

## Matter vs. Spirit: Gnosticism

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 15:35-55

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 18, 2024*

After a couple of weeks of intro, this week we finally take a look at our first heresy, which may well be the best known—at least by name. Since many of its texts and beliefs were not unearthed until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gnosticism is a heresy more people have heard about than some of the others. Its newly-discovered texts bear names of people we know from the Bible, and have been brought to the public eye by great scholars like Elaine Pagels and others.

And, since some Gnostics believed Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and bestselling author Dan Brown took that idea to the bank in the *DaVinci Code*, Gnosticism has had its contemporary moments. But, while it has many Christian forms, Gnostic ideas predate the birth of Jesus by several centuries.

Its specific origins are largely unknown, with some thinking it came out of Buddhism and others tracing it to the thinking of Plato and Pythagoras as filtered through the Hellenistic Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt. But, as we'll see in a bit, their beliefs made them ripe for Christianity when it emerged.

The bishops of the early church spoke out against it frequently, but it wasn't until the church teamed up with the enforcement mechanisms of the Roman Empire that there was a way to really go after Gnostics, and they were hunted almost to extinction by the fifth century. Both before and after that, however, in times and places where people were allowed to debate religious ideas freely, Gnosticism flourished in a variety of forms.

The word “Gnostic,” comes from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.” The belief that earned a variety of related beliefs the name “Gnostic,” is the claim that they possess a secret knowledge, gained only by initiation into a Gnostic community. Set that against Jesus sitting among thousands of people on a hillside to spread his teaching out in the open, no strings attached, and you can already see the disconnect.

But, we humans have always been enticed by secret knowledge. It's what got Adam and Eve in trouble in the first place. It's the lure of conspiracy theories. Here's what's *really* happening. It's how Scientology ensnares people. Pay up and we'll give you the secrets. Okay, now pay more for deeper secrets!

Of course there's the allure of being in an elite group who know things others don't. But also, in a world where there actually *are* conspiracies and groups that operate in the shadows to the benefit of some and the detriment of others; we can be forgiven for our survival instinct that wants to know as much as possible about the world around us. You have secret glasses that will let me see danger I otherwise couldn't see or give me benefits I otherwise couldn't have? We all feel the pull to buy those glasses; to eat that fruit.

But what did Gnostics actually believe? What did Christians find so disturbing about them? Let's start with their cosmology—the way they see the larger universe—God, heaven, and the creation of the world.

On the one hand, the Gnostic image of heaven isn't all that different from what the Bible gives us. Besides a singular, almighty God, Christians have angels and archangels, seraphim, cherubim, and a wild assortment of other beings and creatures, even before you add Jesus, who Christians describe differently before and after his life on earth. And, although you have to piece it together from several different places, you have Satan at God's staff meeting in the book of Job and the story of a fallen angel named Lucifer.

There's a similar menagerie in the Gnostic heaven, but with a twist. The God above it all in Gnosticism is totally unknowable. Like Christian and Jewish depictions of God, the Gnostic God is light, but that light in Gnosticism pulses out, with bits of divine light breaking off and entering into other heavenly beings, called Aeons. One of those Aeons, called the Demiurge, arises from those lesser beings and creates the world.

But that Demiurge is kind of a Lucifer character—a divine being in the heavenly realms, but also a problem. The Gnostic Demiurge is at best incompetent and, at worst, evil. As a result, some of the divine sparks pulsing around

the heavens get either spilled—in the version of an incompetent Demiurge—or purposely trapped, in the evil version—into the created order.

In either case, those sparks were not supposed to be infused into actual matter; and the Godhead is splintered as a result. So, the end game of “salvation” for the Gnostics is to free the sparks of the divine to return to the realm of the Spirit where they belong.

For the Gnostics, material reality—all the things in creation that we can touch and see, feel and hear and taste are obstacles at best or cages at worst. Some believe it has no real existence at all, but is mere illusion. Riding across the top of all of it is a binary idea that matter is bad and spirit is good and those aren’t supposed to be mixed together.

The benefit of having the creator of the material world be either a clumsy or malevolent semi-deity is that you never have to ask why there is evil in the world or why bad things happen. If everything was created by a screw-up or a cruel being, instead of a good and loving God, you have an easy answer to that thorny question.

While Genesis gives us an account of the one and only God placing God’s own image into human beings as a gift, Gnostics see the divided and encased sparks in physical bodies as a clean-up challenge at best and an injustice that needs to be righted—a spirit freed from its cage—at worst. The God of Genesis forms humanity from the literal dirt. Adam means “red earth.” For the Gnostics, that core Christian and Jewish idea is a grave insult to both God and humans.

And let’s talk about those spark-carrying humans for a moment. The Gnostics had a three-tiered caste system. Every human being was placed in one of three categories, ranked from best to worst.

The best humans they called pneumatics—the spiritual ones, the ones who were fully initiated into Gnostic teaching. They were the best because, having fully absorbed the secret knowledge, they knew themselves to be immaterial—without a real body, and thus their knowledge, their *gnosis*, allowed them to escape the doom of the material world. That, for the Gnostics was salvation.

