack opened in its belly.

The old monks heard the noise of that crack and came running from their beds to see what it was. There they saw the guilty young monk with the sledgehammer in his hand. And the head monk brought his torch closer to see the crack that had been made in the Buddha's belly. And there a gleaming light shone back at him. He turned to the young monk and he said, "Go ahead. Finish the job."

So the young monk picked up his hammer and began chipping away at the statue, and the clay and plaster fell away, and when he was done, to the astonishment of all the monks, there was a great gleaming golden statue of the Buddha—solid gold, priceless. And the monks stood in awe. All this time, they did not know what wealth they possessed.

Now if this were the end of the story, we could talk about this story as a parable about religion. How sometimes the true meaning, the spiritual heart of a religion, gets buried and forgotten over time. Just like the beautiful, mystical Gospel of Thomas that we heard read from this morning. More than a millennium ago, when the early church fathers were burning gospels that didn't fit their orthodoxy, a group of Christian monks thought it was so precious that they hid it in a clay pot in a cave in the desert in Egypt. It was only found less than a century ago. It is golden and worth examining more closely.

But this is not the end of the story because the young monk was still curious. He understood now why the monks had venerated the statue, but he didn't understand why something so precious and so beautiful had been covered in clay and then forgotten. So, he went to the library and studied old writings until he found the story. Centuries before, during a time of war when the monastery was under siege, the monks had feared that their golden statue would be stolen if the monastery fell into the enemies' hands. So, they quickly covered it up with clay. And after the siege was over, they decided to leave it covered because, being so valuable, it was always vulnerable to plunder. So, the statue remained covered in clay and the old monks taught the new monks to venerate it, but over time, the story of the gold underneath was forgotten.

Well, that's the story, and like all good parables it can be understood on many levels. I want to talk about it, not on a religious level, but on a personal level. What does this story teach us about ourselves? Here's my message.

You are that golden statue. I am that golden statue.

I'm sure you don't really believe me. I know because I have trouble believing it myself. It's not what my inner voice tells me. It says, "Who do you think you are getting up in front of people and preaching to them?" You probably have an inner critic too that you have to wrestle with.

But I don't mean it in the sense of "I am the greatest" That kind of statement usually just masks fear and insecurity. That's just another form of shallow clay. I mean a deeper purer gold that you have to dig deep to find. Let me explain.

Have you ever been present at a baby's birth? Perhaps you were a witness to a birth as the father, perhaps you attended a birth as a doctor or nurse, as a midwife or doula. Perhaps you were the one giving birth yourself. But when you saw that newborn baby first come into the world and heard its first cry, did you not feel as though you had witnessed a miracle? That baby was solid gold.

And you were that baby once.

What happened to you? As you grew, some adult told you that you weren't good enough or you were bad and it hurt so you covered yourself with clay to protect yourself. You went to school and some of the other children bullied you and it hurt and you covered yourself with more clay.

There is nothing quite so vulnerable as the heart of a child. I think that's what Jesus meant when he said "it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." This is our true treasure—our innate human dignity and worth that we have buried under a heavy layer of clay out of the need to protect ourselves, but sometimes we go too far and we harden our hearts as well.

But then one day, something terrible happens to you. I don't know what it is, but your heart is broken somehow. Someone you love dies; someone you love betrays you; you are getting a divorce; you have lost your job; you realize once again our frail and vulnerable you are. Something in your life cracks you open and you want to reach for that clay to patch yourself up again. Whatever it is you use to cover your heart these days – food, drink, drugs, work, shopping, whatever -- because it hurts so much.

But stop. Maybe you should examine the crack a little closer. Maybe it is the beginning of wisdom.

You may know some of the words from Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem." The chorus goes like this, "Ring the bells that still can ring./Forget your perfect offering./There is a crack in everything./ That's how the light gets in." That's how the light gets in.

The old monk stands at the crack with the torch and a gleam of golden light is reflected back. "Go ahead," says the old monk. "Crack it open. Break it all apart."

The clay falls away and we think we will die from the pain. But no, it's only the beginning of knowing what we truly are. We are precious beyond words. We are loved by God. We are golden.

“Anthem” by Leonard Cohen

The birds they sang at the break of day.

“Start again,” I heard them say.

“Don’t dwell on what has passed away

Or what is yet to be.”

Yeah, the wars they will be fought again

The holy dove, she will be caught again,

Bought and sold and bought again.

The dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That’s how the light gets in.

We asked for signs. The signs were sent.

The birth betrayed. The marriage spent.

Yeah, the widowhood of every government.

Signs for all to see.

I can’t run no more with that lawless crowd

While the killers in high places say their prayers out loud

But they’ve summoned up a thundercloud

And they’re going to hear from me.

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That’s how the light gets in.

You can add up the parts. You won’t have the sum.

You can strike up the march. There is no drum.

Every heart, every heart to love will come

But like a refugee.

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That’s how the light gets in.