

September 3, 2023

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 17

**Meditation:** "Messiahship"

I seldom preach from the epistles, particularly the Pauline epistles because they are so dense and specific. All of the epistles that Paul wrote to communities of faith were written to address specific needs and challenges facing each of the communities – all except the letter to the church in Rome. This letter was written near the end of Paul's life and ministry, and it was written to a church that Paul had neither founded, nor had personal contact with. Paul had never been to Rome. For this reason, the letter is, to quote William Barclay, in his commentary (The Daily Study Bible, 1975, G. R. Welch Co. Ltd., Toronto, Ontario. pages 1-2) on the book of Romans, both testamentary and prophylactic.

Testamentary means that the letter was the distillation of the essence of his faith and belief. This letter contains the very core of Paul's belief and faith. Prophylactic means that it was intended to act as a guard or protection against infection. Paul had seen the harm and trouble caused when wrong ideas, twisted notions, and misguided conceptions of Christian faith and belief infected a community. Sending this letter would serve to bolster the faith and doctrine of the church in Rome to help them defend against false teaching.

The core message is that love has the power to transform and regulate relationships. I can't really say why I felt called to this text, rather than the Old Testament lesson or the Gospel lesson this week, just that I did. The only explanation is that it must be the leading of God's Holy Spirit. Likewise, I felt that a story I had heard was somehow helpful in exploring this text. It's called "The Rabbi's Gift."

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It had once been a great order, but as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth century, 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 years of 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 Torah 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 Torah 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 Eldred! Eldred gets crochety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Eldred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Eldred. 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, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit it 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 this 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 centre of light and spirituality in the realm. Ω

Can you imagine thinking that the person sitting beside you could be the Messiah? Would it change how you treated them? Even more frightening, can you imagine thinking that you might be the Messiah? Would it change how you behaved, the example you set for others?

Like the monks in the dying monastery, so many congregations are fretting over their imminent demise. There is much debate over what will keep the younger generations in church, and the answers range from praise bands to weekly skits in place of the sermon. And that's great, if you have the younger generation as a significant segment of your congregation. But what if you don't?

I think the real challenge isn't how to keep them. The real challenge is how to attract them in the first place. That aura of extraordinary respect that permeated the atmosphere of the monastery is what drew people to the place, and eventually drew some of the young men to seek to join the community.

What does any of this have to do with the church now? We are at a transition point. Like the monastery in the story, the church as we know it will soon die. Like the monks in the story, what the church will become we do not know. In the meantime, how are we treating one another? How are we treating our neighbours? How are we treating the larger community? How are we treating those we don't like, those we disagree with, those we despise, those we envy, those we look down upon, those we hate? What kind of Christian example are we putting on public display?

Paul would remind us that if we want to make unhealthy relationships healthy, and we want to maintain healthy relationships, we need to get serious about unconditional love, for that is how God first loved, and continues to love us. Now go be the Messiah to all whom you meet, and let God worry about what happens to the future of their church!