THREE

On Earth—Reading the Signs of the Times

AN OPEN BOOK

You cannot judge a book by its cover. Why? Because this would mean that you see it only as a *closed* book. You see only its cover, without exposing yourself to its real work that lay in wait for you. To be sure, the cover of a book is an invitation, but it is an invitation to take it into your life and read it. The real life of a book happens only in its opening, such that you are led to consider the new possibilities for life and learning that its words are proposing to you. A closed book is no book at all, for every book is meant to be *opened*—to be read, engaged, and taken into our life.

This is true of all classic texts, and it is especially true of the scriptures. In the Jewish tradition, the Torah—the divinely revealed "instruction" of sacred scripture—does not even take the form of a covered book. Rather, it takes the form of a scroll (*Sefer Torah*) whose continuous rolling pages are open and exposed, and impossible to close like the pages of a book. Moreover, the Talmud—the compendium of Jewish learning and commentary—has no page one. Every tractate of the Talmud begins on page two, so that you know from the very beginning that you are dealing with a book that is of divine origin—without beginning, and infinitely open—without end.

In the Christian tradition, the scriptures are usually placed on a lectern as an *open book*. This is a very symbolic gesture, and I have taken to practicing it myself. At home on my bookshelves are rows and rows of tidily shelved books, all lined up one against another with only their spines showing. However, I always clear a space on one of the shelves where I

place the scriptures as an open book. It is a wonderful sight, the sight of this open book—its pages looking out, its words exposed, its unfolded gaze that is like a beautiful invitation: "take and read." Amidst all those closed books lined up on my shelves, this one book stands in its rightly assumed posture—open and invitational. It reminds me that all life and learning is about this openness, this invitation, this desire to learn and to love.

I am also reminded of the poet Edmond Jabès, whose respect for the fundamental openness of texts was deeply shaped by his Jewish sensibility. The Jewish tradition uniquely combines the "written Torah" with the "oral Torah" of ever-expanding commentary and interpretation. The written text is never finally closed or sealed off, but continually opens onto newly emerging questions and concerns. "The open book," says Jabès, "occupies only a little space on the table, yet the space it engages is huge."[1] How true. The open book engages not only the space of its own times, its own questions, its own words. It also engages the "huge space" of a long line of descendants who—right up to our own day—continually bring their lives to this open text, searching its ever-renewing and ever-recurring meanings and implications for their lives.

Paul Ricoeur suggests that the scriptures have a "surplus of meaning." They can be read and interpreted over and over again without exhausting their significance. The appeal of the scriptures is not tied to one place and one time, but continually spills over with new insight for different people and different times.[2]

If we think of the scriptures as "timeless" texts, we must think of them as texts that *endure* because of their very ability to constantly engage time. This is a key hermeneutical insight. The "past," the testimony of the scriptures and the tradition in which we stand, is never sealed off from the present. It is no "once upon a time." Rather, it is a claim on my existence here and now—today—in this moment, in this place, in this time.

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

It is in the signs of life which happen to us that we are addressed by the living word of God. However, as Martin Buber notes, too often our hearts are hardened or dulled to hearing the word that cuts to real concerns:

Each of us is encased in an amour whose task is to ward off signs. Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would only need to present ourselves and to perceive. But the risk is too dangerous for us...and from generation to generation we perfect the defense apparatus. All our knowledge assures us, "be calm, everything happens as it must happen, but nothing is directed at you, you are not meant; it is just 'the world,' you can experience it as you like, but whatever you make of it in yourself proceeds from you alone, nothing is required of you, you are not addressed, all is quiet."[3]

It is not difficult to hear echoes of Jesus and the prophet Isaiah in Buber's words:

> For the heart of this nation has grown coarse,
> their ears are dull of hearing,
> and they have shut their eyes,
> for they fear they should see with their eyes,
> hear with their ears,
> understand with their heart and be converted
> and healed by me. (Matt. 13:15; cf. Isa. 6:9–10)

There is little purpose in reading the scriptures, as a *living* address to our lives, if we are continually "warding off" the signs of the times that constantly *resound* with this address. Against our propensity to fall asleep in the drowsy calmness of our self-satisfied worlds, we are urged to "stay awake" lest we perceive but do not perceive, hear but do not hear (cf. Mark 13:33; Matt. 13:14).

When Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, I have this image of him walking the great halls of Vatican antiquity, yet all the time hearing the echoes of Jesus' question: "How do you not know how to interpret the present time?" (Luke 12:56). John XXIII seemed to notice that the world was racing along, changing at a furious pace, and yet the church was failing to notice or to respond. Too wrapped up in itself, it seemed unable to cope with "the seriousness of the world."[4]

Vatican II marked a fundamental shift away from an insular, inward-looking church toward a church that is *open* to dialogue and engagement with the world. It represented a wonderful movement of renewal and

"release" — freeing the scriptures and the great legacy of the Catholic-Christian faith tradition from its somewhat closed mustiness, as though the testimony of faith had for too long been sealed in old and tired tomes of formulated doctrine, treated "as read" — conclusive — rather than tapping its true resource as an "*open* book," with its unique capacity to face and engage the world in all its stunning "seriousness."

The seriousness of the world in which we live suggests, among other things, that we do not have another time to live the message of the gospel. We only have this time. The kingdom of God is "near at hand" (Matt. 3:2). "It is in the world of history that we accept or reject the word," says Gutiérrez. "The decision we make is heavy with consequences."[5] There is little in the gospel message that suggests deferral, or even less, resting in the comfort of well-worked doctrines that give the illusion of timeless sureties. Rather, the message of the gospel commands the most down-to-earth realism: "I was naked and you clothed me" (Matt. 25:35). The seriousness of the world — the seriousness of suffering and injustice — must claim our attention, must claim the work of our hearts and our hands.

"*TOLLE, LEGE!*" — "TAKE AND READ!"

In his *Confessions* (Book VIII, Ch. 12), St. Augustine tells the story of how he felt weighed down by his own sinfulness, and how impossible it seemed for him to break free of this weight. He writes:

> I felt that I was still the captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying "How long shall I go on saying 'tomorrow, tomorrow'? Why not now?"...I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house..."take it and read, take it and read." [*"tolle, lege; tolle, lege"*][6]

Augustine immediately went to where he had left his Bible lying open, picked it up, and began to read a verse from St. Paul. At that moment, he says, "It was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."

What verse did Augustine read from St. Paul that so transformed him? Well, I read the verse but I confess that it didn't strike me with the

same transformative "shock of recognition" with which it obviously struck Augustine. Yet that is beside the point. I am not here to relive Augustine's life. I must come to my own "confession," to bear witness with my own life, to read the scriptures as an *address to me* — in this time and in this place — and this is perhaps one of the main points of Augustine's story. His confession, his testimony, is surely a great teaching and inspiration to us, but if we think that it can now "save us" from having to deal with our own troubled times, our own weeping and sinfulness, our own need to listen to the scriptures and have them address and transform our lives, then we will have surely missed Augustine's testimony altogether.

To stand within a tradition of faith is to acknowledge that I am implicated as one who is chosen to respond. According to Martin Buber, the life of faith means acknowledging that "in each instance a word demanding an answer has happened to me." We may call this speaking to us the word that "says something *to* me, addresses something to me, speaks something that enters my own life." In order to signal its infinite capacity to be "ever-present-everywhere," we may also call this speaking to us the word of God, "for nothing can refuse to be the vessel of the Word."[7] After all, it was the simple playing and singing of a child that led Augustine to open the scriptures.

