Three years ago, I stood here and delivered a sermon on “Natural Piety,” a phrase I had borrowed from the poet, William Wordsworth, and that had been the subject of my Master’s thesis at Marylhurst University. As I described then, I understand natural piety to be a quality of reverent alertness or attention, which leads to consciousness of the Divine in all of nature and recognition of the unity of all creation. For Wordsworth, this recognition was achieved not through reason, but through what he called “wise passiveness,” which was for him, a childlike presence and reverence, free of dogma or theological argument. It is not my intention this morning to re-tread this ground. Instead, I would like to add to it. When I was writing my thesis, I discovered and explored connections with Wordsworth’s natural piety in two of the spiritual texts that have come to be essential to my understanding of the Divine (or what I generally prefer to call “the Divine.”) As Gretchen told you, I call myself a mystic with Christian roots and Taoist inclinations. So, the two texts that I explored came from the Taoist and Christian traditions.

The first of these texts is the Tao Te Ching, attributed to Lao Tzu, who is said to have lived in China around 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The Tao Te Ching will perhaps be the subject for a future sermon. For now I will simply say that it describes an unending process, in which the Tao or ‘way’ is manifested in visible forms that return to their starting place in the Tao. The second text in which I found connections with Wordsworth’s “natural piety” was the Gospel of Thomas, which is the subject of this sermon. I would like to begin by giving you a little background. The Gospel of Thomas, along with other papyrus codices written in Coptic, was found in an earthen jar buried near Nag Hammadi, Egypt in 1945. It is believed that Thomas, along with other documents that have come to be known as the “Gnostic Gospels,” was buried sometime in the late fourth century in response to an Easter letter issued by the Archbishop of Alexandria, ordering believers to reject what he considered to be “illegitimate and secret books.”

Unlike the canonical Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, this gospel contains no story, no miraculous birth, no crucifixion, and no suggestion that Jesus died for our sins. It consists simply of 114 wisdom sayings, attributed to Jesus as told to Judas Thomas. “Thomas” means “twin” in Aramaic. And “twin,” as used in the Gospel of Thomas, is intended to imply a person who is spiritually one with the Divine. For those of you with a Christian background, Judas Thomas is not to be confused with Judas Iscariot.

A very short detour here will help me to explain why this gospel means so much to me. I spent my growing-up years in the Congregational or UCC Church, a very liberal and, for a long time, for me, very comfortable community. But, by the time I was a teenager I was tying myself in knots over questions of dogma and creed. What did I believe? Could I recite the Apostle’s Creed? Would it be OK to find the stories interesting and useful, as well as metaphorically instructive, even if I didn’t actually believe that they were all true? Eventually, although I loved the teachings of Jesus, I found that I did not believe all that I was called upon to believe, and I reluctantly left Jesus behind.

And this is how things remained for me until about ten years ago, when I discovered the Gospel of Thomas.

I am drawn to this gospel precisely because it does not concern itself with the stories that Christianity requires us to believe. It, instead, sets forth sayings, couched in mystical and enigmatic language, that suggest how we might be in the world and what the world is about. Slightly fewer than half of these
sayings also appear in the canonical gospels, but the stripping away of story in Thomas leaves me free to ponder the words attributed to Jesus.

I have one more detour before considering Thomas, and that is to acknowledge that there is much scholarly debate about many aspects of this gospel, centering on questions such as: Should Thomas, in fact, be considered a gospel co-equal with the canonical gospels? And: Does it pre- or post-date the canonical gospels? I will leave it to others to explore these questions, which do not impact my belief that this document contains much wisdom, regardless of its place in the historical time line. I will simply note that scholars generally agree that the canonical gospels were written 40 to 60 years after the death of Jesus. In these circumstances, I am as willing to look to Thomas as I am to look to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for an understanding of Jesus’ teachings.

Enough detours. Let’s talk about what is contained in this gospel.

Thomas is called a “hidden” or “secret” gospel, both because it claims to reveal what Jesus taught his disciples in private, and because it contains obscure sayings that are capable of understanding through creative interpretation. This gospel invites its readers to interact with the sayings in order to discover their true meaning. It begins:

These are the hidden sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded.

The first Saying quotes Jesus as follows:

Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.¹

Thomas scholar and translator Stevan Davies explains that the reward of one who successfully decodes Thomas is immortality, that is, the discovery of the Kingdom of Heaven. For Thomas’s Jesus, however, the Kingdom is not someplace separate and far away to be discovered upon death. It is here and now. Thus, in Saying 3, Jesus is quoted as saying:

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 it is outside you.

Thomas’s Jesus has little patience for questions about a future kingdom. Again, from the Gospel:

His followers said to him, “When will the rest for the dead take place, and when will the new world come?”

He said to them, “What you look for has come, but you do not know it.” (Saying 51)

The disciples ask again, and Jesus repeats this lesson:

His followers said to him, "When will the kingdom come?"

“It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, ‘Look, here it is,’ or ‘Look, there it is.’ Rather, the father’s kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.” (Saying 113)

It would seem, then, that for Thomas’s Jesus, it is a failure of perception that keeps humanity from recognizing the Kingdom.

Saying 28 suggests that Jesus found people too distracted to see the Kingdom:

Jesus said, “I took my stand in the midst of the world, and in flesh I appeared to them. I found them all drunk, and I did not find any of them thirsty. My soul ached for the children of humanity, because they are blind in their hearts and do not see . . .”

