

“There Will be Pain” by Teresa Ramsey

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Christmastide

Good Morning Seekers family. I hope that you all had a blessed Christmas. Here I am 2 days after Christmas to tell you, in the words of Angelus Silesius, that “What does it matter that Christ was born long ago in Bethlehem, if he is not born today in me? And what does it matter that Christ is coming tomorrow, if my heart is not opened to receive him today?”[\[1\]](#) These questions bear repeating: What does it matter that Christ was born long ago in Bethlehem, if he is not born today in me? And what does it matter that Christ is coming tomorrow, if my heart is not opened to receive him today

I have been practicing contemplative or centering prayer as recommended by Thomas Merton, one of my favorite Christian authors. A few weeks ago, after meditating for 20 minutes or

so, I heard the unmistakable call to deliver a sermon. I did not ask why or even what; but, like Mary, I agreed. It is useless to do otherwise. I did not really know what I would share but had faith that God would reveal the subject to me in time. I realize that many of you have the education, experience, and background to deliver spiritual messages that I do not have. However, I have always believed that God qualifies the called. This will be a test.

The theme of my sermon today is "There Will be Pain". I will come back to my theme as well as to the gospel and epistle for today, but first some words of background. I have been enamored lately by the writings of Richard Rohr, in particular, *The Universal Christ*. Richard is a contemplative who believes that a mature Christian sees Christ in everything and everyone else.^[2] Furthermore, he teaches that we can never be separate from God except in our own minds. The Good News, which is brought to all creation, not just to mankind, is that we are all, without exception, living inside a common identity, already in place, that is driving and guiding us forward. Christ pre-existed creation and is leading us into the bosom of the Trinity. This is a radical notion, much bigger than the largely imperial, patriarchal, and dualistic Christianity of the ages, that is largely focused on obedience and conformity instead of love. We find God simultaneously in ourselves and in the outer world beyond ourselves.

The incarnation is not a one-time event. God is incarnate within each of us. But inside of us is the last place we usually look to find God. As we grow, we develop what psychologists call the ego, the sense of self as an individual apart from others, apart from God. This ego must be shed (or poured out) in order for us to recognize our connection to God, to each other. and to all of creation. This is not easy. The ego tells us that it IS us. The ego resists the shedding as we would resist death.

Let us turn to today's scripture readings. In today's gospel

from Luke, we witness the Holy Family, eight days after the birth of Jesus, traveling to Jerusalem to present their first-born son to the Lord in the temple. We observe that Mary and Joseph are following the Laws of their Jewish faith and can surmise that they will raise Jesus in that faith. We also observe that they are a poor family, offering a sacrifice of a pair of doves or two young pigeons, a customary sacrifice of the poor. Jesus, at eight days old, is at the beginning of His ego development, at the start of His acculturation into a faith tribe, and the narrowing of His self. Jesus, being human, shared the human experience of "forgetting" his existence pre-birth, coming into this world "naked" as we all do. His world at first was his mother, but slowly he developed a sense of a separate self or ego. As an infant growing up, Jesus learned that he was a male, that he was Jewish, that he was a carpenter's son and other distinctions that create a duality within a maturing person. In this process He was just like you and me. The real question is, given this humanness, how did Jesus learn to empty himself out completely, to transform into the Jesus we see on the cross? The even bigger question is, how can we follow Jesus's path to transformation?

Reading about how Jesus began his spiritual life made me reflect on my own journey and how I was presented to the Lord as an infant. I was baptized when I was 6 weeks old according to the customs of my parent's faith. I grew up the first-born female in a large Roman Catholic household. My early thoughts about God were shaped by that perspective. I had 12 years of Catholic private schooling that provided further indoctrination. I loved God but was confused by the old testament and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Why did God favor some of his children and not others? Why were men the only ones allowed to be Jesus disciples? Why were only a chosen group allowed to be saved?

I was told that my beloved grandmother would not be going to heaven because she was Mormon, that is because she did not

believe “correctly”. Couldn’t God see that it was not her fault? Couldn’t they see how wonderful a person she was? Furthermore, I was admonished that I needed to proselytize others so that they could believe correctly and be saved. That was our duty. Why did God require this conversion of otherwise good people, I wondered? As I grew, I observed many other things about the operation of the Catholic Church that made it impossible for me to remain. I had outgrown the God I had once believed in. It took a long time to find another.

Fortunately, I discovered I am an alcoholic. In order to recover from alcoholism, I embraced Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and accepted the premise that ...” deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God. It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by worship of other things, but in some form or other it is there. For faith in a Power greater than ourselves, and miraculous demonstrations of that power in human lives, are facts as old as man himself.[\[3\]](#) In fact, I believe that deep inside each of us is the indwelling Christ along with our soul or true self.

In today’s epistle to the Galatians, Paul makes a similar statement. In the masculine vernacular “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who calls out, “*Abba, Father.*” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and since you are a son, God made you also an heir,[\[4\]](#)

Because AA is a spiritual but not a religious program, in pursuing recovery I embarked on a journey to expand my spiritual life. This meant examining my spiritual beliefs, discarding my childhood views of God, and seeking a “spiritual awakening”. I also must seek conscious contact with the God of my understanding through prayer and meditation. I became a seeker of God. However, the journey has not been smooth.

