

“The Messiah Among Us”

A sermon delivered by Seth Carrier, Intern Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church on Sunday, December 25, 2011

Once there was a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Some of the younger monks had left in dissatisfaction, and no new men were joining. There were but a handful of monks and their leader, the Abbot, remaining. They began fighting among themselves, each blaming the hard times on the faults and failings of the other. One day a traveling rabbi stopped at the monastery for a night's rest. He ate, and prayed alongside the other monks. The next day, as the rabbi prepared to continue on his journey, the Abbot drew him aside. He told him of the problems of the monastery, and asked him for his observations and for some advice to share with the other monks.

Upon hearing the Abbot's woes, the rabbi was quiet for some time. "Cannot you give me some advice to help my monastery to thrive again?" the Abbot begged. "Your monks will not listen to my advice," the rabbi replied. "But perhaps they would benefit from an observation. The Messiah dwells among you here at the monastery."

"One of us?" asked the Abbot, astonished. "Which one?"

"Oh, that I cannot say," he answered. "Share this with your brothers, and in time it shall be revealed to you." The Abbot thanked him and sent him on his way. He then gathered the monks together, who listened in amazement to the news. "One of us! But who?" each one asked out loud. Then to themselves they wondered, "It couldn't be Brother Robert – or could it?"

"Surely not Brother Henry, but there are times when..."

"Not the youngest, well, maybe..."

"The Abbot himself?"

"Could it be me?"

Soon things began to change at the monastery, as each began to see the Messiah in the other and to hear the Messiah's words in each word spoken. Soon people began to wander back to the monastery, and in time new men joined and the monastery thrived.

I love this story because it shows the power of an idea, without needing to take significant action. In this day and age of consultants and self-help books and Five Steps to Greater Happiness and Six Commitments for a Healthier Relationship and Seven Habits of Highly Effective People – a simple idea changed and transformed a community. And best of all, that idea – that the Messiah might be among us – that idea caused the very transformation in people’s behavior that Jesus modeled in his life and in his teachings. Just the idea that the Messiah might be among them was enough of a reminder of what the monks truly valued to help them change their behavior, and start relating to each other in a more loving manner.

The thing was, the monks already had those values; it wasn’t like the Abbot went and changed the teachings or moral system in his community. It wasn’t like he went around constantly reminding people, “Hey, you need to treat each other better, you need to be more caring in your relationships with each other.” He didn’t ask them to pray more, or to meditate more, or to spend days fasting in an attempt to improve themselves. Just as they were, with beliefs and values they already held, they were able to transform their community, all based on one motivating idea.

My question for all of us, then, is: what kind of reminder would it take in our own lives, to help us shift into better living our values? What would motivate you to make a transformation? What would it mean if the Messiah was among us?

As we think about our different answers to that question, I have a challenge for us. The challenge is to take responsibility. Here’s what I mean by that. Often, when talking with others about the difficulties facing our country right now, I’ve said the following: “I believe that the political system in this country is broken, and that people with money and power have far too much influence over politicians, Democratic and Republican alike. We need to do something about that.” Notice the switch I made in pronouns. I started by saying “I think the political system is broken...” and ended with “We need to do something about it.” There is something very different about saying “I think the political system is broken...” and “I need to do something about it.”

Switching to “I” can actually be empowering. We can forget sometimes, when we are so often reminded of how little power we have in the big scheme of our culture and country, that we do have power. What we do, what you do, what I do: it *does* make a difference. Just like the monks in the story, our attitude towards each other – how we choose to treat each other – can and does have a profound effect on how we experience the world.

There is a bus driver in New York City who makes her world a better place. Every person who gets on her bus is greeted with a genuine smile and an authentically asked, "Hello, how are you today?" She knows her regular passengers well and always has a kind word, or a caring question, for people when they get on. She asks about their kids, or their sick aunt. She also sings under her breath as she drives along each day. She treats each and every person as if the Messiah were among us. In a circumstance in which many of us would not, she brings joy into the world, day in and day out. It is just a few minutes out of their day, on their way somewhere else, but people almost always get off this woman's bus feeling a little bit happier than when they got on. Their world and the world in general have changed for the better. This bus driver did not wait for someone else to make her day-to-day life a happier place. She did not sit around complaining about how rude and self-centered some of her passengers could be. She owned her power, she claimed her "I," and *she* made her corner of the world a happier place to be.

Each and every one of us has this power. We often don't claim it, but we have it. We each drive the buses of our lives every day, and we can have an impact on what is going on around us. I drive the bus of my life every day, and I have this kind of power. And so do you.

Jesus, he knew this. Talk about someone who transformed the world around him. Jesus drove his own bus, and he made that bus a better place, without a doubt. He is a prime example of how one person, treating people the way he believed the world should be rather than the way it was, made a huge difference. Jesus treated everyone with love, regardless of their circumstance or station in life; regardless of how society said they should be treated. He didn't do this to stroke his ego, he didn't do this to found a new religion; he did it because he believed it was the right thing to do. The institution of the church that followed after him may not always live up to the standards he set of treating everyone with love and respect, but his message still speaks loudly, even two thousand years later.

The beautiful thing about living like Jesus, and spreading love and joy in the world, is that like a stone thrown into a pond, the effects ripple outwards. The bus driver changed her own world, but she has also changed the world of those around her. The people who rode on her bus that day, they walked out changed just a little – a few of them with smiles on their faces that might not have been there otherwise. They carried those smiles into the workplace, and they passed along the love. They went home and hugged their children, when they might not have otherwise. They went to coffee with a friend and told them how much they appreciated having them in their lives, when they might

otherwise have remained silent. You never know when a little bit of love is going to make a difference in the world.

I'll ask again: what is the reminder for you to live out your deepest values? What is your "the Messiah is among us" experience? Is it loss, losing someone you hold dear? Is it a profound moment in nature that reminds you of the interconnected web of life of which we're all a part? Is it a serious illness that reminds of you the fragility of your own life? Is it the birth of a child, of new life, full of hope and possibility entering this world?

The answer is different for all of us. But whatever it might be, whenever it might happen – pay attention. Because the thing is, by treating others as if the Messiah was among them, the monks became happier themselves. That bus driver, she sure did make the world a better place for others...and for herself. As we celebrate the life of Jesus today, may we act as if the Messiah were among us, and find the inspiration to transform lives – our own and others – with love.