

**Title: Hidden in the earth - Spiritual knowing and unknowing.**

**Text: John 12:20-33 and Following the path of spirituality by John Cassian (4th century monk)**

Rev. Sharon Smith

John 12:20-33

12:20 Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks.

12:21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

12:22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

12:23 Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

12:24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

12:25 Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

12:27 "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

12:28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."

12:29 The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him."

12:30 Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine.

12:31 Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.

12:32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

12:33 He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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Coloured sand from finely ground ceramics sit in small bowls on the temple floor. Seven monks begin the process of creating an elaborate sand mandala – a geometric configuration of symbols. The details are astounding. The artwork measuring 4 meters squared takes 30 hours to perfect, over 5 days. These monks begin their work each day in prayer, praying for the world, before entering into silence as this artform forms part of their meditation practice.

But perhaps the part that is most transformative is the final ritual that takes place shortly after its completion, a ritualistic destruction.

After the masterpiece is complete, a tool is used to brush the sand to the centre and the design is lost. This is the spiritual practice of relinquishment or renunciation. Letting go.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBrYUIOYK0U>

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Every spiritual tradition offers training for letting go. For perhaps it is one of the hardest things in our lives to do.

Nature, as the first spiritual guide, offers us this pattern also.

We see it in the movement of the clouds: they build and build with moisture, until at last they let go, and in their letting go, the water necessary for life is poured over the surface of the earth.

We see it in the waxing and waning of the moon.  
And we see it daily in the rise and fall of the sun – a journey to fullness to rest and to release.

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The wisdom of Jesus in this section of the Gospel of John presents a path of relinquishment to us also. The author is building up to the passion narrative, here we are presented with the beginning of that movement. Chapter 12 is the final public discourse of Jesus – in chapter 13 we will move to the Last Supper, the ritual of Foot Washing and words of farewell.

Here is chapter 12 Jesus' words are presented in response to the request: "We want to see Jesus"

And Jesus instead of showing mighty deeds or signs like he has done before, instead tells us of his dying, of being buried like seed, of hiding away. What a strange response to the request to be seen. Or is it?

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For most of us in religious communities, we are taught about God. For some, depending on the tradition we are actually told in detail who God is. The discipline of systematic theology attempts to dissect every part of God. This is one pathway to faith by expressing what we believe.

It's kind of like being given a caricature of the Divine before you have an encounter of your own, hoping that the image will assist you when you meet.

There is value in being given a framework for understanding. The tragedy comes when we hold onto the caricature as more real than the encounter itself.

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But there is another path... it is the counterbalance of spiritual knowing. It is the path of spiritual unknowing.

The technical term for it is "Apophatic". It is a Greek word. Phasis means speech or talking. We encounter it in words like aphasia (the loss of speech because of a brain condition).

Apo-phasis – means moving away from speech.

The spiritual path of the apophatic, is a counterbalance to thinking that we know all about God. It is taking seriously Saint Augustine's memorable phrase: "If you can understand it, it isn't God."

So in our tradition we seek to offer speech AND we seek to disentangle ourselves from the web of words by falling silent or by offering gesture or sacrament, or by using language that undoes itself like poetry or parable or paradox.

### **Seeking the God beyond, by J P Williams**

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Barbara Brown Taylor when commenting on the tradition explains her relationship with darkness and silence. She says Silence is one of God's main languages. And she reminds us: God is absent in God's presence; God is present in God's absence.

The invitation for us in community is to provide spaces that are constructive in nature – where faith and belief are built up. But are held loosely. It's like preparing the ground, not building the house.

And to also affirm moments of deconstructive: question and doubts, the relinquishment of what we thought we knew. Knowing that this is time of vulnerability and needs great care.

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This is the direction desert father, John Cassian, leads us in today's first reading.

Part of the movement of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries these Desert Fathers and Mothers gave birth to a different kind of knowing. A knowing by silence, symbols, and not even needing to know with words. The balancing of knowing with not needing to know. A deep acceptance of ultimate mystery. Keeping ourselves open to be surprised.

Have you ever had that experience, when someone is telling you about a beautiful landscape that you need to go and see. And you follow their map, but when you get there. You are utterly taken aback. Yes it is somewhat like what they described but it is so much more, more expansive, more colourful and not to mention the light...

Christine Valters Painter writes:

"We need to be aware of the way images of God can distort our view"

*Christine Valters Paintner, PhD, Eyes of the Heart: Photography as a Christian Contemplative Practice*

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And the spiritual training ground of relinquishment is also about the ways we seek to live.

- To live open handedly.

Its arriving at a meeting with a very definite sense of how you want it to go. And then letting that go, for what is happening in the conversation.

Its holding on to our position, and then in the early hours of the morning, realizing our error. And whispering God, I'm sorry. I was wrong.

It's the practice of changing our minds and humbly saying so.

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A poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

What are you afraid of?  
What are you holding onto?  
What are you holding on for?

Let all things be,  
let them be right there,  
without having to hang onto them.

The last thing you let go of is your  
self. This hard-shelled seed of who you are  
you are trying so hard to build up

into something great and false.  
Trying to build a fruit tree  
out of sticks.

Let it go. Each moment, each breath,  
surrender your favorite self.  
Let it fall

into the earth of our being, the home  
of our bones. All of our falling  
is into God.

When at last the fist of your life  
is opened, the grave of your heart  
dug deep enough, and empty,

when you let the breathing darkness  
and your unguarded nothingness  
spill into each other

then something miraculous grows in you,  
and out through every pore,  
to the edge of the world:

a completely new and different life,  
begotten, not made, that gives life,  
that doesn't look like a seed at all.

You don't need to hang onto it.  
It can't be killed. Its roots  
are in God.

Amen.