Below the pneumatics were the psychics. They were partially initiated. They were true spirits but still held the silly belief that they actually existed in real flesh and blood bodies. They weren’t “spiritual” per se, to the Gnostics, but they were “soulful.” It’s this layer of Gnostics who are responsible for the branches of Gnosticism that move into the occult, most famously with Madame Blavatsky, the Russian-American mystic who co-founded the Theosophical Society in 1875.

Then, on the bottom rung of human existence were the hylics, which is a Greek word that roughly translates to “made of wood.” These were people who were entirely concerned with the material world and saw themselves as fully part of it. The Gnostics believed these people were simply incapable of understanding the gnosis, and therefore they were unable to be saved.

When you start separating the material and spiritual worlds and—worse—setting them in opposition to each other and ranking human worth according to whether or not they agree with you; a number of problems crop up.

Many Gnostics lived an ascetic lifestyle. There’s nothing wrong with that. Many of the seven deadly sins articulated by the Catholic Church come about because of runaway bodily appetites...sloth, gluttony, lust, etc. and living a life that seeks to tame bodily excess is one way that Christians throughout time have sought to ensure that they are in control of their bodies and not the other way around.

But if you are adopting an ascetic lifestyle because you believe your physical body is inconsequential at best and an enemy to your spirit at worst, pretty soon you will be open to the idea that your health doesn’t matter. And if it isn’t just you—if any material body is worthless, or even non-existent; you will have no concern for the bodies of anyone else either.

If bodies don’t matter, then there’s no need to feed the hungry or clothe the naked, at least not for their sake. And if the material world is not only of lesser value than the spiritual world; but a problem to be overcome; you’re not

going to be worried about the well-being of the non-human world either. It's just a temporary, illusory vehicle to help us find and nurture the trapped sparks so that we can all be free of this material burden.

You will not find any Gnostics out trying to save the planet. Nor will you find them serving in soup kitchens, hospitals, any kind of social justice movement, or any other endeavor whose mission is to alleviate bodily suffering or prevent the degradation of the material world. Neither the Gnostics who believe matter is evil nor the Gnostics who believe matter is illusory are going to help preserve any of it—human or otherwise. Why would you?

A key point in this sermon series is that our core beliefs affect our behavior. What we believe may be buried deep in our subconscious—we may never have thought about its implications. But, over time, anyone who watches what we do will come to understand what we believe; even if we don't ourselves.

And it's not a huge leap from "matter is evil," to convincing yourself that inflicting material suffering or environmental destruction is the righteous thing to do. It's standing in the way of salvation, after all—deluding those dumb hylics into thinking that they are in any way "real." Get rid of it and let them see the spirit shine forth, devoid of its material trappings.

To my mind, all of that is incompatible with a loving God. To be fair, Gnostics believed that the highest order of the divine was totally unknowable. So, a loving God wasn't really a Gnostic belief in any sense that Jews or Christians would recognize. In their view, God didn't even make the world, let alone love the world; and any bit of divinity that got into it was either a mistake or a prank.

And now take all of that and apply it to what Christians believe about Jesus and the central witness of all four Gospel accounts of his death and resurrection.

If material bodies are evil, then God would never choose a human body as a dwelling place. Jesus as both fully human and fully divine, which is what Christianity teaches, has no place in that worldview. The only element of the divine that Gnostics would acknowledge in Jesus is that divine spark that either got in by accident or was trapped in Jesus the man by an evil being.

When considering Jesus and the claims of the Gospels about him, the Gnostics put Jesus in the top order of human beings, the pneumatic, because he recognized his spiritual essence. In their view, he allowed his body to be beaten tortured and even killed without objection because it was either beneath him or only illusory, and the resulting freedom of his true spirit is what that group would count as "resurrection."

Related to that is a different heresy that denies, not just a bodily resurrection, but even Jesus' death. It's called Docetism. Docetism doesn't just *deny* Jesus' death; it teaches that Jesus' body was never more than an illusion—a phantasm of some kind that only seemed to suffer, die, and be resurrected.

Another form of Docetism said that there was a physical body belonging to a man named Jesus, but that the spiritual being Christians worship only entered into Jesus when the dove descended at his baptism and exited in the moments before his death when Jesus said, "Into thy hands I commit my Spirit." And, of course, all of that made the question of a bodily ascension moot if there was no actual body to begin with.

Remembering that the physical existence of material things was a real question for Gnostics is helpful when dealing with the "was Jesus married" question. Marriage and all of the physical intimacy that goes along with it were metaphors and symbols for most Gnostics. To the extent that bodies existed, they were not celebrated and in most cases they were at least mostly illusion.

That's all too simplistic and it exists on a spectrum of belief. But all of it is related to the idea that all physical matter is impure and thus incapable of containing the divine. It's that duality of matter vs. spirit that characterizes Gnostic belief in its various forms and, when applied to Jesus, got them tossed into the heretical pool by Christians.

There are certainly brands of Christian and Jewish mysticism that come close to those kinds of thoughts. Mystics of every major religion I'm aware of describe ultimate enlightenment as the experience of feeling that we are all

one with God. Many people report various kinds of “out of body” spiritual experiences that suggest body and spirit can be separated. We even sing hymns about mystical union with God.