Like Augustine, Buber is urging us to "take and read." We are being asked to notice and pay attention to the living word of God — a word that is always open and never closed, a word that is always a "saying" to us — here and now — not a closed word, a word already "said." The word of God is unique in this regard, for it resists being put down, closed, filed on a bookshelf, and treated "as read." Rather, "the word of God is something alive and active" (Heb. 4:12). From Augustine in the fourth century to Buber in the twentieth century, the word of God is forever open, forever awaiting and provoking fresh readings, new appropriations, real and concrete connections to life as it is lived.

"EXPLAIN ME!"

When we open the scriptures, we are seeking to understand what they are saying to us. In the Christian tradition, theology is often spoken of as "faith seeking understanding." In the Jewish tradition, this seeking is referred to as *midrash* — to search, to inquire into the meaning of a text.[8]

Every encounter with the word of God is led by the simple demand: "Explain me!" Or, if you like, "Read me, listen to my words, tell me what I am saying to you." This is a crucial interpretive moment as an imperative given in the present. "What am I saying to you today?" This question lends to the scriptures their wonderful open quality. For there are no readers of the scriptures who can exempt themselves from this question, as though they already knew the meaning, as though they already understood, as though the scriptures had nothing more to say to them — in which case, they may as well close the book and consign it to their bookshelves along with the many other "already read" books.

As soon as we hear this demand, "Explain me," our own lives are instantly "brought into play."[9] They come into play because they are put in question by the text, which asks of us, "What am I saying *to you?*" What is the text saying, for example, when we read in Mark's Gospel: "You know that among the pagans their so-called rulers lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you" (10:42)? Is this text simply about another time, another place, another audience? Can we read it and simply bracket or exempt our own lives from its meaning and its message? Or, in trying to understand it, must we not hear it as a *saying to us* that questions our current lives, here and now, in this time and place? Will not this text bring into play or bring into question the various ways that authority is practiced in my own life (all the times I try to make my authority felt), and the various ways that authority is practiced in the church, in my workplace, in society?

The interpretive demand — "explain me" — clearly places the practice of interpretation in our hands. It is up to us to interpret the meaning of the text. However, we should notice that this task is *given to us by the text*, not by our own authority. Even though we are the ones who must interpret, we do not have the upper hand. We do not rule over the text. Rather, when the text asks us to interpret what it is saying, it is *at the same time interpreting our own lives* — placing our own lives in question — as if the text were raising interpretive questions of us: "Why do you like to make your authority felt?" As if the text were trying to understand us: "Why do you need to lord it over others?" As if *we* were the puzzle and the question that needs to be explained and interpreted, much more than the text. This is where the true rub of hermeneutics happens.

THE EVENT OF UNDERSTANDING

Hermeneutics — the art of interpretation — is concerned with the event of understanding. For understanding to *happen* at all, it must necessarily have this *eventlike* quality — otherwise, it is not really understanding, but simply something I have *already* known, *already* understood, *already* assimilated. Understanding is an *event* — a *happening* — more than it is something that I already possess. Who among us can say that they have no need for further understanding? Those who say that they "have it" or are "in possession of it" are those who are furthest from it. Yet those who recognize that *faith* is not *possessing* but *seeking* understanding are those who grow in grace and wisdom. The wise person is "full of understanding" because they continually seek it, unlike those who smugly proclaim their possession of it.

For understanding to truly warrant its name, it must necessarily be something that *strikes me now*. A popular way of naming this hermeneutical quality of understanding is when we speak of the "aha" moment. "Aha — *now* I understand!" Understanding — if it truly warrants this name — is always a present event, a happening, an occurrence, something that comes to us and suddenly impacts us — "aha!" In traditional theological language, this event is *revelatory*. A word is spoken to us, something is said to us, and like St. Augustine, we are transformed. I begin to understand something differently, with new eyes, with a changed perspective, with a renewed heart. Or, as Gadamer says, "It is enough to say that we understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all.*"[10]

This is the eventlike quality that hermeneutics seeks to highlight and celebrate as a pivotal moment of all interpretation. To be skilled in the art of interpretation is to be alert to this moment, to be expectant, hopeful, waiting, open — ready for that moment when a true revelation happens. Whether it be the sacred scriptures, or the sacredness of a poem, or a song, or the speaking of another person, the moment of understanding always shares this same quality of revelation. If I understand at all, I understand differently.

Moreover, for understanding to truly warrant its name, it must be something that affects the way I live. No real understanding takes place unless it touches life in all its concreteness and particularity. According to Gadamer, the event of understanding can never be separated from the

event of *applicacio* ("application") in our current situation. The text, "if it is to be understood properly — i.e., according to the claim it makes — must be understood at every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding is always application."[11] A text's meaning is never simply given "back then" but only becomes meaningful when its message can be restated or represented for us today. "Is this not true of every text," writes Gadamer, "that it must be understood in terms of what it says? Does this not mean that it always needs to be restated? And does not this restatement always take place through its being related to the present?"[12] Only when the meaning of a text becomes a concern for us today — affecting our values, our behaviors, our actions, our relationships — only then, can we say that the event of understanding is actually under way.

A PROPOSED WORLD

Paul Ricoeur suggests that the sacred texts and classic testimonies of a faith tradition are primarily concerned with offering us a "proposed world which I could inhabit," not simply a mirror of the world as it is.[13] He is reminding us that the work of interpretation is primarily led by the "proposal of the text." The text is offering a message or a meaning — a proposal — for us to consider. This is what matters to a text. This is its "subject matter." This is what it is "about" — a "proposed world which I could inhabit" — and this is what interpretation seeks to understand.

In other words, what matters to a text matters little unless it also matters to me. For interpretation to happen at all, the concern of the text must also become my concern. It is only at this point that interpretation comes into play, when I am led to consider what the text is saying as a possibility for my own life. If nothing of what the text says is of concern to me, then it hasn't really said anything at all (and there would be no need for interpretation). Only when *what it says* is also a *concern for me* does interpretation come into play. Otherwise, we would only be dealing with a "dead" text, with no future beyond it. All good interpretation is oriented by this futurity — the "proposed world I could inhabit." Everything of creative interpretation happens *in front of the text* as each new generation — right up to our own generation and our own times — feels

that something here matters, and is able to make the matter and concern of the text the matter and concern of their own lives.