What, then, must a person do to perceive the Kingdom? According to Thomas’s Jesus, he or she must look inward:

Jesus said, . . .

“When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you dwell in poverty, and you are poverty.” (Saying 3)

Gospel of Thomas scholars suggest that Jesus is asking his followers to recognize a status that they have always had, so that the work of salvation and the recognition of the immanence of the Kingdom

¹ My quotations are from the version of the Gospel of Thomas set forth in The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus. 2d ed. by Marvin Meyers.
are one and the same. Thus, in order to recognize the Kingdom, one must recognize the Divinity within and without. In this way, that which has been hidden will be revealed. Thomas’s Jesus teaches:

Know what is in front of your face, and what is hidden from you will be disclosed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed. (Saying 5)

And what is it that Jesus suggests will be revealed? His teachings describe a non-dualistic spiritual reality. Again from the Gospel of Thomas:

Jesus said [to Salome], "I am the one who comes from what is whole. I was given from the things of my father."

. . . . . . .

“For this reason I say, if one is ‘whole,’ one will be filled with light, but if one is divided, one will be filled with darkness.” (Saying 50)

Thus, Jesus, like modern physicists, and, indeed, like Wordsworth and the Tao Te Ching, describes us as part of a whole that is greater than ourselves.

In Thomas, Jesus is quoted as saying:

If they say to you, “Where have you come from?” say to them, ‘We have come from the light, from the place where the light came into being by itself, established [itself], and appeared in their image.” (Saying 49)

Thus, Jesus has us coming from a place of light.

He also describes an entry and a return:

Blessings on those who are alone and chosen, for you will find the kingdom. For you have come from it, and you will return there again. (Saying 49)

Light is an ongoing theme for Thomas’s Jesus:

Whoever has ears should hear. There is light within a person of light, and it shines on the whole world. If it does not shine, it is dark. (Saying 24)

How does one assure that one will be a person of light? It is not a question of following rules. When Jesus’ followers ask him how they should pray, whether they should fast or give to charity, he responds simply: “Do not lie, and do not do what you hate,” (Saying 6). What Jesus suggests to his followers is a process of radical self-transformation:

When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, . . . , then you will enter [the kingdom]. (Saying 22)

Here, Jesus is pointing us to a consciousness of unity. This is the consciousness we experience when we are fully present—when we are in the state that Wordsworth called natural piety. At these times, we are not conscious of our gender or our age or of time itself; we simply are. Thus, for Thomas’s Jesus, when one achieves the Kingdom, one will not taste death because during the experience of unity, death becomes meaningless.

The poet Alfred Lord Tennyson gave this account of a mystical or unity experience:

. . . individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of surest, utterly beyond words—where death was an almost laughable impossibility . . .

I believe that it is to such a unity experience that Jesus is pointing in the Gospel of Thomas, asking his followers not to look for an apocalyptic end of time, but to instead seek the beginning:

The followers said to Jesus, “Tell us how our end will be.”

Jesus said, “Have you discovered the beginning, then, so that you are seeking the end? For where the beginning is, the end will be. Blessings on one who stands at the beginning: That one will know the end and will not taste death.” (Saying 18)

Perhaps the richest description of unity in Thomas appears in Saying 77:

Jesus said, “I am the light that is over all things. I am all: From me all has come forth, and to me all has reached. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.” (53)

Here, Jesus, the representative of the Divine, is present in all things. There is no separate reality or separate God. All is one.
Obviously we cannot force the mystical experience that will make us conscious of the unity of all. How, then, might we prepare ourselves for such an experience? Jesus, like Wordsworth, teaches that we must be as children:

Jesus said, “The person old in days will not hesitate to ask a little child seven days old about the place of life, and that person will live. For many of the first will be last and will become a single one.” (Saying 4)

Again, in Saying 22, we are told:

Jesus saw some babies nursing. He said to his followers, “These nursing babies are like those who enter the kingdom.”

In Saying 46, Jesus declares that since Adam no one has been greater than John the Baptist, but goes on to state: “[W]hoever among you becomes a child will know the kingdom and will become greater than John” (39). Thus, for Thomas’s Jesus, one is not to follow rules. One is, instead, to approach the mysteries of the Kingdom with the innocence and sense of unity of a child.

Thomas scholar, Cynthia Bauman, in her book *The Luminous Gospels*, describes the kingdom as:

[A] territory to which we belong, from which we have come, and to which we are returning. This Kingdom exists as a sacred geography transcendent to but including space-time, which is also the “kingdom within” intimately connected to our own hearts.

Bauman sees Jesus as “directing us toward that Kingdom from duality at the periphery of the world to oneness at its Center.”

Thus, the Gospel of Thomas teaches that wisdom and spiritual knowledge come from childlike simplicity, attention, and consciousness of the whole of which we are a part. This is what Wordsworth called natural piety.

Jesus’ words in this Gospel draw me away from received and mandatory beliefs – the virgin birth, the miracles, the dying for our sins – and place me in a world of radical unity, if I will only open my eyes and heart. This description of unity resonates with my Wordsworthian intimations about the nature of being and unity of all creation.

I hope that I have given you a taste of the Gospel of Thomas. It is not easy to take in these sayings when they are read aloud, but I hope that, if you have any interest in the teachings of Jesus, you will consider this text. There is much more to be pondered in this gospel. Enough to keep you meditating for a long, long time, without any need to recite a creed.