



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
9-14-14

"We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

Today we will share in something really wonderful – wondrous. Together, publically, we will formally recognize and declare Isabel Lo Snidecor as one of God's magnificent creations. I will sign a cross on her forehead with blessed oil and she will be marked as "Christ's Own Forever." She is the Lord's. And we honor that truth through our ritual of baptism and welcome. Oh, that all on this earth would be treated so well and with such support and love.

I read a story online this week. It is one that I have heard before and I think it entirely appropriate for this special day. It is called "The Rabbi's Gift."

The story is told of a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once it was a great order, but as a result of the waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeen and eighteen centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteen, all its branch houses were lost and 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 woods surrounding the monastery there was a little cabin that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a retreat. The old monks could always sense when the rabbi was visiting the cabin. "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, the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and ask for any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of this visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "Yes. 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. When the time came for the abbot to leave, they embraced one another. "It has been a wonderful thing that we have talked after all these years," the abbot said. "But 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 you." But then the rabbi paused and said quietly to the abbot, "But, there is one thing I have to tell you: One of you is the Messiah."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "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—he said that one of us was the Messiah! Maybe it's something from Jewish mysticism. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks began to think about this and wondered whether the rabbi's words could actually be true? The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, who is it? 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 that Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he couldn't have meant Brother Jonathan! Jonathan 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, Jonathan is virtually always right, often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Jonathan, but surely not Brother Philip. Philip 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. Could Philip be 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? Oh God, me?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one of them might actually 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 monastery was situated in a beautiful forest, it so happened that people 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. And 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,

people 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. And it happened that 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 spirit.

What do you think? Maybe Isabel is the Messiah in our midst. Maybe you are – maybe your neighbor. We can listen to those powerful words in Romans today and think that Paul's words are, like the story, also our gift. The reading speaks to us of the gift of respect for others in the context of service to the One who is the Lord of the living and the dead, the one before whom we will all stand one day, accountable for our own actions and inactions. This is the Lord who teaches us every day so that we may gain in wisdom and service to others.

In the rabbinic tradition this is a definition of Wisdom.

Who is the person who is wise? The one who has the ability to learn something from every person. A wise person is able to really hear and appreciate that every individual can make a valuable contribution to our life, to our community.

Today we welcome Isabel into our community. So many gifts are in our midst.

“If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live or whether we die, WE ARE THE LORDS.”

Thanks be to God.