

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

The Messiah is One of You

Matthew 25:31-46

November 22, 2020

A parable for today. A parable for the day when our eyes are turned higher as we celebrate Christ as King. And as we wonder just what kind of King it is that reigns over a world like this one. And, where is he? A parable for Christ the King Sunday.

I read this first some years ago and have shared it in various forms, but it's not my story.* It's been working its way around storytellers for a long time. It's called The Rabbi's Gift. The story is about a monastery. The challenges of a monastery may seem a long way away from our lives, but monasteries are a lot like families, a lot like church communities, or communities of any other kind. We struggle together; we work together; we have hopes and fears, good days and bad. And even holy people like monks wonder where God is sometimes.

This story is about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. Chaos and change had come to this little group. Waves of anti-monastic persecution in the 17th and 18th centuries and the rise of secularism in the 19th century had decimated the order. All its branch houses were closed. Once a great order, now there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot, who is the leader, and four others, all over seventy years old. The future looked dim. You could feel it in the air and on the determined but grim faces of the few men left. The monastery had fallen on hard times.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery, there was a little hut that a rabbi from a neighboring town occasionally used as a retreat house for meditation. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit and ask if by some possible chance the rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. They had never met before, these two, but the abbot had always felt a strange mystical connection with the rabbi. He seemed to know when the rabbi was in his hut. All the monks did. They had never met him, but it was as if they had known him for all their lives.

The rabbi warmly welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only sympathize with him: "I know how it is, the spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in all the nearby towns." So, the old abbot and the rabbi commiserated together. They wept together. They read scripture together and spoke quietly of deep things and the mystery of God who sometimes seems so very far away.

The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying community?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi

responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

On the walk back home through the forest, the abbot kept turning this saying over and over in his mind, “The Messiah is one of you.” *The Messiah is one of you?*

When he returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well what did the rabbi say?” “He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just commiserated and read the scriptures together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — it was something cryptic, I almost hesitate to mention this, but it has been burning on my mind since then— the only thing he did say was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. His prayers are so beautiful.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly, Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. You can feel your spirit lifted when he is near.

Certainly, though, he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred.

But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. And he’s never been very strong; he’s always sick or in pain in some way or another. But then again, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just seems to appear by your side with an offer to help however he can. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course, the rabbi didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they each began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without

even being conscious of it, they sensed an aura of respect and even holiness that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place.

There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about the place. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery grounds more often to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place, and their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So, within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

None of them ever knew for sure who was the Messiah. Then again, they never figured out for sure who it wasn't. It could be anyone. They started to live as if the Messiah could be anyone among them, one of the brothers, or one of the guests, or one of the poor in town, the hungry and thirsty, homeless.

They lived that way until they could figure out for sure who the Messiah was among them. That day hasn't yet come. Which means that they haven't yet figured out who the Messiah isn't among them. As the old story is passed down from generation to generation in the community, they always end up saying at the end, "It could be anyone, even the one you least expect."

** Note: This story is adapted from the Prologue of M. Scott Peck's [The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace](#); however, the story's original author is unknown and there are many similar versions in circulation.*