

## **A Perceived Conundrum (Matthew 25:31-40)**

### ***Word and Deed***

It seems to me that for about as long as I can remember Christian people like us have wrestled with this perceived conundrum that there is an identifiable great tension between *word* and *deed*.

You know well the parameters of this argument. Those who are all about *word* can't say more than a paragraph or two before Jesus is woven into the conversation. They are unafraid to confront you in the coffee shop, or corner you at your doorstep. Most any gathering is a good reason to preach the gospel. In the barbershop, at half-time of the football game, during a lunch break at the factory...anytime is a good time to get the word out there that Jesus is the good Shepherd anxious to welcome the lost sinner home.

And then there's those *deed* folks. Those people who go around being nice and kind, and doing things that are virtuous and even noble....but their motivations are unclear. Is this really all about them and their own ego? Do they have some ulterior motive? Is there some religious purpose behind it all that we don't hear about? Why do they do what they do? And if they are Christian folks don't they understand that works can't save you, at some point you've got to confess your sins, get right with God, and believe.

I think this weekend of the MCC Sale is a good time to think for a few moments about this perceived conundrum.

But, you know, I want to stop right here and admit that this is a ***perceived*** conundrum, and not really in actuality one at all. I suppose that in our more individualistic environment we want to parse things out and put people into categories but a more biblical view is that we are whole, mind, body, and spirit and that the things we hold dear and believe are inextricably linked to what we do....or at least they ought to. It's a troubling place to be if you can't live into your beliefs.

Now of course it's important to remind ourselves of important biblical injunctions. *Faith without works is dead*, we read in James (2:17). In I Peter we are reminded *always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.* (I Peter 3:15-16)

### ***The Rabbi's Story***

I assume that most of you have heard the story of a monastery that fell on hard times...

*Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic 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 hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the hermitage and ask if by some possible chance the hermit could offer any advice that might save the monastery.*

*The hermit welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the hermit 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 all the nearby towns. So the old abbot and the hermit commiserated together. 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 hermit 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 hermit say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just commiserated and read the scriptures 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 these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. 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 the 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 hermit 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 hermit 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, 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.

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. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and,

*thanks to the hermit's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.* (The story is taken from Dr. M. Scott Peck's Different Drum: community Making and Peace)

The story can be applied in a thousand ways but what if we applied it to ourselves?

People in leadership at FMC were concerned with the decline in attendance at both of their worship services and the fact that their building was getting old and difficult to maintain. So they sent two of their leaders, Lance Zimmerman and Erasmo Quintanilla down to Colombia to visit with Cesar Garcia, the executive secretary of MWC. They were a Mennonite church, after all. They talked to Cesar for an entire afternoon, through dinner, and into the evening. But about all Cesar could say was this: *well, you know, I've never been to Reedley in my life but I do understand that the Messiah has been with you in the past, and in fact, the Messiah, I hear, is with you right now.*

Lance and Erasmo returned and reported at the mid-year congregational business meeting that Cesar couldn't help much, he had no great wisdom about how to fill the pews, or how to hold meaningful united worship services, or what to do about silverware disappearing from the church kitchen, or how to use the old basement, or where to find a 25 year old church organist, or how best to get more people to come to Sunday School but he did mention that, nevertheless, the Messiah had long been and still was right there, somewhere, at FMC.

Well, the congregation decided to hold a table talk evening the very next Sunday night, to try to discern who might be the Messiah. No table came to a firm conclusion but at each table a lot of wondering went on.

John Rogalsky spoke for one table and said that their table did a lot of talking about Pearl Janzen...remembering practical things like her zwiebach and her peace quilts but also her pointed, far reaching, dare we say prophetic words.

Karen Peterson spoke for another table. She said that at her table people were thinking about Raul Zarco. He's probably the biggest guy in the whole church. Maybe the Messiah is obvious, the biggest person here?! Could it be? He's made some big changes in his life and now he's as faithful as the sun rising in the East, he plays the guitar and sings, he's always ready to use his construction skills for the good of others....

And then Juan Gomez spoke for the next table. He said he personally barely remembered the guy but his table did a lot of talking about John Miller. He did a lot of verbal witnessing, at Street Light and at the Rescue Mission, but he also worked for decades with MDS, he drove countless people to church and he handed out lots of boxes of government surplus food.

Someone else, I think it was Ruth Buxman, said how can we not think about Maxi Ambriz. Why she's a big-time prayer, she's always ready to visit people, and even though her house is pretty crowded, she'll take people in.

And Barbara Ewy was pretty passionate when she started sharing about various children in the church, she couldn't limit herself to just one. Maybe the Messiah is right here among us walking to the front of the church during children's time, or playing out on the playground!

The good folks of FMC got pretty excited just thinking about who the Messiah might actually be.

**Matthew 25**

Since they were thinking about how we need to be alert to seeing Jesus right among us it wasn't hard for them to say, let's read Matthew 25 again. In this familiar parable where it is discovered that when you visited the prisoner or clothed the naked or welcomed the stranger you were actually performing this deed of kindness, this word of witness, unto the Lord!

The passage seemed to say to them that they needed to be constantly alert, and ready, for the King was actually among them!

They thought, maybe we should check out earlier verses in the chapter. In the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids they learned that *you always need to be ready*. Then they read the parable of the talents and they concluded that in the Christian walk, you've got to be *ready to take risks*. They combined these ideas with the teaching of the parable, the judgement of the nations, which is basically that *the Messiah is here among you* and they concluded some of the following.

- 1) You know, let's not worry too much about who's talking and who's doing this and that, let's just covenant to be alert to the Christ in the person in the next pew, or in the other service. Surely Christ is here among us all.
- 2) They decided it's really important to be able to sing one's faith and connect the dots in attractive ways between faith in Jesus and racism, between faith in Jesus and shallow materialistic living, between faith in Jesus and violence of any stripe.
- 3) And they figured out that the persistent practice of love and compassion was both more difficult and more important than trying to believe all the same things in the same ways. But, they concluded, that love thing was the most important.

In the end they decided that the old song they used to sing around the campfire at Camp Keola pretty well summed it up. *They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

--April 3, 2016

--2016.14

--First Mennonite Church, Reedley, California