

August 6, 2023

Sermon On The Mountain : Considering The Lilies and Pondering a Universal Christ

Well , that title is a mouthful, but don't expect a full blown sermon. A meditation maybe, or what the Episcopalians call a "homily", which makes Southerners think of grits.

First , Consider the lilies. I understood these words of Jesus in a new way when I visited his boyhood Galilee and saw the flower strewn hillsides surrounding the Sea of Galilee . He was marveling at the beauty of God's world. Emily Dickinson, the poet of Amherst, once wrote " The only commandment I ever obeyed —'Consider the Lilies'". In one poem she wrote :

Oh Sacrament of summer days,
Oh last Communion on the haze—
Permit a child to join.

But "consider the lilies" means more than to wonder at their beauty . It also be to care for them considerately . We see the damage caused our earth when we do not treat it considerately and make it only as a means of making money , pillaging it in the process. This mountain festival and worship service puts us in the place we need to be to consider such things .

We hear the Psalmist differently when we hear the psalms out of doors. " The heavens declare the glory of God , and the firmament declares God's handiwork " Poet , farmer , novelist Wendell Berry says that the Bible is best read out of doors —and the farther outdoors the better. So, let us praise the Maker of the world and all creation — and devote ourselves to its safe keeping .

But now I want to make a turn and consider what Richard Rohr and others call " The Universal Christ"— Christ permeating all reality. And for this I turn to the Non-Canonical Gospel of Thomas, the gospel discovered in the last century. It is sometimes called an apocryphal gospel , which means "a hidden" gospel. It, along with others, was covered up , hidden because the early church thought them heretical and sought to destroy them . . So many of these were found buried in clay jars in Egypt.

Well ,Thomas didn't make the cut to be in the New Testament , it didn't , so to speak , make it to the Final Four . But many consider it an important entry way into understanding the historical Jesus. I think it helps Jesus enter in the side door, when the front entrance has been so crammed with 2,000 years of churchly interpretation.

I offer two sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas today , that may jostle your minds about Jesus. The gospel itself is totally comprised of 114 sayings, no birth stories , no crucifixion, no resurrection, just teachings and conversations. Here is the first .

Saying 30:2. Jesus said " Lift a stone, you will find me there. Split a piece of wood, I am there." Could the Christ be so universal that he is everywhere? In everyone? The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote : " Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs not his , through the features of...(our human)...faces ." And in the the sunrise and the garbling brooks and flowering meadows.

Now the second .

Saying 61: 1-3. His followers came to Jesus: “ When will the realm come?” (What Jesus called in the gospels “ the kingdom of God”). Jesus replied, “ It will not come by looking for it. It will not be a matter of saying, ‘ Here it is’ or ‘Look! There it is.’ Rather the realm of the Father is spread out upon the earth, but people do not see it”.

The church has had a proprietary interest in Jesus, wanting to keep him just our own, refusing to see him everywhere, in all nature, in all religion. It’s our franchise, and we have the exclusive rights. But what if he and the realm he preached belong to the world? And he and the realm are everywhere, in everything? All we have to do, then, is open our eyes. You can’t make money on that Jesus, but it may be more liberating than we can imagine .

We are here today in the great un-roofed church of God. We offer our wonder , love and praise.