

## The Rabbi's Gift

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.

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The opening story is found shared by many in many forms, but my first encounter with it was in M. Scott Peck's Book The Different Drum.

Once upon a time there was a monastery. Now earlier in its history, dozens upon dozens of monks had called it home. But in recent times the once great order had all but disappeared. Now there were but 5 monks left, the Father Abbot and 4 others, all of whom were over 70 years of age.

One night, as the Father Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, an idea came to him. In the woods near the monastery was a small cabin that the local rabbi would use from time to time. Earlier in the day he had seen smoke rising from the chimney. Yes, tomorrow he would go over and see if the rabbi might have any advice that could save the monastery.

Well the next day the Father Abbot set out for the Rabbi's cabin where he was warmly welcomed. And the tea, well the tea was already poured, as if the rabbi had known he was coming. After exchanging pleasantries, the abbot explained the purpose of his visit. The rabbi sighed. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore. The spirit has gone out of the people." So the old abbot and the old rabbi... well they wept together. And then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things.

The time came for the abbot to leave. They embraced each other as old friends. The abbot spoke with joy as to their new friendship, "but..." the abbot said. "But I have still failed. 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 one of you is the messiah." And with those words the old rabbi shut the door.

When the abbot returned his 4 brothers gathered around him. "Well, what did the rabbi say?" There was silence. Finally the abbot answered, puzzled: "He couldn't help. We just wept and read the Torah together. And then...." "And then what?" the other monks asked. "Well, just as I was leaving --it was rather odd-- he said... well he said that one of us is the messiah. I have no idea what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks kept thinking about what the rabbi had said: "the Messiah is one of us? One of us? I guess the poor thing has just lived alone in the woods for too long. Maybe dementia is setting in. But... well for the moment let's just assumed he's not crazy. If he's not, then, which one of us would be the messiah. I guess if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. After all he has led us for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Thomas is certainly a holy man; a man of light. Well at least we know he wasn't talking about Brother Elred! I have never known someone so crotchety in my whole life. But... you know, now that I think about it, even though he is a thorn in our flesh, he is virtually always right; often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother

Elred. Of course there's Phillip. I like Philip but he's so passive; a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he seems to have a gift for showing up just when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. After all, I'm just an ordinary person. Yet what if he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. C-could I be that for you?"

Now as the monks thought about the rabbi's words in this manner, they began to treat each other with extraordinary respect just on the off chance that the rabbi wasn't crazy and one of them really was the Messiah. And just on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

While the monastery's mother house had seen better days, the forest and gardens surrounding it were still quite beautiful. And occasionally people still came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, or to wander along some of its paths, and while it was not a daily or weekly event, some still would go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate or pray. But as they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that had now begun to surround the five old monks. Not only did it radiate out from them but it was as if it had started permeating the very atmosphere and the stones of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. And hardly without knowing why, visitors began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, and yes, to pray. And they began to bring their friends to show them this special place.

And then one day it happened: one of the younger men who been visiting the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a number of conversations, one day he inquired of the Father Abbot how he might go about joining them. And he was not the last man to ask such a question.

And so it was that life came again to the monastery. No it did not happen over night. No, they did not find the numbers they had at their peak, but thanks to the Rabbi's gift, they recognized and cherished and shared the light and life that stemmed from that holy and vibrant place.

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Whenever we search for the messiah, we will find community; always. And whenever we search for and create community, we will find the messiah in our midst; always.

It's worth noting that in three of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark and John - Jesus doesn't perform 1 healing or 1 exorcism until after the disciples are called. And once he created a community with Andrew and Peter and John, well what happens next is truly miraculous: Jesus' teaching sweeps Galilee like a wildfire. He begins healing everybody that is brought to him - those with diseases and those with demons - and they all find wholeness. So is it just coincidence? I seriously doubt it. In fact, I will go so far to say that Jesus needed the others, even as they needed Jesus. Since Jesus was 100% human, he needed community; he needed a group that would help sustain him; a group who could rejoice together and mourn together. And while miracles may not be limited to the context of community, a community will always produce miracles. Always.

And we - our culture, our world, our churches, us - we need community. Why did we love MASH in the 70's? Why did we love Cheers where everybody knows your name? Why were we fascinated with Rachel and Ross and Phoebe and the others on Friends? Why is Facebook the phenomenon it is? Because all of them have to do with community, with finding and creating a place where we can belong warts and all. Yes the shows are fiction and Facebook has some issues, but the hunger that they each seek to satiate is quite real.

Communities, real communities are nothing less than life-granting. And I'm not talking about fenced-in subdivisions with a guard at the gate. That's not a community. That's a group of individuals living in close proximity to each other. Individuals in communities have a relationship that goes deeper than masks of composure. Being in community with each other, sharing a covenant with others is about a lot more than being nice. In communities we rejoice together and mourn together. In community we wrestle with each other, lovingly, but we wrestle nonetheless. We make the condition of others are own. Community comes, not when we assert our own individuality, but when we accept the individuality of others. That's why, at least in part, community remains a rare occurrence despite our hunger and need for it.

At the end of this service we will have a congregational meeting governed by Roberts Rules of Order. And these rules are helpful in a business meeting context to help ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak. But in a Christian community there really is only one rule and it is a question: Am I treating my brother and sister as if they were Jesus Christ?

So what will it be folks? Will we go the way of the world; will we only see each other as republican or democrat, conservative or liberal, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor? Will we go the way of the American culture where we concern ourselves only with my rights, my freedom and all that is unholy about me, myself and I? Or will we continue to work together here in this place to establish a covenanted community where we will celebrate the Rabbi's gift and where every soul who walks in that door is treated as the messiah.

In the presence of Community things are transformed. Water becomes wine, blind eyes become seeing eyes, enemies become friends, hostility becomes hospitality, sorrow becomes joy, dark becomes light, dying churches become living churches, brokenness becomes wholeness and death becomes life. And so long as we remember the rabbi's gift, so long as we remember the church is not a building but a life-giving community in which the messiah dwells, it will be so with us. So remember Scripture tells us angels walks amongst us without our knowledge. And remember what the rabbi told us... One of you is the messiah. Amen.