

Learning Community 9-27-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Acts 2:41-47

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

I Peter 2:9,10

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy,

Jesus didn't start a new religion, he started a movement. When he stood before his home synagogue, he took out the scroll from Isaiah and read these words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to

let the oppressed go free." The hometown boy, now grown up tells his home community of faith, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21) And Jesus spent his life on the move sharing this good news message of love in word and deed to make real God's love and presence.

Later, when he asked what is required to inherit eternal life, Jesus responds by sharing those words he had grown up reciting from Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Jesus knows these words so well, and then he adds, "and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus understood that the law and rules and religious observations can be empty if they do not have the spirit of life and relationship and connection to God and the community of faith. Communities can grow stagnant if they merely do the same things over and over without having the breath and movement and life to animate them and make them alive and growing and changing in order that they keep their connection to a living God.

The Israelites understood very well that they were the people of God. God had made a covenant with them, had brought them up out of bondage made them somebody. It was rough for them as they learned how to be a community with and for one another, as well as to be a community who learns and adapts and grows and remains faithful to a God on the move.

The statement about who we are at First Christian begins, "We are the people of God on a path of freedom, learning and love. We question, think, and listen. We respect other faiths. We welcome new people. We are open to new ideas. We are not defined by our

agreements or disagreements. We are defined by our acts of love and justice and healing." Who we are as a people of God is a community who learns from and with each other. We care about each other. We give room for one another to be on the path together, but maybe in a different place. Because we are God's people, our doors are open wide. God's love is for all and we want people to experience it and be participants in living God's kingdom on earth.

Sometimes communities forget they are living, learning, and dynamic organisms who must be continually renewed and recreated. And when that happens, they cease to be the people God has called them to be. M. Scott Peck, in his book, *The Road Less Traveled* shares the story of one such religious community.

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying 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 occasionally used for a hermitage. 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" they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit to the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, all the rabbi could say was, "I know how it is". "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 spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you 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?"

"The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant?"

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered about the significance of the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, 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 always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. 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, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that 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 compelling,

about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then 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.

We are Christ for one another. We are children of God beloved; full of life and light, learning and growing and ever changing to reflect the glory of God. Or, in the words of I Peter, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into God's marvelous light." Amen.