

	July 16, 2006
First Reading	<p>A reading from The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas</p> <p>The day before we were to fight with the beasts I saw the following vision. The deacon came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: 'Perpetua, come; we are waiting for you.'</p> <p>Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough and broken country. At last we came to the amphitheatre out of breath, and he led me into the centre of the arena.</p> <p>Then he told me: 'Do not be afraid. I am here, struggling with you.' Then he left.</p> <p>I looked at the enormous crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me, of vicious appearance, together with his seconds, to fight with me. There also came up to me some handsome young men to be my seconds and assistants.</p> <p>My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest). Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of marvelous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheatre. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples.</p> <p>And he asked for silence and said: 'If this Egyptian defeats her he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch.' Then he withdrew.</p> <p>We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised up into the air and I began to pummel him without as it were touching the ground. Then when I noticed there was a lull, I put my two hands together linking the fingers of one hand with those of the other and thus I got hold of his head. He fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head.</p> <p>The crowd began to shout and my assistants started to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: 'Peace be with you, my daughter!' I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life. Then I awoke. I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.</p>

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Second Reading	<p>The Gospel of Thomas</p> <p>* 112. Jesus said this: "Whoever drinks out of my mouth, he will come into my way. I, also, will become as he is, and that which is hidden will appear to him."</p> <p>* 113. Said Jesus this: "The Kingdom is like a man who had there in his field, a hidden treasure, and he did not know about it. After his death, he left it to his son, who knew not &lt;also&gt;. He took the field there, and gave it away. And whoever bought it, came plowing, and found the treasure. He began giving money (with interest) to those whom he loves."</p> <p>* 114. Jesus said this: "Whoever has found the world and become rich, let him abdicate from the world!"</p> <p>* 115. Jesus said this: "The heavens and the earth will be rolled up in your presence, and he who lives &lt;from&gt; out of He who Lives, will not look upon death." Because Jesus speaks of this, whoever finds Him, himself, the world is not worthy of him.</p> <p>* 116. Said Jesus this: "Woe be unto the flesh who depends on the soul; Woe be unto a soul who depends on the flesh."</p> <p>* 117. His disciples said to him: "On what day will the Kingdom come?" "It will not come when you are looking outward for it. They will not say; 'Behold it is there!' or; 'Behold, it is that one!'. Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth and men do not see it. "</p> <p>* 118. Simon Peter said to them: "Let Mariam go out from us, for women are not worthy of The Life!" Jesus said this: "Behold, I will lead her so that I might make her male, so she might also be a living spirit like you males. For any woman making herself male will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."</p> <p>Here ends the second reading</p>

Sermon

Well, alrighty then. You ladies are out of luck. Christianity is a guy thing. But don't worry. When we all get to heaven, you'll be guys too!

Don't get me wrong. It won't matter since scripture tells us that we won't marry or be given in marriage so there's no problem with being an all-guy society. You know, like in prison. We'll all be perfect men, just like Jesus was a perfect man and we'll be able to be Christ for each other, just like a Catholic or Orthodox priest is here on earth because, well, Jesus only picked men to be in charge and who are we to change the rules after Jesus went to all the trouble to set them up for us.

Sometimes it's hard to find the wisdom and inner light in scripture, writings and the actions of other Christians but lets give it a try. The Gospel of Thomas and the he Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas both give us stories of a miraculous sex change. Both times it's female to male and both times it gives the "new guy" the opportunity to do something the "old girl" couldn't. Maybe that's where we should seek wisdom.

But first, let's talk a little bit about Perpetua and Felicity, and

## The Gospel of Thomas.

At the dawn of the Third Century, Roman emperor Septimus Severus banned conversions to Christianity. Among those disobeying that edict were Vibia Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and her maidservant Felicitas. Both were jailed at Carthage in North Africa along with three fellow Christians, Revocatus and Saturninus, and Saturus, their teacher.

Perpetua was also a new mother and a fairly recent widow. Felicitas (or Felicity) was near the end of her own pregnancy when arrested.

During their imprisonment, Perpetua and Felicitas witnessed to their faith with such conviction that the officer in charge became a follower of Jesus. For some time, doubts remained about their fates, but Perpetua had a vision of a golden ladder guarded by a fierce dragon. She climbed it, stepping on the dragon's head to do so. At the top, she found a green meadow with many white-robed figures. In their midst stood a Shepherd, who welcomed her and gave her cheese from the sheep's milk. She awoke understanding that martyrdom was assured but that she would triumph.

Roman law forbade the execution of pregnant women and

Felicitas feared that Perpetua and the men being held at the same time would face martyrdom but leave her behind. However, she gave birth two days before the scheduled execution and was allowed to join her companions in the arena.

