

Close your Bibles. Do not look up the page number in the bulletin. Now pick up a Bible. I have a piece of candy here for the first person who can find Philemon in the Bible. Ready, set, go.

Philemon is hard to find because it is one of the smallest books in the New Testament. It is actually a letter. It is letter written from Paul to three people including Philemon, the slave master of a slave named Onesimus. In this letter, Paul is writing from prison and informs that Onesimus has been with him in prison but he is now being released. We are not sure why Onesimus is in prison or why he is now being released. But in this letter to Philemon at the release of Onesimus, Paul gives advice to the Christian community about how they should now treat Onesimus on his return to the community. I am reading this letter this morning because it mentions Epaphras who will also be mentioned in our second reading from Colossians this morning. But I think both letters give us clues that can help us in how we are to live our lives today.

Read Philemon

(Special Music)

Our second Scripture comes from the letter written to the church in Colossae, what we call Colossians. Paul, or one of Paul's close associates, begins this letter as he usually does by introducing himself, addressing the audience, and then thanking them for their faithful obedience.

He recalls how they have learned many important things about the faith from Epaphras, the person we heard mentioned in the letter to Philemon. In the reading which we will be reading, Paul is going to lift up who Christ is for their building of community with one another.

Read Colossians 1:15-29

In the beginning of his book The Different Drum, author Scott Peck tells the story of a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order but as a result of 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 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 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.

Messiah in the Bible means “one who is anointed by God.” Today we usually apply Messiah only to Jesus but in the Old Testament Messiah refers to anyone who is anointed and sent by God. In the OT, Messiah usually refers to kings like David but the term can refer to anyone who is chosen by God to impact the community of faith in some special kind of way. This reading of the term “messiah” is how it would be defined in this story.

Who among us is the messiah? Who among us is anointed by God for some type of special purpose among us? Is it you? Is it you? Is it you? Is it I? Who among us do you look at and say, “Well it cannot be that person? It can’t be them because of this reason or that reason or that reason? They can’t be the Messiah. No way are they anointed by God for anything special for this community.”

Could the messiah be outside this door somewhere? Whom do you walk past or ignore or never pay attention to? Whom do you discard as being less than you? Is it the person you pass on the street, that serves you food, that ticks you off? Could it be that this person that you want to push aside for one reason or another is the messiah?

Could it be that this person is the person anointed by God to do something special for the world? Could it be that you are the messiah to them? Are you the one anointed by God to make an impact upon that person’s life in some way?

We are so quick to decide who is anointed by God and who is not. We are quick to dismiss some and appoint others. But maybe our readings this morning challenge us to rethink where we are looking for the messiah.

How would we treat one another inside the church and in the larger community if we saw each person as potentially anointed by God to be or do something special? AMEN.