

Thomas: Patron Saint of the UCC?

Most of us experience the church, pretty much, Sunday-to Sunday. Unless we have a need for pastoral care, or are really active on church committees, it's easy to lose sight of all the other things that a minister does in addition to Sunday morning worship. And that list of responsibilities is even longer for an interim, who is also asked to take a close look, and bring a fresh perspective, on many different aspects of how the church operates.

In addition to all that, we are also asking our interim minister to lead us a process of discernment about who we are, and who we want to be in the future. So, there is a lot involved in interim ministry.

And Alan is doing a great job; we are so lucky to have him. But he has been going full-tilt ever since he arrived. So, it seemed like a good idea to give him a week off from preaching, so that he could catch his breath.

And so, here I am: glad for the opportunity to talk to you about one of my own personal heroes, the disciple Thomas. Thomas is one of the most amazing and complex characters in the New Testament; but, he has gotten a bum rap. So I'm going to try to rehabilitate his reputation a bit here this morning; and even go so far as to nominate him as "patron saint of the UCC."

More on that later. But first.....

Have you ever had the experience of sitting on an airplane next to someone, who is eager to chat, while you just want to read your book? It can be pretty annoying.

Well, I was on a cross-country flight not long ago; and I was minding my own business, reading a magazine - *Sports Illustrated*, it was (and, no, it wasn't that issue). Anyway, the woman next to me, finished her book or something, and so she decided to start up a conversation. It was pleasant enough, until she asked the inevitable question, the question I always dread when talking to strangers, namely, "What do you do for a living?"

I told her, and then held my breath. You just never know how people are going to respond when they learn they are sitting next to a minister: disdain perhaps, or pity. The worst is when you trigger some latent guilt in them, and they feel the need to start confessing their sins to you, right then and there! It can get pretty creepy.

Anyway, I told her I was a pastor, and this nice woman responded with interest, saying, "Oh, what kind of church is that? What do you believe?"

Now, you could say that this was my moment, right? Here was my opportunity to explain to her that yes, I believe in Jesus, but not in Jesus as my Savior - I don't even know what that means anymore - but instead, Jesus as The One Whom I Have to Deal With, like it or not! Or did I try to explain to her that Jesus is a palpable presence in my life, constantly challenging me, and encouraging me, to be the best person I can be? Did I try to explain that Jesus has a claim on my life, has hold of me, in a way that I just can't ignore - no matter how hard I try?

OR, did I explain to this woman how I believe in God, to be sure, but not your Standard, Garden Variety God; in fact, not any kind of God that I can easily explain. Certainly not "God the Father," an image that has become so tainted, in our unbalanced, male-dominant culture.

On the other hand, did I say that God as Mother is a metaphor that does still work

for me, as I find myself caught up in the everlasting arms of a living presence that enfolds me with tenderness and affection?

OR, did I try to explain to her my deep and abiding passion for the United Church of Christ - in all of our ambiguity and uncertainty, and the vast, teeming diversity of opinions among us - including how to speak of God, or who Jesus is; and our amazing ability in the UCC to tolerate just about anything, except intolerance? Or did I tell her that the United Church of Christ is more than a denomination to me - it is my spiritual home on this earth, my family, my people?

No. Of course not. I didn't say any of those things to the nice lady sitting next to me on the airplane that day. I'm not really sure what I did say, except to make darn sure that she understood what I didn't believe in.

I made sure that she knew that I wasn't one of "those" kind of Christians: you know, those right-wing Christians, who try to impose their view of morality on the rest of us, or one of those over-zealous evangelical Christians who make everyone else feel uncomfortable. No, sir. Not me.

You see, that day on that airplane I just wanted to make sure that my seatmate understood that I was an amiable, easy-going, non-offensive sort of Christian: you know, the kind of person that "goes along to get along," and doesn't make anybody feel uncomfortable.