If we ask, "Where does interpretation lead us?" or "What is its goal?" or "To what end and for what purpose?" — Ricoeur suggests that it is finally concerned with opening the horizons of our hearts and minds toward a new understanding, a new possibility, a new way of living in the world. To interpret or understand a text is not just to understand something back there and back then. Rather, the path of interpretation always stretches out in front of us, such that we are led to consider how our ways in the world could be made different, made new, transformed by a possibility that exceeds the way things are. Interpretation happens when the subject matter of the text (what it is about) becomes the subject matter of our own lives (and what we could also be "about"). Ricoeur writes:

> The "matter of the text" and what I call the world of the work... is not *behind* the text... but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals. Henceforth, to understand is *to understand oneself in front of the text.* It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self.... [14]

Ricoeur goes on to say that in seeking to understand a text, it is not we who possess the "key." Rather, it is the text that possesses the key that unlocks our own narrow worlds and opens our horizons to newer and wider understandings and possibilities. It is the text that is revelatory and inspired and that stirs our imaginations. As David Tracy suggests, if "the text is a genuinely classic one, my present horizon of understanding should always be provoked, challenged, transformed. In encountering a classic we are compelled to believe... *that something else might be the case than is the case.*"[15]

As a teacher, Jesus spent a long time trying to get his listeners to dwell differently in the world, to see the world differently, to live according to God's ways — not according to the ways of the world, that is, the accustomed and predictable ways that are all too human. For example, in Luke's Gospel Jesus says, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you will be repaid" (14:12). If our hospitality extends only to the intimate circle of our family and friends, then we are only doing what most people do. We are not extending our lives much further than the conventional ways of the world, whereby we offer friendship to those who we know will offer us friendship in return. Jesus' teaching, however, seeks to offer us a *proposed world that we could inhabit:* "When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you..." (14:13–14). The kingdom of God is concerned with friendship and hospitality to those who are not normally "our friends," to those who are not part of our "circle," to those who have no means of returning our hospitality — and this is the true test of what hospitality means. Otherwise, it is simply loving those who love us, which is all too easy, all too human.

Like many of the teachings of scripture, the "path" of this text stretches out in front of us and opens onto the kingdom of heaven. However, at the same time, everything of this text's subject matter (what it is about) is finally concerned with our own lives and how we could be living here today — "on earth."

If we can speak of the biblical and Christian tradition as "heaven's doorway," it is nevertheless a door that we must pass through, that *we must enter.* When Ricoeur suggests that all good interpretation is finally taken up with the question of a "proposed world that I could inhabit," he is suggesting that interpretation ultimately leads to this "open door." The question hermeneutics asks, therefore, is "can I enter"? Can I move from the world I currently inhabit to a new world that I *could* inhabit? Am I open to a different way of dwelling in the world?

Rather than simply reflecting the world as it is, the biblical and Christian tradition offers us possibilities for the "world as it could be." The "world as it is" is often quite routinized and conventional, and its path is crowded and wide. As such, we do not consider it or think about it too much because we are simply caught up in its jostling and numbing normalcy. It simply churns along day by day and, like any other day, there is not too much that captures our attention.

The scriptures, however, seek to move our hearts according to the ways of God. They seek to align our lives according to the kingdom of heaven. They awaken our imaginations. They disturb our routines. They offer us a "proposed world" — not simply the world as it is — but the world as it could be, "on earth as it is in heaven."

"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). We only have to stand in line at a supermarket checkout to notice what the world treasures. If we are wondering what "worldliness" means, then we only have to notice all those magazines that are well positioned on their racks — waiting for us like great temptations — with their covers celebrating fame, fortune, and the "good life." If we are wondering what worldliness means, it means being lured by the things of the world, of which Jesus said, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:13). The wilderness of Jesus' temptations, when he faced "all the kingdoms of the world" (Luke 4:5), remain surprisingly on par with much of the wilderness of our own times. The vacuous allure of those supermarket magazines is just as barren as the desert of Jesus' temptations. In this sense, little has changed. Our yearnings and our desire are constantly being eroded, worn-down, or co-opted by the ways of the world, and yet — as the popular saying goes — all that glitters is not gold.

The kingdom of heaven, however, glitters differently. As one of Jesus' parables suggests, should we capture even a glimpse of the kingdom's sparkle, we would "sell all and buy the field" (Matt. 13:44). We would realize how much we have been "duped" by the world's glitter that is like "fools' gold." According to the Gospels, many of the signs of modern life simply urge us to "store up treasures for yourself on earth" (Matt. 6:19). While they seem deceptively real and of crucial concern (the new car, the new cell phone, the new credit card, the new look, and so on), they are destined to pass away. They will consume our hearts only to be consumed themselves "by moth and woodworm." The temptations of the world are all around us, whereas the path to the kingdom of heaven is very narrow, "and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:14).

Perhaps this is why the early followers of Jesus were called people of "the Way." The real life of the kingdom of heaven happens only when its path is opened, such that we are led to consider its proposal for dwelling differently in the world — "on earth as it is in heaven." The door to the kingdom of heaven is always a door that opens onto our lives and onto the world that is groaning and suffering and not yet healed, a world caught up in too much "worldliness" and too little "heavenliness." As Abraham Heschel suggests, the scriptures are not primarily concerned with "worldly concerns"; rather, they are concerned with "God's concerns." This is *not* to suggest that we should have no concern for the world, as if God's concerns lay elsewhere (where?). Rather, it means that our concerns are more deeply shaped by the proposals of God rather than the proposals of the world. It means that our focus or attention shifts from "what man does with his ultimate concern" to *"what man does with God's concern."* It means that we view the world with divine concern rather than with worldly concern. As Heschel notes, unless we share the concerns of God, "We know nothing about the living God."[16]

GOD'S CONCERNS

What, then, we may well ask, are the concerns of God? For a start, let us say that God is not concerned with God's own self. It amazes me how much theological ink has been spilled in trying to determine who God is, as though God were completely enraptured in his own being, which would say little about God's "concern" other than that he is self-obsessed. Why do we too readily take it upon ourselves to say who God is, when this is a question that rarely troubles God? And if it is a question that rarely troubles God, why should it trouble us so much? Why are we so often preoccupied with naming and defining God, as though God were a being that spends most of his time looking in a mirror? As though it were necessary for us to help God work out his identity?

When Moses inquired into God's identity, God simply dismissed his question as somewhat pointless, as if to say: "Don't trouble yourself. I certainly don't." Yet we've been troubling ourselves ever since, not satisfied with God's lack of self-concern: "I am who I am" (Exod. 3:14), which means (among other things) that "I don't really worry too much about who I am. It doesn't really concern me too much. I am who I am." Moses learns that God is the one whose awareness is never a solipsistic self-awareness, but an awareness that is "well aware of their sufferings" (3:7). God is encountered as the one who notices an enslaved people's misery, who witnesses their oppression, who hears their cries and takes heed of their appeals. And then God says to Moses to tell the people that "I Am has sent me to you" (3:14). Rather than being drawn into the mystery of a nameless God, Moses is drawn into the mystery of *the one who sends.* God's name, "for all time" (3:15), is the one who *sends me to you.*

When I pause briefly to reflect on this strange name of God — the one who sends me to you — I find myself thinking about all those times I've

encountered a person who reaches out to me in love, or all those times when someone has released me from the burden of my sin by offering forgiveness. On occasions like this, I feel as though God has sent this person into my life, to offer me the gift (the grace) of God's love and forgiveness. Or when I witness the life of a saintly person who gives of themselves with generosity and compassion, who cares for the poor, or who struggles for justice, I find it easy to say of that person's life, "surely they have been *sent by God*," which means they are *of God* or *from God*.

God is the one who sends, and the saintly person or prophetic figure is the one who bears the name of God — who gives witness to God — as the one who has sent them. This leads me to ask of my own life: Am I living in a way that is *of God* and *from God?* Am I living in such a way that another person can say of me, "Surely God has sent you into my life today"? Have I shown mercy to another? Have I been gracious and compassionate in my actions? Have I worked for the justice of those who have no justice?

What interests God is whether we share her interests, whether we share her concerns, whether we share her life, whether we see things the way she sees things, whether we value the things she values, whether we want to be "like God" and the way God acts in the world. Indeed, this is how we ultimately "get to know God" — and this is not unlike how we get to know anyone — by sharing their life, learning more about what makes them tick, discovering the things they value, feeling their passions, sharing their concerns — this is how we know who they are — and it is no less with God.