But, where Christianity and Judaism differ from Gnostic belief is that the Christian sense of oneness with God includes the material world, our bodies and, for many, all of the created order. God made it, not some lesser being, and what God has made is sanctified not demonized. It is gift, not burden; the vehicle for meeting and knowing God and, therefore, for salvation; not an obstacle that the process of salvation overcomes.

Whatever spark of the divine that exists within human beings is the manifestation of what Genesis calls the image of God, placed within us in love and on purpose to help us in our vocation to serve and protect the earth.

Whatever you think about the Gnostic ideas, you can see why the Church had a problem with it. I picked the passage from 1 Corinthians 15 to go with this because I think you can hear some of Paul—Jewish Pharisee that he was—arguing with the Jewish Gnostics of his day here; but you can also hear things that seem quite supportive of Gnostic positions. You can find a lot in John’s Gospel, too. But listen again to 1 Corinthians 15.

“<sup>35</sup> But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?’ <sup>36</sup> Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.” Especially given the strong rebuke, it sounds like Paul is talking to those on the end of the Gnostic spectrum who had come to believe that Jesus was resurrected, in some way, but did not die. But then, a few verses later, in verse 51 Paul says we won’t all die, but we will all be changed.

In verses 42-43, the Gnostics also find some support: “<sup>42</sup> So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.” That sounds a lot like the body is of lesser importance than the spirit, and maybe even dishonorable.

Then, in verse 44, Paul makes what I think is a subtle turn: “<sup>44</sup> It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup> Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup> But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup> The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup> As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

<sup>50</sup> What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup> Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

<sup>55</sup> ‘Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?’

I’m not going to pretend that Paul is easy to understand. Even Peter complains in 2 Peter 3:16 that understanding what Paul is trying to say is a tall order. I had professors like that; I swore some of them were paid by the syllable. But, as best I can tell, in this passage that is so often read at funerals, Paul is—I think—trying to say that the material world is both good and a necessary precursor to the spiritual.

In his metaphor here, our bodies are the seeds that give birth to our spirit; not a cage from which our spirits must be freed. No seed? No actual body? No spirit. The spirit is the mature growth of the seed, which means that the full nature of the spirit must exist within the seed in the first place—not as an enemy, but as the thing that makes the seed of a human life uniquely what it is.

Paul talks about our bodies being changed—not kicked aside in disgust, not discarded—changed. The mortal *becomes* immortal; the perishable *becomes* imperishable. The Christian witness is that the Word *became* flesh in Jesus

who then took it to the limit, then through the limit, until the seed broke open and *became* spirit in resurrection. The water didn't just suddenly taste like wine; it *became* wine. The Christian witness is a witness of transformation.

And because that transformation is an act of love on God's part, not the acquisition of secret knowledge on ours, there is no lower order of human that lies outside the bounds of God's salvation.

Paul is also clear in his letter to the church in Rome that the message of God's salvation is in no way secret but is evidenced freely to every person through the material world. Romans 1:20: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made."

For thousands of years, well before the life of Jesus, human beings have been aware that there is a world of things we can experience with our senses—things we can see, touch, hold, nurture, destroy, taste, use. But humans have also recognized that there is also a reality that is intangible—things that have been called personality, consciousness, memory, soul, and spirit—and that those intangibles can somehow be shared with other humans and, to varying degrees, with other life outside our own.

Every religious system I know of has grappled with what to make of that awareness, and in every Philosophy 101 class you'll be invited to try to prove that your body actually exists—that you aren't a figment of cosmic imagination or a character in a dream. These are universal questions and Gnosticism is one way of answering them.

Christians agreed with Jews that the tangible and intangible both fully exist but in balance, not opposition; that God gifted us with both material and spiritual realities and that both are fully real, good, and holy. And then Christians went one step further to claim that, in Jesus, God gave us an example of what that perfect balance looks like—fully human and fully God at the same time, claiming that by following Jesus' teaching and example, we, too, find that balance. As a result, upon our death we don't experience destruction but transformation. The sacred seed of our bodies breaks open into its mature form; our tangible lives transformed from perishable to imperishable; from mortal to immortal.

For me, that's where I've chosen to hang my hat, because when I am able to fully live it out, I like the results. I like the way I feel; I like the way it forms loving communities of all kinds; it brings me comfort in distress; it encourages me to make the world a better place; it doesn't put anyone or anything outside the circle of God's grace.

Maybe I'm wrong and the Gnostics are right. As I've said before, I'm sure there's a percentage of things I believe that aren't true at all. I just don't know what those things are. All I can do is constantly hold my life up against the example of Jesus and, when they don't match, try to figure out why. Most frequently the mismatch is found in my belief system; and I try to adjust accordingly.

Your mileage may vary; but I encourage you to think about your own beliefs. We talk easily about body, mind, and spirit. But what do we mean by those words? Where does one end and the other begin? Is God infused in all of them or just some? When you've fallen short of being your best self, what part of you has tripped you up? Is perfection possible?

Oh wait...sorry...that's next week. Amen.