But, you know, that's not who I really want to be. And it's not really who I am. And I'm pretty sure it's not who you are either.

Which brings us, then, to Thomas. Dear Thomas. Thomas, who has gotten such a bad rap.

Now, let me just say right off the bat: that the one thing you will never hear from me is that phrase, that adjective, by which Thomas is most widely known. You know what I mean: the "D" word that is so often associated with Thomas.

No. The only "D" word you'll hear from me is Daring Thomas. Or maybe Devout Thomas - since, after all, his response to the Risen Christ that day was a passionate, heartfelt, "My Lord and my God!"

Let's look again at the story. The other disciples come running up to Thomas. They're out of breath, and they say, "We have seen the Lord - the Risen Christ - in the flesh! He showed us the wounds in his hands and his side. O Thomas! It was amazing! We felt that Holy Breath, the *Holy Spirit*, filling us with power."

Thomas says, "I can't believe this! I have to see the Risen Lord, too - just like you did!" Which seems like a perfectly reasonable response.

And so the time comes, and Thomas finally gets to have his own experience of the Risen Christ; and he responds immediately with profound devotion: "My Lord and my God!"

But instead of praise, Thomas gets scolded. "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now, Biblical scholars point out that this reprimand of Thomas actually aimed, not so much at him, as it at us, the readers.

You see, the Gospel of John was written about 60 years after Christ died. The church was in crisis at that time because, by then, the eyewitnesses to Jesus were becoming few and far between. The author of the Gospel of John knew that if the Christian movement hoped to survive, people were just going to have to "get over" the need for eyewitness accounts.

Thus, Thomas provides the author with a perfect foil: an opportunity to point out that it is imperative that we believe what we hear about Jesus and what we read about Jesus, without having to have an eyewitness account.

So, that's what's really going on when the author has Jesus say to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe."

And this is understandable, and it would be fine - except that it has given Thomas such a bad rap over the years – as if he were some kind of hesitant or uncommitted follower of Jesus: when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth!

There's plenty of evidence that Thomas was anything but "hesitant." He was actually a highly-committed, "full-speed-ahead" kind of guy. In fact, what I love most about Thomas – and the reason he is my hero - is because he's a disciple with chutzpah. He was bold and audacious, not afraid to step out of line, or be impertinent, and never afraid to ask the hard questions. Thomas was a courageous disciple; always ready to speak his own truth and to share the good news of Jesus.

And that's why I think you and I need Thomas - a disciple with some chutzpah. So let me tell you a little more about him, and then you can decide, whether or not we should adopt him as our "patron saint."

In the 11th chapter of the Gospel of John we find the well-known story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Unfortunately, we always seem to start in the middle of this story, at vs.17; but there's plenty of drama in the first part of the chapter, when Jesus learns of the death of his dear friend Lazarus, and he considers whether or not to return to Bethany.

You see, he'd gotten in trouble in Bethany. And so, his disciples try to talk him out of going: "Jesus, you can't go back there. We were just there, and they tried to stone you. You'll surely be killed if you go back." But, Jesus says he is going anyway.

And then, in verse 16, Thomas speaks up. No one else; just Thomas. And he says to his fellow disciples, "C'mon, let's go. If Jesus is going to die in Bethany, well, we're going to die with him."

Now, there may be other occasions in the New Testament where a disciple pipes up and says, "Let's go die with Jesus" - but I sure can't think of any.

So here we discover Daring Thomas, Courageous Thomas, rallying the troops. "If Jesus is going to die, we're going to die with him."

In chapter 14, Jesus tells his disciples about the rough road that lies ahead for him. And Thomas, who clearly intends to go the whole way with Jesus, says, "I want to go with you, but I don't know the way." To which Jesus famously replies, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

Actually, the passage I read to you earlier, from The Gospel of Thomas, seems to indicate that Thomas was closer to Jesus, and understood Jesus better, than the other disciples.