In her book *The Silent Cry*, Dorothee Soelle offers the testimony of a medieval woman mystic, Mechthild von Hackeborn, whose vision of God was not an ecstatic-erotic fusion, but the receiving of God's "senses" and God's "heart."

> She once begged the Lord to give her something that would always cause her to remember him. Thereupon she received from the Lord this answer: "See, I give you my eyes, that you may see all things with them, and my ears, that you may hear all things with them; my mouth I also give you, so that all you have to say, whether in speech, prayer, or song, you may say through it. I give you my heart, that through it you may think everything and may love me and all things for my sake." In these words God drew this soul entirely into him and united it in such a way that it seemed to her that she saw with God's eyes, and heard with his ears, and spoke with his mouth, and felt that she had no heart than the heart of God.[17]

When I first encountered Catherine Mowry LaCugna's book *God for Us*, not only was I struck by the title, I was also struck by the very simple and yet beautiful proposal of her work: *the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation are inseparable.* According to LaCugna, we cannot speak of God *in se* without speaking of God *pro nobis*.[18] In other words, it makes no theological sense to speak of God in God's own self without speaking of God's heart, God's concern, God's love. It makes no sense to speak of God unless we are at the same time speaking of God who is *for us*... for our sake and for our salvation. Theology's greatest temptation is to be concerned only with God, whereas it should always be concerned with God's concern. God's "being" is always "being-for-us," rather than a "being-locked-in-self-identity."

Knowing God's "essence" as some sort of distilled, unaffected, "pure" God is to miss God's essence all together. What is essential to God is not God. Now *that* is a "mystical" statement — not unlike Meister Eckhart's prayer, "God, free me of God." Concern for God can easily become ego-driven concern, which is of little concern to God. If God becomes simply a mirror of my own introspection, a capital "Meaning" for my life, then I am probably caught in the realms of religious idolatry, and will have missed God all together.

Contrary to popular conceptions, the "mystic" is not so much one who strives to reach God as a summative, mystical goal of their lives. Rather, the mystic is one who gradually discovers, along with St. John, that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). God's essentiality — what is "essential to God" — is found in God's heart, God's care, God's love, God's concern, God's attentiveness. St. John's hymn to God's love is one of the most beautiful and tender passages of scripture. "My dear people," he says, "let us love one another, since love comes *from* God, and everyone who loves is begotten *of* God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). However, the high point of St. John's hymn — the truly mystical point — is when he asks us to consider the love of which he speaks. "This is the love I mean," he says, "*not our love* for God, but God's love *for us*..." (4:10). *Pro nobis.*

TODAY

I would like to conclude this chapter with two stories that are told concerning the coming of the Messiah. "Take and read." Both stories speak of the one who is anointed by God, who is of God and from God. Both speak of the Messiah who is here among us, bearing the name of God, "the one who sends." One text is from Matthew's Gospel, and the other is from the Talmud. Both are ancient texts, and both call out to us today, in our times, "Explain me!"...

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Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in the cities.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Matt. 11:1–6)

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Rabbi Joshua ben Levi once met with Elijah the prophet and in the course of their conversation he asked, "When will the Messiah come?"

"Why don't you go and ask him yourself?" said Elijah.

"Where can I find him?" the rabbi wanted to know.

"You will find him sitting at the gates of Rome," answered Elijah.

"And how will I recognize him?" Rabbi Joshua asked.

"You will see him among the poor, the afflicted and the diseased, binding up their wounds. However, while all the others bind an entire area covering several wounds with one bandage, the Messiah dresses each wound separately."

With this information Rabbi Joshua took himself off to Rome, and there at the gates of the city he saw the Messiah attending to the poor and the sick, just as Elijah had described.

"Peace to you, my master and teacher," said Joshua.

"Peace to you, son of Levi," answered the Messiah.

"Master, when will you come to redeem us?" the rabbi asked.

"I will come today," the Messiah answered.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi returned home, and soon afterwards he again met with Elijah the prophet.

"Did you speak with Messiah?" the prophet asked.

"I did," replied the rabbi. And he reported on the conversation. But then he added, "The Messiah lied to me. He promised that he would come 'today'; but he didn't come."

The prophet answered, "What he meant was 'today' if the people would but hearken to God's voice." (*San.* 98a)[19]

FOUR

Between Heaven and Earth

The Life of Faith for the Life of the World

MILLIONS OF MOMENTS OF ENCOUNTER

The task of practical theology, according to a widely accepted working definition, is "to establish mutually critical correlations between an interpretation of the Christian tradition and an interpretation of the contemporary situation."[1] The art of interpretation is crucial, as Don Browning suggests, "because the practical theologian never has access to either the raw, uninterpreted Christian fact or the unbiased and uninterpreted reality of ordinary experience. This is why practical theology must be seen as first of all an interpretive or hermeneutical task."[2]

To speak of a conversation between heaven and earth is a poetic way of naming this essential task of practical theology — to read and interpret the signs of God in the midst of the signs of life. Every age has grappled with this task of theology — to bring the life of faith to the life of the world, to discern the ways of God for the sake of the coming of God's kingdom, "on earth as it is in heaven."

An image often associated with hermeneutics is that of a text and a reader. Yet W. Dow Edgerton suggests that hermeneutics also speaks of a third "hidden presence." We see a reader and a text — we see only two — but "between the two, there is a third." According to Edgerton, the question hermeneutics asks is, "Who is the third?" In other words, what happens between a text and a reader, what transpires between them? Hermeneutics is concerned with questions and possibilities "about the interpreter, about the text, about their relationship."[3]

Perhaps the key word here is "between." It evokes a profound sensibility for the dialogical quality of life. "All real living is meeting," says Martin Buber.[4] It is an encounter between two: "Spirit is not in the *I*, but between *I* and *Thou*."[5] Whether we speak of love, or understanding, or forgiveness, or peace — these cannot happen except that they happen between us, except that they become a matter of concern for both of us. "This between," writes Gadamer, "is the true locus of hermeneutics."[6]

Gadamer suggests that the relationship between a text and a reader is like a conversation that takes place in the to-and-fro dialogue of question and answer, speaking and listening, address and response.[7] "Text" and "reader" are metaphors that need not be identified in all cases with written expression. An important claim of hermeneutics is that we are always interpreting — or entering into conversation — not only with texts, but with the people, life, and events of the world around us. Like Buber, Gadamer sees this conversational or dialogical structure as integral to life. The art of interpretation happens between I and Thou, between one person and another, between text and reader, past and present, present and future, memory and promise, questioning and answering, listening and responding, reflecting and acting.

The "space of the between" is notoriously difficult to pin down. It is the meeting or encounter of life itself. It is impossible, for example, for me to define my relationship with Mary, even though we have been married for many years. Rather, our relationship is made up of millions of moments of encounter between us. The same holds true when we speak of a people's relationship to their faith tradition. It consists of millions of moments of encounter. It happens in the "between," in the to-and-fro of the encounter between God and humanity, between the life of faith and the life of the world.

