

Look Real Hard
1 Samuel 16:1-13
July 22, 2018
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The passage from 1 Samuel that we just heard dialogues interestingly with an old story about a conversation between the abbot of a monastery and a rabbi.

The abbot's monastery had fallen on hard times. It had once been a great house with over a hundred monks. But over time, fewer and fewer monks joined the order, until there were only five monks left in the decaying house. The abbot and four others, all over 70, remembered a great past, but had no hope that their order would survive.

Now in the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town often used for a hermitage when he went on retreat. Through many years of prayer and contemplation, the old monks had become a bit psychic, so that they could always sense when the rabbi was there 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 advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut, but when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only grieve with him.

"I know how it is," he said. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my own 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 Old Testament and quietly spoke of deep things. They embraced each other.

“It has been a wonderful that that we should meet after all these year,” the abbot said, “But I still have 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 among you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him to ask what the rabbi had said.

“Well, what did the rabbi say?”

“He couldn’t help,” answered the abbot.

“We just wept and read the Torah together. He did say one thing just as I was leaving – that the Messiah is among us. I don’t know what that meant.”

In the days and week and months that followed, the old monks thought about these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance in them. The Messiah is among 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 had been our leader for more than a generation.

One 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 ornery 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 certainly 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. Maybe Philip is the Messiah.

He couldn't possibly mean me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet suppose he did. Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh no, not me. I couldn't be that much, 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 of 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 it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still 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 this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and fill 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, and to pray. And their friends brought 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 then another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, it became again a vibrant center of light and spiritual truth.

Searching for which one of them might be the Messiah, each of the monks in the story tries to look beyond the surface to see the truth that lies underneath it. They are trying to follow the way of God who tells Samuel in this morning's scripture, "the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." In the Bible the heart is believed to be where the will and character lie so that looking on the heart is to see the truth of a person, just as the monks were trying to do with one another and with themselves.

Many things get in the way of finding this truth beneath the surface. Fear can do it. This is what is happening to Samuel in the scripture. He has been sent by God to anoint a new king. The Hebrew word for the anointed successor to a king is Messiah, or Christ

in Greek. So like the monks in the story Samuel is looking for the messiah. Just one problem, Saul, the former king who has been disobedient and was therefore rejected by God, is still very much alive. And it's not hard to imagine what he'd do if he found out that Samuel had set out to anoint his successor.

So Samuel is scared. He's a very reluctant prophet. Every step along the way God has to give him a shove to get him going. In the end, he does find the truth – the Messiah is revealed – but his fear almost gets the better of him. In the same way, fear can block us from seeing the truth that lies below the surface

This can be fear of the unknown. Fear of disappointment . Fear that if we knew the truth we'd have to do something or change something. Sometimes the only way that we can get beyond this fear is to get somebody to help us.

Prejudice is another thing that keeps us from looking past appearance into the heart and seeing the truth. Samuel is blocked by the prejudice of his received wisdom. The king is supposed to be the oldest son not the youngest, some nobleman comfortable in the seat of power, not some shepherd comfortable with a flock of sheep.

There is another kind of prejudice which plays into the reason why Samuel is reluctant to go and see Jesse. For Jesse, at least in the eyes of some, is tainted. His grandmother was Ruth and his grandfather was Boaz. We think of Ruth as a hero, and so she is, but she was also a Moabite. And how could the Messiah possibly be a descendant of this immigrant? We see here that prejudice against immigrants is not a new thing in our own day. There's more. Boaz, Jesse's grandfather, has two Canaanite women in his lineage, one of whom was a prostitute. How could the Messiah possibly come from such a family?

As for Samuel, so it is for us. It's hard to let go of prejudices about race, sexual orientation, gender, religion, ethnicity and all the things that can blind us to the truth of a person. Prejudice is sneaky. You think you're free of it, but it's still there, blocking us from seeing past it into the heart of another person. I know in own life, I've come a long way from the prejudices I learned growing up in a segregated state of Virginia in the '50's and early '60's, but I'm still working on it.

Finally, we know that we live in a world where the truth is often intentionally hidden by packaging, image making, posturing, and general misdirection. I can go to the store and buy cereal in a box with a picture on it that promises me youth, joy, and sparkly teeth. But I've learned the hard way that it just isn't going to happen. What I do is read the fine print on the side of the box to see what's actually in the cereal. Forget the sparkly teeth. I just don't want the stuff to kill me.

As we move into a political season, we also seek hidden truth. It's a challenge to look beyond the image of a candidate to what's really there, to see the values that the candidate is actually committed to. I see our faith-based coalition Isaiah of Minnesota trying to help to do this. Actually Isaiah is trying to do it in both directions – to look within ourselves to see what faith-values are in our own hearts, and then to look beyond labels to see what values truly are close to the hearts of individual candidates. It's hard to see the truth, but it's good to try as hard as we can find it.

In closing, I'd like to go back to the story of the rabbi and the abbot. What would we do if the rabbi had told us here at First UCC, Northfield that the Messiah is among us? Just suppose. Who knows? Really, who knows? Maybe, on the off, off chance that the Messiah could be one of us, we would need to treat one another with the extreme respect that the messiah deserves.

And even more amazing, since you yourself or me myself might be the Messiah, we would need to treat ourselves with the same respect with which we treat others. And if we did this, maybe, just like the old monks in the story, extraordinary respect would radiate from us until this place lit up and vibrated with spiritual truth. Now that really would be something!