I practiced the 12 “steps” of AA. In Step 1, I admitted that I was powerless over alcohol (and in fact powerless in general) and in step 2 I came to believe in a power greater

than myself who could restore me to sanity. But I balked at step 3, the turning of my will and my life over to the care of the God of my understanding. The old fears resurfaced. What if I turned my life over to God and they wanted me to be a missionary in Africa? Or, what if They wanted me to be a martyr (Catholics know about hundreds of them)? I always have wanted to avoid pain. Now what? The short answer is that I needed a bigger God that I could turn my will over to. I started searching.

I believe that God intended for all mankind to seek them and that every person has an urge to find meaning in life, to know why they exist, to know the point of it all. While we are not explicitly told just how Jesus grew from a young Jewish boy to discover his true identity and purpose, I believe that he did so in the same way we must do so, through prayer, meditation and studying scripture. I also believe that challenging truths told in AA: We suffer to get well. We surrender to win. We die to live. We give it away to keep it.

I continued "working the steps" finding that they required a very painful ego deflation. I examined my life to see where I had resentments, fears, sexual misconduct and caused other harms. This process was brutally painful. I confessed to another human being that which only God knew about me and I had expected to take to the grave. I looked at my character defects and became willing to have them removed (still doing that because I still have some), apologized to the people I hurt and made a daily personal inventory. All this can and in fact, must be done by all of us and not just by people in a 12- step program, but it is very painful process. Most people are unwilling to do it. I learned that there is no easier, softer way, there will be pain.

I experience acute pain now of a hitherto unexpected sort. I feel the pain of the awareness of my own selfishness and shortcomings, the pain of my self-will, the pain of the knowledge of how I hurt others, and other pain caused by my

ego. Yet, as I work on improving my conscious contact with God through prayer and meditation, seeking only a knowledge of their will for me and the power to carry it out, I experience both God's unconditional love and my own connection to all of creation. The new pain I feel is the pain of separation from God, hearing their voice but not able to fully connect. I want to follow Christ yet need so much more guidance and help. My ego fights me every step of the way.

Lately, I have been finding inspiration in the Gospel of Thomas. As many of you know, the Gospel of Thomas is one of the many written gospels available to the early Christians in the few hundred years after Jesus death. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, in the second century determined to select a few of the written gospels in order to tell a "master story" of Christianity. He subsequently ordered the destruction of the others. In 1945, this gospel and other gospels and documents were unearthed near the desert village of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt seemingly hidden to prevent destruction. It took years for these gospels to be translated.

The Gospel of Thomas, rather than telling a narrative story of Jesus life, recorded only the sayings of Jesus. For several weeks now, I have been reading this gospel, meditating on it, and considering what it teaches about Jesus journey. The Gospel of Thomas outlines in Jesus words, His path of transformation which is also a suggested path for our own transformation.

From this treasure trove of scriptures not yet picked apart by preachers over the past several hundred years, I offer you some pieces that resonated with me:

Yeshua (Jesus) said,

*An aged person will not hesitate to ask a seven-day-old infant about the Place of Life, and that person will live,
Many of the first will make themselves last, and they will*

become One. [\[5\]](#)

The infant still retains something of the face of eternity, is remarkably close to the Source. The infant has no information; but has a simple way of looking at things. The infant has not yet developed an ego, so is open and teachable. The infant has not yet applied labels and begun dualistic thinking.

Another reading:

Yeshua said,

*Fortunate is the lion eaten by a human,
for lion becomes human.*

*Unfortunate is the human eaten by a lion
For human becomes lion.* [\[6\]](#)

What is the lion? Perhaps it is the ego, the false self, a bundle of memories, materialism, opinions? In any event, one must master the lion or be consumed by it.

Now my favorite reading:

Yeshua said,

*I stood in the midst of the world
And revealed myself to them in the flesh
I found them all intoxicated,
Not one of them was thirsty
And my soul grieved for the children of humanity,
For they are blind in their hearts.
They do not see.
They came naked into the world
And naked they will leave it.
At this time, they are intoxicated,
When they have vomited their wine,
They will return to themselves.* [\[7\]](#)

We are intoxicated by what? The world of appearances? materialism? given truths? How do we regain our proper selves? Do we need to again become naked i.e., without ego? So much to ponder.

Richard Rohr teaches that love and suffering are God's primary tools for teaching us all the lessons that really matter. He tells us that "Authentic Christianity is not so much a belief system as a life and death system that shows you how to give away your life, how to give away your love, and eventually, how to give away your death. Basically, how to *give away* –and in doing so, to connect with the world, with all other creatures, and with God." I would add that the emptying out of self, the giving away is painful. Yes, there will be pain! But birth is painful. We need to experience giving birth to Christ within us. We need to continue to break open our hearts to receive Him. We need to see Christ when we look at each other and at the world around us. Take a moment now to look at each other and see Christ in the faces before you. May our vision expand to include all mankind.

Let it be so. Amen.

[1] Leloup, Jean-Ives. *The Gospel of Thomas*, Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1986

[2] Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ*. New York: Convergent2019, P 45.

[3] W., Bill *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*. New York. Alcoholics Anonymous World Services.1976, Pg. 55

[4] Galatians 4:6-7.

[5]Leloup, Jean-Ives. *The Gospel of Thomas*, Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1986, Logion 4.

[\[6\]](#)Ibid, Logion 7

[\[7\]](#) Ibid, Logion 28.