In the same way that we cannot too mechanically define a method of relationship or prescribe a method of "encounter," so too we cannot too mechanically define a method of practical theology. However, we can learn something of its *artfulness*. We can watch what happens, for example, when we are engaged in practices of interpretation. We can try to discern "movements" of interpretation that are integral to its workings. In what follows, I would like to distill some of these crucial movements as guidelines for good interpretive practice. While I am writing about them

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sequentially, it is important to keep in mind that these are not methodological steps that one follows like a recipe. Rather, they are interconnected movements that are all the time affecting each other.

MOVEMENTS OF INTERPRETATION

What are you *saying* to me?

Interpretation begins, if it begins anywhere, with the question: "What are you saying to me?" Without this question, there would be no need for interpretation at all. It may seem unusual to begin with this rather obvious question to describe an interpretive encounter. However, the art of interpretation is often doomed at the start because we fail to notice the importance of this question. Nothing is more certain to prevent a conversation or close down interpretive understanding than a hardness of heart that refuses to listen.

"What are you saying to me?" is therefore a crucial question that signals my willingness to listen to you, to take your words seriously. It directs my attention *to you* and allows your words to speak *to me*. Interpretation cannot happen without this fundamental openness toward another that speaks to me and addresses my life.

> *But I say this to you who are listening...*

Such begins one of Jesus' teachings or sayings in the Gospel of Luke (6:27–35). In the very opening of the text, we realize that we are being addressed. Whenever we interpret, we must necessarily be willing to hear. Moreover, the words that are spoken are not spoken to anyone or everyone. Rather, they are addressed "to you who are listening"—to this people in this time and this place. Their address is quite singular in "singling out" this particular reader or community of readers in this particular time and place. Interpretation always means that I am implicated, that the text is speaking *to me, to this community, here and now, today.* If the art of interpretation is a dialogical event, then *I am required.* This means that I cannot excuse myself from the interpretive encounter. Rather, my own situation and context must be brought into play as the only real arena in which any text can speak.

My experience is placed in question.

> *But I say this to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.*

This is a very difficult saying. All my familiar concepts are placed at risk; all the ways I usually make sense of the world are called into question. I feel as though something within me is being stripped away or laid bare. The text exposes me to myself, as if it were reflecting some part of me that I can hardly recognize. According to Gadamer, this exposure is a pivotal movement in the art of interpretation. It is the experience of "being pulled up short by the text."[8] The text lays claim to me in a way that I may never be able to finally settle or resolve, but which nevertheless strikes me as something essential that I can no longer renounce or do away with.

While it is crucial that we hear a text according to our own experience and in the context of our own lives, we cannot simply stay within the realm of "my experience." To do so would simply leave me locked into my own familiar world, rather than exposed to a world of new and sometimes uncanny possibilities that stretch far beyond my current understandings or expectations. For example, while it is true—as every teacher knows—that the best learning happens when it engages the experience of students, it is also true that no learning happens if it doesn't provoke or widen the experience of students into new learning and deeper understandings.

Little would happen in the art of interpretation if something of my own experience were not placed in question or, as Gadamer says, "put at risk."[9] If I enter an interpretive encounter only to come out of the process unchanged and unaffected, then it would be difficult to say that any interpretation has occurred. Interpretation is an *event* that always *affects* my understanding, or it is no event at all.

"Every experience worthy of its name," writes Gadamer, "thwarts an expectation."[10] Gadamer is suggesting that we can only call something an "experience" when *what happens* has a quality of unexpectedness or surprise. Experience that is "worthy of its name" can never be reduced to that which is expected or foreseeable in advance. In order to deserve

the name "experience," something happens or we discover something that we did not expect, and our familiar world of understanding is disturbed or surprised. Without this quality of surprise or transformative effect, we could not use the word "experience"; rather, we could only speak of something that is routinely familiar and in this sense quite uneventful, predictable, and expected.

We often equate the word "life" with the word "experience." This is evident, for example, when we intuitively affirm the deep connection that exists between the wisdom of experience and the wisdom of life. We know that the experienced person is someone who has gleaned or accrued a measure of wisdom through life experiences. However, what we too often miss is the process by which the "person of experience" becomes the "person of wisdom." We would be wrong to assume, for example, that the experienced person is the one who always knows "what is around the corner," as though wisdom simply meant knowing what to expect. Rather, the person of experience and wisdom is the person who is able to respond to life precisely when the way ahead is uncertain and uncharted. As Gadamer suggests, the experienced person is someone who knows that "experience always thwarts an expectation." The experienced person is someone who knows that life will always surprise, that life can never be tamed, that *creativity* and *risk* are essential to every encounter with life, that no amount of knowledge can tame the inexorable demands of being human. In other words, the experienced person does not *rely on accustomed or programmable responses;* rather, the experienced person knows that there is always more to life than meets the eye, that life itself always exceeds our grasp, that wisdom is not found through our measure of conceptual control, but through our measure of openness to that which always exceeds and surprises our current take on things.

A crucial element of interpretive experience is that it calls forth a reinterpretation or reassessment of my situation in ways that *open* me to new understandings and new behaviors in my life and in the world. It is only through this breakdown of my prior understanding that any possibility of a breakthrough into new understanding can occur. While this may sound like a negative requirement, it can also be viewed as a positive process of *releasing* me from past positions and frameworks that have held me captive for too long, or limited me from truly *experiencing* new insight and recognition. In biblical terms, the heart of the hermeneutical

experience requires a "change of heart," a *metanoia* that stirs up our lives, turning our lives around, as though plunging us into the tumbling waters of repentance and conversion.

What is this text asking of me?

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Most of us know this saying as the "golden rule" that is an ethical benchmark in virtually every religious tradition. However, it is strange the way this typical standard of love suddenly appears in the middle of this text. It seems out of place, because the previous verses, and the ones that follow, seem to be questioning even this standard of love, calling into question this sense of love's equivalence, whereby we simply love others as we want them to love us. Luke's text places in question this notion that love is a reciprocal measure, rather than a love that is *immeasurable*—loving even those who do not return love, loving even those who are our "enemies."

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

It is obvious that this text is asking questions of us. However, we should notice the types of questions it asks. It does not, for example, question *that* we love; rather, it questions the *way* we love. It assumes that most people want to love, but it questions our understanding and practices of love. It holds a mirror to ourselves and our ways of acting in the world, and asks us to consider what we see. It holds our typical understanding of the word "love" to the very flame of this word, testing it to see if it really is love. If we cannot love our enemies, or if we cannot give to another without expecting something in return, then in what sense can we say that we are loving? Aren't we, rather, just caught up in games of calculation

and exchange, whereby love is measured and meted out to those who we know will love us in return? And if this is the way we love, is it really love?

The matter of concern

It is typically *only when we hear the question of the text* that we will even begin to approach its subject matter, that is, what *matters* to the text. The subject matter, however, is no matter at all unless we are drawn into its question, unless we ourselves are led to take up and consider the *matter of concern* that it raises.

I have come to appreciate the importance of hearing the question as one of the most crucial movements of hermeneutics. Gadamer calls this the "priority of the question."[11] In the art of interpretation, it is the question that has priority and leads the way. What a strange thing, that interpretation should be primarily concerned with "hearing a question" rather than with "finding an answer." However, Gadamer is seeking to remind us that we do not come to new understanding so much by coming to answers, as we do by hearing questions that present themselves to us. To enter the realm of the question is to recognize that we do not know, and to expect the unexpected. To enter the realm of the question is to allow our familiar worlds to be provoked by an unfamiliarity, a strangeness, a "lure" that hooks us and begins to reel us in. "A question presses itself on us," says Gadamer, "and we can no longer avoid it and persist in our accustomed opinion."[12] The question brings us into the open—into a less guarded or defensive space—but this openness allows the subject matter to emerge or break through and claim our attention.

