

YOU ARE THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

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Our first reading comes from author and public lecturer, Marianne Williamson. These words come from her book, *A Return to Love*, which explores the principles of the Course in Miracles.

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond all measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who I am to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightening about shrinking so that other people won't feel unsure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. As we let our own Light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

Our second reading comes from the Christian Scriptures – the words of Jesus as attributed to him in the Gospel of Matthew, the 2nd oldest of the canonical gospels, dated circa 85 CE.

“You are the light of the world. A city sitting on top of a mountain cannot be concealed. Nor does anyone after lighting a lamp put it under a bushel basket, but on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

I'd like to share a story from the literature of the Desert Fathers, a group of 4th century Christian monks wandering in search of God through the deserts of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Like Zen koans, the tales of the Desert Fathers encourage us to find answers that dig beneath the surface of our day-to-day consciousness. The term *abba*, used in this story, is a term of respect and tenderness, often falsely translated as abbot.

Abba Lot went to seek wisdom from the renowned spiritual advisor, Abba Joseph. Abba Lot asked, “Abba, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my

little fast, my daily prayers, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of bad thoughts; and still I have not found what I seek; what more should I do?’

The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten flaming lamps. He said, “Why not be totally changed into fire?”

In this season of darkness, we honor the light within.

As in many faiths, light is very important in the Christian tradition. To understand this power, we have to look back to the stories of creation in Genesis. The first thing to come to be was light... out of the chaos, the darkness, the nothingness, the words, “let there be light,” were spoken by God. “And there was light, and it was good.”

So when Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” it is no trivial statement. He is saying you are the manifestation of God... that the light of God is within you... that God is within you... and you must not hide your sacred nature but share it with the world. Jesus declares this to be perhaps our most holy duty... to let our light shine.

This principle is perhaps the most basic affirmation within the liberal religious tradition – the sacred stirs within each of us and, for that matter, all of life.

Now, of course, not everyone feels that way. As we know, as it is today, early Christianity was not a singular movement but many... not a Christianity, but Christianities. We see this debate revealed very clearly in the last gospel of the New Testament, the Gospel of John, and another gospel that never made it into the official literature of the Catholic Church, the Gospel of Thomas.

Both gospels have similarities. They both are likely to have been written around the same time, about 90 to 100 CE. They each claim secret teachings of Jesus, not

revealed elsewhere. And they also both equate Jesus with the divine light cast forth at the beginning of Creation.

John writes about Jesus as light in a quote referring to John the Baptist, the wandering visionary who declared Jesus' coming. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

And Thomas quotes Jesus describing himself, "I am the light which is before all things. It is I who am all things. From me all things came forth, and to me all things extend. Split a piece of wood and I am there; lift up the stone, and you will find me."

But that's where their agreements seem to end... as the two books have a very different understanding of how one gains access to that eternal light. And we can actually see hints of their tendencies in the two readings. John argues that the light is unique to Jesus and only through him can one find salvation, while Thomas argues that the sacred light is within us all.

Thomas writes, "If they say to you, 'Where do you come from?' say to them, 'We came from the light, the place where the light came into being by itself, established itself, and appeared in their image.' If they say to you, 'Who are you?' say, 'We are its children...'

And also, "There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark."

And similar to the quote from Matthew, Thomas says, "No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, nor does one put it in a hidden place. Rather, one puts it on a lampstand so that all who come and go will see its light."

And we see further quotes in Thomas that emphasize the inner nature of the sacred.

“If your leaders say to you, ‘Look, the Kingdom is in heaven,’ then the birds of heaven will precede you. If they say to you, ‘It is in the sea,’ then the fish will precede you. Rather the Kingdom is inside you, and outside you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known... But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty...”

And one of my favorite quotes: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

The Gospel of John, however, has a different take on things, emphasizing the uniqueness of Jesus and our need to go through him.

John quotes Jesus as saying, “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.”

John, referring to Jesus, also says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned; but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

John also features a variety of statements not seen in any other gospel, known as the ‘I am statements.’ In one example, the apostle Thomas asks Jesus a question. “How can we know the way?”

Jesus declares, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

And it’s just such a setting up of Thomas that reveals a fascinating hypothesis about these two gospels put forth by author & Princeton professor, Elaine Pagels, in her

book, *Beyond Belief*. She suggests that the Gospel of John & the Gospel of Thomas may actually have been competing with each other for their understanding of God, and the Gospel of John may have been written as a means to discredit the light-is-within-us-all views in the Gospel of Thomas.

Perhaps, many of you have heard the phrase “doubting Thomas”. The origin of that phrase comes from the Gospel of John and is present in no other text. And there are many other examples too numerous to name that suggest such a debate.

What is important, though, is the recognition that the Gospel of John eventually won the day. Pagels writes, “What John’s gospel does – and has succeeded ever in persuading the majority of Christians to do – is claim that only by believing in Jesus can we find divine truth.”

Yet, with the rediscovery of the teachings of Thomas, we are reminded that the divine light within us all remains a powerful and palpable understanding of the sacred. The affirmation of the sacred within each of us continues, affirmed in the countless pockets of liberal religion, our community being one of them.

I wonder what it would be like if we were to take seriously the words attributed to Jesus... “You are the light of the world.” What would it be like for us to live as if this were so?

I think we all know the experience of what it’s like to radiate. Feeling more energized and happy, people seem to feel more at ease with us. We might catch the eyes of more people glancing our way, or get more smiles, or more people randomly speaking to us. We might even notice children or animals paying a particular attention to us.

A few months ago, I experienced very clearly such a radiating moment as I was reading a book by Leif Enger called *Peace Like a River*. At one point in the book, a

child, a young boy, dies rather tragically. The boy then finds himself in another land... an afterlife. There's a gentle river running by, an orchard full of fruit trees, and in my mind's eye, I imagined it to be nighttime with a slight cast of light from the moon.

I wondered what the boy must have felt like, suddenly in a strange place, alone and separated from his family. I imagined he was frightened, anxious, very nervous. In the story, the boy then speaks of an awareness of a keeper of the orchard. I imagined a person, a stranger emerge from the trees of the orchard and approach the boy. I wondered what kind of person, what kind of being this would have to be... a complete stranger to the boy, yet whose purpose was to console him in his fear. I felt the boy find comfort and calmness as he naturally reached out to embrace this angelic stranger, feeling the safety and wholeness of home in the arms of this warm soul.

And then I began to imagine that I was that warm soul. I wondered what I would have to be like to greet such a child, for that child to find peace in my own simple presence. As I imagined this, I began to viscerally feel a love so powerful that it seemed like it might overwhelm me. I cried as I experienced what seemed like an endless source of light flowing through me and pouring out of me. I felt calm, peaceful, at ease, as I radiated in my mind's vision. And yet, in that vision, there was no me. There was just the child, a still, gentle, yet very strong focus of love on that child.

Eventually, of course, this experience faded and came to an end... yet, it brought me face-to-face with the primary obstacle I place in front of myself that prevents me from experiencing this level of openness more regularly... fear.

Marianne Williamson writes, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond all measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us... You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world..."

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone.”

One of my greatest fears is that if I love people, I will be drained dry. Yet in my vision with that little boy, I felt not emptied, but filled... renewed through openness.

My friends, we are challenged to become like flame... to let the fire of love consume us. Fear is the bushel basket with which we cover our love... Yet we are charged to put our light up on a lampstand for all to see... to let our light shine.

I conclude with a wonderful poem from German poet and mystic, Rainer Maria Rilke.

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Give me your hand, my friends. Let your light shine. Hallelujah and Amen.