

Original Christology

Luke 13:1-9, Romans 5:12-21; Matthew 18:1-5

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 3, 2013

I begin today with a story that is likely familiar¹:

There was a famous monastery which had fallen on very hard times. At one time its many buildings had been filled with young monks and its big church had resounded with the singing of the chant. But now it was nearly deserted. People no longer came there to be nourished by prayer. Only a handful of old monks shuffled through the cloisters, and they prayed to God with heavy hearts.

On the edge of the monastery woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. From time to time, he would come there to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he appeared, the word would pass from monk to monk: "The rabbi walks in the woods." And for as long as he was there, the monks would feel sustained by his prayerful presence.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and to open his heart to him. So he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway, his arms outstretched in welcome, as though he had been expecting him. The two embraced like long-lost brothers, and the rabbi motioned the abbot to enter. In the middle of the room was a wooden table with the Scriptures open on it. They sat there for a moment, in the presence of the Book. Then the rabbi began to cry.

The abbot could not contain himself. He covered his face with his hands and began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. The two men sat there like lost children, filling the hut with their sobs and wetting the wood of the table with their tears. After the tears had ceased to flow and all was quiet again, the rabbi lifted his head. "You and your brothers are serving God with heavy hearts," he said. "You have come to ask a teaching of me. I will give you a teaching, but you can only repeat it once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again."

The rabbi looked straight at the abbot and said, "The Messiah is among you." For a while, all was silent. Then the rabbi said, "Now you must go." The abbot left without a word.

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together and told them he had received a teaching from "the rabbi who walks in the woods," and that this teaching was never again to be spoken aloud. Then he looked at each of his brothers and said, "The rabbi said that one of us is the Messiah."

The monks were startled by this saying. "What could it mean?" they asked themselves. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery?

¹ "The Rabbi's Gift." Adapted from a version by Karen Mulder on *Wisdom of the Wounded* Blog. Accessed online March 2, 2013: <http://blog1.wisdomofthewounded.com/blog1wisdom/2011/05/02/the-rabbis-gift-2/>

If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone here, it is probably the abbot – he has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas – he is also a man of light. But certainly he could not have meant Brother Alfred! Alfred 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, Alfred is virtually always right – often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Alfred. I doubt its Brother Phillip – he is so passive. But then again he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just mysteriously appears by your side. Maybe he is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. But what if he did? What if I am the Messiah?

As they contemplated in this manner in the days that followed, the old monks began to treat each other with renewed care and respect. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extra care and respect as well.

Occasionally, 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. Without being conscious of it, they began to sense this new aura of care and respect that began to surround the old monks. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, visitors 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. 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. 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, one that continued long to radiate the care and respect with which those old monks began to hold one another when they came to believe that the Messiah was among them.

In recent weeks and months Jeff and I have been spending a lot of time contemplating basic Christian beliefs and Brethren values. Several projects and events have led us into these discussions. We have been leading concurrent processes for discernment of vision, priorities, and core values for our congregation and youth ministries. We have also been reading Dale Brown's book on Brethren Theology, *Another Way of Believing*, with several of you in our Pastors' Book Study. Just this weekend we attended a symposium at Bridgewater College focusing on "The Church in 20 Years." And we had decided several months ago to focus our worship and preaching during Lent around exploring core beliefs and practices of the Brethren.

Going into all of this, it was and is one of my basic assumptions and convictions that it makes a world of difference where you start when you consider such things. Like the monks of the monastery in our story, whose spirits and fortunes were revived by a change in their basic assumptions about themselves, one another, and their community, we have a choice in how we perceive our reality and our story, though it is often subconscious. In faith, as in life, perception can define reality.

The scripture texts chosen for our contemplation this morning represent a number of different starting points for people of faith. In the Matthew text, Jesus lifts up a child as the example of greatness according to divine standards, asserting that becoming like children is the way to enter the Kingdom. In the Romans text, we find the classic Pauline formulation of atonement: as the heirs of Adam's original sin, human beings are condemned to death; but through the obedience and righteousness of one man – Jesus the Christ – human beings have been given grace – the free gift of justification – leading to eternal life.