Whenever I am engaged in a conversation that matters, I try to remember that "the question has priority." When Gadamer suggests that the question has priority, he is saying that what must *lead* every conversation is not so much our ready-made answers, but rather a *listening for the question that matters.* If I only let my preformed opinions or ready-made answers lead the conversation, then I may as well be talking to myself, because everything I say will only lead back to me and to what I already know. If interpretation means anything at all, it must surely mean trying to understand a voice that is other than my own.

Whether between "text" and "reader" or between "I and thou," it is all too easy in an interpretive encounter for our own preformed answers to lead the conversation rather than a *question* that is as yet unanswered or

unmet. It is all too easy to talk and talk and talk—while all the time the question is completely missed, such that both partners come away less the wiser about the matter of concern and only more assured of their own position (which, in my experience, is more likely to lead to an argument or a debate rather than a conversation).

The priority of good conversation is with the question or the issue-at-hand that can only arise as both partners earnestly seek it and listen for it, letting it emerge such that it leads the way and makes an answer or a new understanding possible. Interpretive dialogue does not simply mean that "I understand you" or that "you understand me"; rather, it means that *I and you come to an understanding together* as we consider the subject matter that is a matter of concern between us. In other words, it is the subject matter that we are seeking to understand, not simply each other. It is the subject matter that must "lead the conversation," rather than "the will of either partner."[13] A conversation is not led by me or my opinions alone, nor is it led by you or your opinions alone. "The partners conversing," says Gadamer, "are far less the leaders than the led. . . ."[14] What *leads* a conversation is the subject matter that arises between us as we listen for the question or the issue at hand, guiding us toward a newly found understanding that is always a *shared understanding between us.*

When the question arrives, then the subject matter arrives, and when the subject matter arrives, then—and only then—is the art of interpretation fully under way. "The heart of dialogue," says Edmond Jabès, "beats with questions."[15]

If you love those who love you . . . ?
If you do good to those who do good to you . . . ?
If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive . . . ?

Is this love?

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.
If anyone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt.
If anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them back.

Is this justice?

What do you say? How will you choose to respond?

The tension between acting according to the ways of love and acting according to the ways of justice are constant in my life. Hardly a week goes by where I do not feel the need to make a decision and choose a direction that is not affected by the demands of love and the demands of justice. I may never be able to fully answer or resolve this question, but I am always provoked to make a response.

According to Gadamer, the real "rub" of hermeneutics happens when the question of the text finally becomes a matter of concern to me, and I am led to answer or respond to it. This is not so much a "final" movement of interpretation, as if I first inquire into the meaning of the text and then decide how I will respond. Rather, the moment of *applicacio* ("application") — what the text means for my life or for this community of readers today — *is* the very moment of understanding or interpreting the text. Gadamer writes:

> The interpreter dealing with a traditionary text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand the text — i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all.[16]

By opening up a question, the text invites my own questioning: "What does this mean in my life? How should I respond to this text? What is it asking me to do?" Moreover, I will be led to consider the context and conditions in which my own response is situated. The unique demands of my concrete situation will, if you like, talk back to the text, bringing forth its own particular questions and dilemmas.

What is happening in the world today, in my society, in my workplace, in my church or family, or in the culture at large, that requires me to "love my enemy"?

What does it mean to call another person an "enemy"? When I call someone an enemy, haven't I already killed any possibility for love, and made it all the more likely that I will deride or attack them?

Am I acting justly toward another? What does it mean to act justly and yet tenderly as well? Could it be that an "excess of justice" — lacking in love or mercy — is dangerously close to becoming an injustice? On the other hand, is it possible that an "excess of love" could ever jeopardize or fail the demands of justice? Isn't it, rather, that the practices of love and mercy keep justice from becoming unjust, such that the conditions of justice are always tested against the infinite demands of unconditional love?

Do I act as most sinners do, loving only those who love me? And if I am a sinner, won't I always be dependent on the mercy and forgiveness of another? Isn't it the case that we are always responsible to each other and for each other, and therefore we are always in debt, and therefore always in need of asking for the forgiveness of our debts — even as we forgive the debts of others?

Our response to these questions, and the decisions and actions they call forth, will necessarily vary according to the particular demands and needs of each changing situation. According to Gadamer, it is only when "the world of the text" enters a conversation with "the world of the reader" that interpretation attains its genuine effectiveness and productivity in the world. It is only when the saying of the text and the response of my life "fuses" that the real chemistry of interpretation happens.[17]

LEARNING FROM THE RABBIS

In undertaking my own search into the interpretive art of practical theology, I have found myself surprisingly attracted to the richness of the rabbinic tradition. I recall one snowy evening in Boston, some years ago, when I read the following words from the Jewish poet Edmond Jabés:

> "Ah, who will ever count the centuries examined in the margins of our books?" wrote Reb Amit...
>
> I myself have tried, in the margin of tradition and through words, to find again my fountainhead.[18]

I remember how much these words stood out for me. I was immediately struck with the image of "the margins," which suggests an interpretive link between a people bound in time and history, caught, like every living person, in the throws of practical human existence, yet also bound to their tradition, to that living conversation that endures through generations of prayerful reading and attentive response.

Jabès offers us an image of a people who, over centuries and centuries, live with such a deep attachment and attentiveness to their religious tradition that they return to it over and over again, as one returns to a fountain or to a well. "Turn it and turn it," the Mishnah says, "in it all things can be found" (*Pirkei Avos* 5:26). Page after page, day after day, through long nights and difficult questions, across the centuries, the Jewish people bring their lives to these ancient sources, weaving their own voices into the texts they are reading. Jabès offers another beautiful image:

> To be in the book. To figure in the book of questions, to be part of it. To be responsible for a word or a sentence, a stanza or a chapter.
>
> To be able to say: "I am in the book. The book is my world, my country, my roof, and my riddle. The book is my breath and my rest."
>
> I get up with the page that is turned. I lie down with the page put down. To be able to reply: "I belong to the race of words, which homes are built with"—when I know full well that this answer is still another question, that this home is constantly threatened.
>
> I will evoke the book and provoke the questions.[19]

In speaking of "the book," Jabès is evoking a deeply felt sense of belonging to a tradition into which his own life is inexorably bound. He realizes that he is part of the Jewish story and the Jewish experience, that he lives within its pages, that he is "in the book." It is a place of belonging, "my roof" and "my rest," yet it is also an unsettling experience of questioning and being questioned.

The "book" is by no means a closed, settled, and completed text. Indeed, Jabès's major seven-volume work is called *The Book of Questions*. The story is unfinished, and the book is like a "riddle" or a place of questions that continually calls forth new responses and new writing. "We always start out from a written text and come back to the text to be written," says Jabès.[20] To be "in the book" is to be responsible for its ongoing story, "for a word or a sentence, a stanza or a chapter."