The accounts say that the five were first scourged at the crowd's urging. Then the men faced a boar, a bear, and a leopard while a wild cow was set against the women. After they were all injured, Perpetua and Felicity exchanged the kiss of peace before the Romans put them to the sword. One tradition holds that Perpetua showed mercy to her captors by guiding the sword of a trembling young gladiator to her own heart because he could not bear to put her to death.

The martyrs were interred in Carthage in North Africa. Later, a basilica was erected over their tomb. Their story was so popular that Saint Augustine of Hippo warned against giving it the weight of Scripture.

Notice something? Nowhere in this story does it mention the battle with the Egyptian or the sex change. As a matter of fact, in the vast majority of the sources I checked, there is no mention of the Egyptian, the wrestling match or the sex change and yet it's in the acta, the original manuscript source of the story, it's recorded by

Tertullian, it's mentioned by Augustine and it's celebrated in Christian art as far back as the fourth century. This sex change business really makes modern Christians uncomfortable. Oh, and by the way. In art, Perpetua is European and Felicitas is African.

And the Gospel of Thomas, we've already discussed. In brief, The Gospel of Thomas is the modern name given to a New Testament-era apocryphon completely preserved in a papyrus Coptic manuscript discovered in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Unlike the four canonical gospels, which combine narrative accounts of the life of Jesus with sayings, Thomas is a "sayings gospel" with 114 pericopes attributed to Jesus. It takes the less structured form of a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus, brief dialogues with Jesus, and sayings that some of his disciples reported to Didymus Judas Thomas. Thomas does not have a narrative framework, nor is it worked into any overt philosophical or rhetorical context. Some of the echo things found in the four canonical Gospels but others were unknown until we got Thomas. Some of its sayings run counter to sayings found in the four canonical gospels. "For any woman making herself male will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." is one of those.

It seems, based on this, Jesus didn't have the same hang ups

with gender roles and sex some of his followers, our contemporaries, seem to have developed. Kick and scream as much as conservative Christians do about following tradition and the letter of the scriptural law, there is every reason to believe that Jesus breezed right through the cultural and religious scared cows of his time and included everyone, equally as a partner in ministry. His early followers continued in that tradition. The current controversy over ordaining women and non-celibate gay men or lesbians to the episcopacy in the Anglican church is the loudest and most recent example of Christian sex role rigidity and institutionalized misogyny and heterosexism. It's not Christian. It's not scriptural and it's not traditional. There is no wisdom in it and it's an excuse to centralize power and marginalize minorities.

Not that I have an opinion, mind you.

Here then is wisdom. Seek after truth and be the image of Christ in the world. If Christ for you is Sophia, do be it. If Buddha is Christ for you, so be it. If your spirit and the voice of wisdom within you inspires you to preach and teach. So be it. Exercise the ministry you are given. I can't promise you handsome young men with oil but there's sure to be a fight anyway.

July 16, 2006  
Rev. James W. Hensley

Because one of the things I'm learning is that there are bandits  
on quite a few of the pathways to the Divine.

**Participation Aid for Sunday Evening Worship  
Progressive Pathways Fellowship**

Responses for the service

The Presider says: Let all the fellowship acclaim.  
Please respond: **Amen.**

The Presider says: Hear this our prayer.  
Please respond: **So mote it be.**

Other Information.

You do not need to be a member of Progressive Pathways Fellowship in order to receive communion. Everyone is welcome at the feast of fellowship.

*The service today is rooted in the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition.*

What is Gnosticism?

Gnosticism is a descriptive term used to identify a common belief among various religious movements and groups that likely originated in prehistory and became most active in the first few centuries AD/CE. The key to understanding the core belief of these movements is provided by the term gnosis, a Greek word expressing a type of understanding/consciousness gained through personal experience. It is through this type of transcendental experience that followers of Gnostic belief systems ("Gnosticism") seek escape from ignorance and thus the mundane.

The term has become widely used by modern scholars and others as a way to identify an emphasis placed on the salvific benefit of individual wisdom. Although many Gnostic movements identified with the teachings of Jesus Christ and were Christian by their own definition, there remains widespread variation in the particular religious orientations of many Gnostic groups. Especially notable for their extended and uninterrupted presence up until the modern era are the followers of the Persian Prophet Mani, the Manicheans; and the Pre-Christian Mandaeans who still survive in Iraq and Iran.

What is Hermeticism?

Hermeticism is a set of philosophical and religious beliefs based primarily upon the writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, who is sometimes pictured as a wise sage and Egyptian priest, but commonly seen as synthesis of the Egyptian god Thoth, the Greek god Hermes and Enoch who walked with God (Genesis 5:22).

Hermeticism focuses on the concept of God and the perfection of the individual study, alchemy, and theurgy. The traditional secrecy surrounding Hermetic philosophy gave rise to the term "hermetically sealed."

In Islam, Hermeticism and Hermetism were accepted as being Sabian as mentioned in the Qu'ran. In Christianity, Hermeticism is associated with Simon Magnus (Acts 8:18-24)