Simon Peter compares Jesus to a "righteous messenger," while Matthew compares Jesus to a "wise philosopher." But Thomas says to Jesus, "I am utterly unable to compare you to anything. There is no one like you." This apparently is the answer Jesus is looking for, because he then takes Thomas aside, and shares with him with three secret teachings.

And these mysterious sayings are apparently "too hot to handle" for Peter and Matthew. Because when they ask him to tell them what Jesus said, Thomas says, "If I tell you the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me." But you may not want to do that, because "fire will then come from the rocks and devour you."

Strange stuff.

Now, there is one other ancient Christian writing that bears the name of Thomas. It's called The Acts of Thomas; and it describes how, at the same time the Apostle Paul headed north and west to spread the gospel, the Apostle Thomas headed east with the same goal, of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. According to this account, Thomas took an ancient trade route all the way from the Mediterranean Sea to the Malabar Coast of India. And that's what is depicted on the front cover of the bulletin today: Thomas the Disciple landing in India, in 52 A.D.

Well, The Acts of Thomas is quite an adventure story, filled with lively tales about the faith and courage of Thomas. One story tells of the Apostle Thomas at the court of King Gundaphorous. Thomas is directed by the king to build a palace. Instead, Thomas ends up giving all the money to the poor; and then tells the king that a palace has now been built for him in heaven - which makes the king even more furious. I mean, talk about chutzpah!

At first, King Gundaphorus plans to kill Thomas; but after further reflection, the King instead converts to Christianity, and he dedicates his life to serving this God whom Thomas speaks of so eloquently.

Now, please understand that scholars are quite doubtful about the authenticity of these stories. Some of them are pretty far-fetched, and in The Acts of Thomas we also find some of the bizarre theology that is typical of apocryphal writings.

So, did Thomas actually go to India? There is no way to know for sure, but I can tell you that there are plenty of people who believe it.

Including the Pope. In 1952, exactly 1900 years after Thomas supposedly landed in India, Pope Pius XII acknowledged that the Apostle Thomas had planted Christian churches in India; and he congratulated the Christians of today for keeping this precious legacy alive.

Because the fact is that, along the southwest coast of India right now, there are 3 million Indian Christians who belong to an ancient order known as "St. Thomas Christians." St. Thomas Christians claim to be the direct descendants of those who were baptized by none other than Thomas himself.

And I have met some of these St. Thomas Christians - including a friend who got her Ph.D. at the GTU. And I can tell you, these people are extremely proud of their heritage, proud that that they are Indian Christians who were not converted to the faith by some white missionaries; but instead, that their church goes all the way back to St. Thomas.

Well, you know, I wouldn't mind being called a "St. Thomas Christian" myself. He certainly was someone with the courage of his convictions.

Unlike me, most of the time. And I'd venture to guess that the same is true for you: we don't often show a lot of chutzpah when it comes to our faith. Whether it's on an airplane talking to a stranger, or chatting with our friends, or neighbors, or co-workers: you and I tend to downplay our faith and to tamp down our passion. Usually, we choose, instead, to be amiable, non-offensive, easy-to-take Christians - who'd rather just "go along and get along." Which is precisely why you and I so desperately need to look to Thomas as our patron saint.

You see, dear friends, the world needs to hear about the faith we proclaim. Truth is, there are people right here in the Sonoma Valley who are hungry to hear about a

God who surrounds them with tenderness and affection. There are people who long for fellow travelers on their spiritual journey, and they would love to find a church where skepticism is allowed, and diversity is welcomed, and hard questions are encouraged: a place where you don't have to check your mind at the door.

People need to know about a community of Christians who cry out for justice, and who are fighting to save a dying planet, and who yearn to change the world.

Dear friends, by the grace of God, may we, like Thomas, be disciples of Christ who show some chutzpah. May we be disciples with the courage to speak up, and to speak out. May we be disciples who live out the courage of our convictions.

For Jesus' sake. Amen