I find this metaphor of the book very helpful in exploring the relationship of a people to their religious tradition. Even though I am drawing upon the Jewish tradition, I do not find it difficult to relate the image of the "book" to my own Catholic tradition, which has also consistently affirmed the value of tradition and commentary as deep sources of God's revelation in history.[21]

The metaphor of the book is particularly interesting when we consider that a book can actually mean two things to us—it can mean *something that we read* and it can also mean *something that we write*. Indeed, Jabès suggests that the book is always both:

> *"What book do you mean?"*
> *"I mean the book within the book."*
> *"Is there another book hidden in what I read?"*
> *"The book you are writing."*
>
> —*Reb Haod*[22]

Though seemingly enigmatic, Jabès is referring to the unique ability of the Jewish tradition to speak of the book as both something that we *read* and something that we *write*, and that these two approaches are intimately related. Both approaches to the book are essential to the life and vitality of tradition—to "take it and read it," and "to write it and prolong it." Indeed, it is impossible for the rabbis to read the pages of tradition without at the same time writing their commentary. Hidden within the story they are reading is the story they are writing. The very act of reading the book allows its story to generate ongoing life and creativity, such that the story of the book is prolonged and kept alive and active. It is the very reading of the book that generates the creativity of interpretation and commentary, such that we can say, paradoxically, that the book is indeed both something that we read *and* something that we write.

In the Jewish tradition, the book is always twofold. It is indeed God's Word, but it is also the people's response to God's Word. The book is indeed written and given to be read. There is always a normative quality or a "deep story" that marks every religious tradition. The rabbis refer to this as the "Written Torah." In the Written Torah, God has given

and intended all, such that everything is filled with divine intention and meaning.

However, because the Written Torah is the Word of God — filled with infinite meaning — it necessarily calls forth interpretation and commentary. The rabbis refer to this interpretive responsibility as "Oral Torah." The following parable attempts to reveal the relationship between the Written and the Oral Torah, suggesting that the only responsible way to read a book is to take responsibility for its words, or as Jabès says, "to be responsible for a word or a sentence or a stanza or a chapter."

> What is the difference between the Written and the Oral Law? To what can it be compared? To a king of flesh and blood who had two servants and loved them both with a perfect love. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and each a bundle of flax. What did the wise servant do? He took the flax and spun cloth. He took the wheat and made flour. He cleaned the flour and ground, kneaded and baked it, and set it on top of the table. Then he spread the cloth over it until the king would come.
>
> The foolish servant, however, did nothing at all. After some time, the king returned from a journey and came into his house. He said to his servants: my sons, bring me what I gave you. One servant showed the wheat still in the box with the bundle of flax upon it. Alas for his shame, alas for his disgrace!
>
> When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, he gave it only in the form of wheat — for us to make flour from it, and flax — to make a garment from it. (*Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, chapter 2)[23]

The parable suggests that interpretation is always a productive and creative craft that shapes "garments from flax" and creates "bread from wheat." The rabbis are suggesting that interpretation actively weaves, shapes, and "makes" the text: "the text is experienced only in the activity of production."[24] As Ricoeur reminds us, interpretation does not so much unveil established meanings "behind the text"; rather, it produces new meanings "in front of the text."[25]

Some readers may notice the similarity between this rabbinic parable and the Gospel "parable of the talents" (Matt. 25:14–30). However, there is another saying of Jesus that is perhaps closer in meaning:

> Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. (Matt. 13:52)

This is not unlike Gadamer's insistence that the interpreter is always mediating the wisdom of the text with the unique claims of their own present experience, in which "the old and the new combine into something of living value."[26]

IN THE MARGINS OF THE BOOK

The place where the "reading of the book" and the "writing of the book" happens is "in the margins of the book."[27] The margins represent the vital space between text and reader. If we think, for example, of any book that truly engages us — a book we read well — we typically read it "in the margins." (At least, this is what I typically do when I am reading — always with pen in hand, ready to write!) It is in the margins of the text that I scribble the response of my own reading in the form of commentary and question. It is in the margins that I am most deeply involved and engaged with the text — reading it — but also creating it and bringing it to life.

This image of "the margins" is starkly evident when we look at a page of Talmud. For those of you who have never seen a page of Talmud, I would encourage you to someday take a look at this most amazing page. It is quite a wonder and a testimony to interpretive genius and creativity. It is a page that is swarming with writing and commentary. It is a page that is completely overtaken by the expansiveness of the margins.

The roots of the Talmud go back to the Bible, the Word of God, which was communicated to the people of Israel at Sinai through the mediation of Moses, and amplified later through the teachings of the prophets. With the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the rabbis emerged as a distinct group of teachers who sought to preserve the life of Israel in the wake of this disastrous event. They considered the Pharisees their intellectual and spiritual forebears, who had already begun the process of reinterpreting or extending the holiness of the Temple into the ordinary and daily events of people's lives.[28]

The rabbis believed that ultimate authority could not be found in fixed texts but only in a living interpretation of those texts. There is no question that the texts are sacred; however, given the finitude of the human condition and the pressures of new historical situations, these sacred texts must also be carefully interpreted as deep sources of wisdom for encountering daily dilemmas. Much of this teaching, which was mostly oral, was eventually recorded and redacted, and ultimately what resulted was the Talmud — a vast encyclopedia of teachings and spiraling commentaries. The Talmud seeks "to preserve the record of earlier generations studying their own tradition and provide materials for later generations wishing to do the same."[29] In many ways, it is a quintessential expression of practical theology. "The Talmud applies the Bible's basic teachings on the human condition to its own age; it offers procedures for dealing with problems that challenged the Jews in the new historical situations they faced."[30]

In *The People of the Book*, Samuel Heilman provides a rich account of the time-honored Jewish practice of *lernen*, "the eternal review and ritualized study of sacred Jewish texts."[31] Heilman describes the Talmudic study circle (*shiur*) as a place of communal, interactional drama through which *lerners* play the game of interpretation, taking their cue from the Talmud, which itself is a book of interacting, circling commentaries in the ever-expanding margins of the book:

> Both literally and in effect, the Talmudic page is framed by commentaries: Rashi on the inside margin, his successors the Tosafists on the outside....
>
> These commentaries in turn may be reframed by later commentaries which have been added to the outer margins of the page.... With each new edition of Talmud, the publishers may add more commentaries or new appendices — new interpretive keys....
>
> Passing through layer upon layer of interpretation, the *lerners* bring themselves, their ethos and world view to bear upon the subject and animate the whole.... As the folio of Talmud is characterized by commentary, replies, response, questioning, debate, information exchange, digression, narrative, and repeated recountings, so the *shiur* is marked by keys of all of these.... The conversations during *lernen* are always something different from the written page, patterned by it but not exactly the same....
>
> So complicated does the process — the *lernen* game — become that one would have trouble determining where the written page leaves off and oral commentary and reframing begins.[32]

I sense that something in my own Catholic tradition shares the spirit of this vibrant interpretive activity. I recently came across this rather lively image of St. Thomas Aquinas:

> One imagines his study filled with books. As Thomas writes (or dictates) each article of the *Summa* one can see Scripture at his right hand, Augustine's great corpus at his left, Aristotle's philosophy on a table nearby, the works of the Fathers piled up on the floor, and the questions and perplexities of the monks he taught and lived with written on scraps of parchment and arranged in the order of topics as he would tackle them. One sees secretaries scurrying to find the precise wording of the citations he has requested, and copyists awaiting the finished manuscript. And one can hear the clucking of those who criticized the new synthesis of truth and knowledge as it appeared.[33]

In many ways, there is a kinship between this interpretive activity of Aquinas and the interpretive activity of the rabbis. Aquinas has the scriptures "at his right hand." They represent his primary text, the normative story. Yet he is also relying on past commentary, and so he has Augustine's work at his left hand. Augustine's "great corpus" has now become part of the story, and so too have all the commentaries of the Fathers, "piled up on the floor" around him. In other words, like the Talmudic page described above, Aquinas's work is "framed by commentaries" which have now become authoritative texts themselves, incorporated into the very heart of the tradition.

