

April 19, 2015 - Easter 3

1 John 3: 1-3, 7

The Rabbi's Gift

The author of this story is unknown. I first came across it in Scott Peck's book "The Different Drum," some twenty years ago. It has remained in my heart and deeply informed my ministry ever since.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage.

"The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again" they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him.

"I know how it is," he exclaimed.

"The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town.

Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore."

So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Psalms and quietly spoke of deep things. 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 order?"

"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."

When the abbot 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 wept and read the Psalms together.

The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving –
it was something cryptic -- 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 this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words.

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 Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

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.

Certainly 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. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. 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, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they 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 the aura of extraordinary respect 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 it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery

more frequently 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.

Something like this is going on in our letter from John. If our hope is that we are children of God and "what we will become" is wonderful and still developing, then this hope moves us into holiness.

You see, as this hope dawns in our consciousness, an attitude of gratitude and deep respect enter in. Our way of being with ourselves and others begins to change. We become appreciative and grateful and respectful of others who are also children of God. We seek more than their wellbeing and we treat ourselves the same way. That is when holiness enters in.

When hope becomes holiness we are living heaven on earth.

When hope becomes holiness everything we do makes a difference. So...

(With apologies to Mark Twain)

The Application for Today

Dance like there's no body watching!

Faithfully witness to the goodness of God.

Sing like there's nobody listening!

Share the simple, soulful joy of living.

Love like you'll never get hurt!

Think parenthood and compassion.

Live like there's heaven on earth!

Let hope become holiness in all our relationships.

Amen.