Traditionally, these two starting points have represented two different and often opposing views of human nature. To put broad and vastly oversimplified labels on them – either human beings are born into original innocence and blessedness – which somehow we forget as we mature and to which we must return to enter the kingdom. Or human beings are born into original sin, the judgment and penalties of which we cannot escape without the atonement of Jesus the Christ.

We could spend all day – perhaps many days – detailing the different ways that theologians and Christians throughout the ages have wrestled with and chosen between these two points of view. In essence, the question is deceptively simple – are human beings born bad or good.

But these are not the only possible starting points for contemplating human nature. The text from Luke 13, which is one of the lectionary texts for this Sunday, offers at least two other possibilities. In the beginning section, in which Jesus comments on the deaths of the Galileans in the Temple and the eighteen people at Siloam, Jesus contradicts the Deuteronomic theology that had gained wide currency at that time which asserted that obedience to Torah brought blessings while disobedience brought a curse. In doing so, he negated a common starting point that held that a person's righteousness or lack thereof had anything to do with any evil that befell that person.

Now, Jesus did follow up each negation of the Deuteronomic assumption of blessings and curses by asserting the need for all to repent or perish. As such, his comments might be interpreted as beginning with the assumption of original sin. But when viewed in light of the parable that follows, I do not think we can draw that conclusion.

As I have reflected on this parable recently, and how it might represent a different starting point for our consideration of human nature, two features have stood out to me. First – the tree in the parable was judged according to its fruitfulness – or more precisely its lack thereof. It was planted for a purpose, and the owner was understandably disappointed when he failed to find the fruit that was expected. But the second thing that stands out is the intervention of the gardener. Presumably, this gardener has been tending this same tree for three years and is likewise disappointed in its failure to be productive. But she is not ready to give up on it yet – she believes it still has value and potential, and so she advocates for giving it another year of extra care and fertilizer.

Here the parable ends, and we have no way of knowing what happens next, or what would have happened if the owner returns after year four and there is still no fruit. But given Jesus' teaching elsewhere about forgiveness – that one should give another not just a second or third

chance, but forgive even seventy times seven times – I don't think it is unreasonable to imagine that the gardener would advocate for the tree again even if it failed to produce a harvest yet again.

So what can we make from all of this? What is the "take home message" from our consideration of these questions and these texts? As I said, I believe that it makes a world of difference where we start when we consider matters of faith. And while it is tempting to say that such questions are simply academic, and don't really have a bearing on what we believe and how we live our lives, I believe they do matter. Because like with the monks in the story with which I began, the assumptions we make and the way we view ourselves and others has a real effect on our lives and the lives of those around us. Our spirits and our witness are shaped by our views of human nature. And our understanding of Jesus – who he was and is and what he means for us – is at least partially determined by this starting point of how we view human nature.

I believe that this parable of the barren fruit tree offers a compelling place for us today to begin thinking about who we are as human beings, and what Christ means for us today. This is not the only place in the New Testament that asserts that our lives are intended to bear fruit. But it might offer a unique and original word to us about those inevitable seasons in our lives that are fruitless – those times when we fail to live up to expectations and fail to fulfill our purpose. In short, it is potential. Like the rabbi who could see the potential of the elderly monks in a dying monastery, the gardener in this parable sees potential even in a failing and fruitless tree. She saves the tree by standing with it – offering to care for it and nurture it through another season.

Is this not the gospel? Is this not our founding story? That even though we human beings so often fail to bear the good fruit that is expected of us, that God has affirmed our potential, and chosen to stand with us? And that through the incarnation, Jesus has given us a chance to reach our potential and experience what those monks experienced – a fruit-bearing way of life nurtured by the assumption that the Messiah is among us?

Indeed what would it mean, if we really took this as our starting point – if we saw the potential in ourselves and in everyone we met – to be the Christ among us?

I would love to find out. And I have a feeling that we would be found bearing fruit.