However, Aquinas isn't simply "rehashing" these texts. Rather, he himself is offering a new commentary. "On a table nearby" is the philosophy of Aristotle. "On a table nearby" is perhaps suggestive that while Aristotle's work is proximate to Aquinas's new interpretive venture, the works of Aristotle are nevertheless a "strange" or "new" voice that have not yet gained the same credibility or authority as Aquinas's other sources. In many ways, Aquinas is crafting his commentary by creatively playing with "the old" and "the new" — with the scriptures, Augustine, and the Fathers

all around him, but also with Aristotle, that "pagan philosopher," daringly positioned on a "table nearby."

Lastly, we should notice that all of this is taking place amidst "scraps of parchment" that represent the urgent questions and concerns of the monks he is teaching and living with. All these pressing and unanswered questions are crucial to Aquinas's interpretive work. These questions are questions are crucial to Aquinas's interpretive work. These questions are like "scraps" and remnant pieces — not yet ordered or systematized — and yet Aquinas takes them with utmost seriousness. They are central in forming and shaping the new commentary he is crafting — a commentary that will, as we now know, outlive him and become itself a new and enduring voice in the pages of tradition.

Aquinas, who is now considered one of the great doctors of the church, was initially engaged, much like the rabbis, in the practice of commentary and interpretation "in the margins of tradition." What interests me here is the need to rescue the term "marginal" from its negative connotations as "on the outside," "separatist," or "insignificant." Margin space, which we typically think of as narrow, insignificant space, is actually a vital interpretive edge that enlivens the pages of tradition. The margins represent the very space upon which the book's life is dependent. It is in the margins of commentary and interpretation that the book either spills its borders to enlarge and expand itself, or shrinks into virtual nonexistence through lack of provocation, questioning, commentary. It is in the margins that the book will either become a book of great size or a book of little measure. The success of the book depends largely on how much its margins are filled with commentary, question, and response; in other words, how much it provokes interpretive reading and writing among communities of interpretation.

HOUSES OF PRAYER AND STUDY

It may seem that images of reading and interpreting, studying and writing, questioning and commenting, are more suited to "academic" pursuits rather than the pursuits of "pastoral" or "practical" theology. However, I would like to suggest that these images bring us into the heart of practical theology's concern with the creative interplay that results when a community reads-prays-studies-interprets its faith tradition in dialogue with an equally attentive reading of the events-needs-questions-concerns of its own current reality.

According to David Tracy, the modern age has suffered a "fatal separation" between "theory" and "practice."[34] We are unsure how to bring these two back together again in a healthy relationship. We typically consider "theory" as somewhat speculative, and "practice" as something that "puts theory into action." We often equate the word "study," for example, with theoretical pursuits that are separate from "practice." In contrast to this modern scenario, Ivan Illich notes that the ancient Latin meanings of the word "study" denote "affection," "friendliness," "devotion to another's welfare," "sympathy," "desire," "pleasure or interest felt in something."[35] Prior to modernity's fatal separation between theory and practice, the art of reading-studying-praying-interpreting the sacred texts of tradition was essentially linked with the art and practice of living the Christian life, in all its concrete forms and conditions. The exercises of prayer, study, and service were not divorced from the living questions, concerns, and pastoral needs of the day.[36]

Study was not an abstract exercise divorced from life. As Tracy notes, this mentality would have been quite foreign to "the ancients," who felt deeply "the magnetic pull of the Good, and thereby of God."[37] Many of the monastic, medieval schools and the great scholastic thinkers such as Aquinas displayed little sense of the debilitating division between the "theoretical" and the "practical." Indeed, they would have found such a separation not only strange but self-destructive ("fatal"). In his study of Aquinas, for example, Marie-Dominique Chenu makes it plain that Aquinas never functioned as "an ivory tower theologian working in isolation from the burning questions of the people around him." Rather, "all of St. Thomas's writings were shaped by pressing academic, social, and pastoral concerns."[38] As Jean Leclercq so eloquently reminds us, what impassioned many of the ancients was the intimate link between "the love of learning and the desire for God," rather than their separation.[39]

The Jewish tradition also preserves this link between the "house of study" (*Bet ha-Midrash*) and the "house of prayer" (*Bet ha-Tefillah*). According to the rabbis, the essential marks of the house of prayer and study are devotion to scripture and its Talmudic interpretation, devotion to prayer and to God's Name, and devotion to our fellow human beings. "You need these all year," suggests one of the sages, "but never more than

now." And again, "You are not required to complete the task, yet neither are you free to withdraw from it" (*Pirkei Avos*, 2:21).

For most of my adult life, I have been a member (along with my family) of small Christian communities. I like to consider these small communities as "houses of prayer and study," "houses of hospitality and service" (sometimes referred to as "house churches"). Where does practical theology happen today? Certainly, I think it should be happening more and more in our parishes and congregations, in our schools and universities, in our religious institutions and social involvements. Yet I also think it should be happening more and more among intentional gatherings of small Christian communities — among people of faith who devote themselves to prayer, study, and service — whereby we desire God with all our hearts and minds and deeds.

Jabès begins his first volume of *The Book of Questions* with the scene of rabbis going into the house of study:

> "What is going on behind this door?"
> "A book is shedding its leaves. . . ."
> "I saw rabbis go in."
> "They are privileged readers. They come in small groups to give us their comments."
> "Have they read the book?"
> "They are reading it."[40]

Christian communities have much to learn from this ancient practice of rabbis gathering around an open book. For these sage interpreters, "what matters is that they belong to the Book, and through the Book they belong together. The Book is the world and the world is the Book; to live is to interpret, and to interpret is to live. But they can only do it together, not alone."[41] The Mishnah says: "If two sit together and words of Torah are between them, the Divine Presence rests between them" (*Pirkei Avos*, 3:3). The Gospel says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20).

In my experience of belonging to small Christian communities, I have always sensed that this represents a time and a space that is marked with an essential quality. This is conversation that matters. It is where people are bound together to speak of experiences that count, questions that weigh, issues that matter. The conversation is characterized by stories, commentaries, questions, digressions, needs, responses, actions, and reflections. This is where the *interpretive edge* of small Christian communities takes on most of its creative power and energy. We begin to see that these communities are reading their questions and writing their commentary in the margins of the book, between the claims of tradition and the claims of new, contemporary situations. This suggests a profoundly communal activity in discerning the way forward through deliberation, conversation, and decision making in specific, local, concrete situations among communities of interpreters. "It becomes all the more imperative," writes Richard Bernstein, "to try again and again to foster and nurture those forms of communal life in which dialogue, conversation, practical discourse, and judgment are concretely embodied in our everyday practices."[42]

"You must believe in the book," says Jabès, "in order to write it." To believe in the "story of God" is to write it, to live it, and to enact it in the story of our own lives. Each generation must take this task to hand, reading and interpreting the signs of God for the life of the world, continuing to write the story of God into the story of life. "The time of writing," says Jabès, "is the time of this faith."[43]