

Meditation

July 29, 2019

My name is Peter Shafer. My wife, Shirley, and I are new-ish members of Seattle First Baptist. We are also both Companis volunteers.



I want to tell a story wrapped in another story, a kind of story sandwich.

The middle of the sandwich is a tale about five monks and a rabbi.

The story goes that there were only five elderly monks left in a once thriving, but now decaying Christian monastery. The monastery was at the edge of a community scarred by war and social strife. In the woods surrounding the abbey there was a little hut used by the town's rabbi as his place of spiritual retreat.

The monks had resigned themselves to their fate and had turned inward. All their thoughts were only of what happened within their walls and of the sadness they felt over their lost future. In their inwardness, they were uncannily aware of each other's moods, and shortcomings, finding many faults in themselves and in others.

They had also developed an almost supernatural ability to sense their surroundings and to notice changes and danger. When the rabbi was nearby they would whisper, half with fear and half with fascination, "The rabbi is in the woods again."

The leader of the order agonized over its coming demise. One day, driven by desperation, he went to speak to the rabbi to see if he had any advice.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But it seemed that the rabbi could only commiserate. "It's the same everywhere around here," said the rabbi. "The people have lost all hope." They cried, prayed together, and read from the Torah.

Finally it was time for the abbot to leave. "Is there no advice you can give me?" the abbot said as he stood in the door. "I am sorry," said the rabbi. "The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery the other monks asked what advice the rabbi could offer. "Nothing really," said the abbot. "He only said this odd thing: that the Messiah is one of us."

The monks' uncanny ability to sense each other's thoughts was greatly aroused, and it caused great discomfort. The thought circulated, Could the Messiah be our abbot? He is our leader so it certainly could be him. Or then again perhaps it is Brother Thomas. Both are very holy. Yes, it must be the abbot...or Brother Thomas! But certainly not Brother Elred! He is so sour and cranky and critical with his face scrunched up like that all the

time! But, though, when you think of it, his criticisms are often right! Or perhaps Brother Phillip, but he is so passive, so quiet, so in his own head. But, he does always turn up when others need him. Surely it's not Brother Timothy! We just can't think of ANYTHING he's good at except to bake bread. But he does make good bread. We like that bread.

In their agitation and confusion they also began to think in another way. Each began to ask himself the exhilarating and frightening question, "What if it is me? What if I am the Messiah?"

Out of their uncertainty and their questioning came something new. Now when they thought about the others they could not help but think, "This person may be the messiah." They hoped it was so! Because when they thought about being the Messiah themselves all each of them could think was, What if I must carry this burden? How inadequate I am! How much I need to learn! How much I need others! What could I possibly do about the sorrow and sadness of the village? Each of them, quietly hoping that it was someone -- anyone -- other than himself began desperately to recognize those virtues in their compatriots that had previously been hidden. They began to treat each other with deference and humble reverence. They let go of haughtiness and pride. Strangely, out of fear turned sideways, hope and affection began to grow.

It so happened that the people of the village would come and picnic near the monastery. They began to notice a change in the place. Once, the monks seemed cold, forbidding, inward, funereal, and horribly old. They were stern and legalistic among themselves and with outsiders. Now they seemed expectant, eager, curious, welcoming. The habit of seeing a could-be messiah in each of the other monks spilled over into seeing a could-be messiah in everyone in the village: men and women, boys and girls, the young, the old, the well, the ill, the familiar, the stranger.

Soon the abbey shed its old hidebound habit of fearful exclusion and welcomed new initiates. Life returned to the village.

At the abbey's feasts, now shared with the village, the rabbi was always an honored guest. He rarely spoke, preferring to smoke his pipe and smile.

So that was the middle of the sandwich, now here is its outside.

This story of the Rabbi's Gift is told in a slightly different form in the prologue to a book called *A Different Drum: Community-Making and Peace* by M. Scott Peck.

That book was mentioned here three Sundays ago. I scribbled its title down and bought it. The reason I bought it was because the book talks about group dynamics. I have been interested in that topic for some time, but I was motivated to buy the book -- and made an impulse purchase, a great rarity for a cheapskate like me -- because of my Companis placement.

Shirley and I have been working with an organization called Minds Matter Seattle. Minds Matter pairs high-achieving, low-income students with mentors and tutors. Meetings happen Saturdays at Seattle University. Many of the tutors and mentors are from the tech firms downtown. Many are young and new to Seattle. (There is a need, by the way, for more volunteers, especially seniors. The organization recognizes its need to broaden their volunteer base beyond 20-, 30-, and 40-somethings to include those with more classic experiences, abilities, and perspectives.) What we found in studying this organization is that a missing element is education and support for the mentors. Students sometimes felt misunderstood. Mentors sometimes felt inadequate, confused,

and unsupported. More connection needed to happen. Right now, I am preparing a course for the mentors about community-building and communication.

That's why a book about community appealed to me. But without my experience of being at SFBC 3 Sundays ago I wouldn't have known about that book. Without a reason to NEED that book, I wouldn't have paid any attention to it. Without the connection that Companis provided I wouldn't have been preparing a course for young Seattle techies with a heart for helping low-income students. Without the encouragement of Gary, and Karen, and Peter, and all the other Companis volunteers I wouldn't have had the courage to apply my experience and gifts in that way. You may not be shocked to hear – this is not a novel thought, I've heard this somewhere -- that there is power in showing up. There is hope in showing up. There is healing in showing up. There is courage in showing up.

Our scripture passage talked about our need for each other. It's a simple metaphor. Look, it says, together is better than apart. We find our "meaning and function" not alone in our room, but when we are with each other, involved in that messy and often scary business of being with each other. And that "meaning and function" found in the whole interconnected body of human relationships -- and the completeness that we long for and need – is already there, waiting. We ARE ALREADY "fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts."

To be better together we each need three things: A place to receive, a place to give, and the courage to get on with it. The monks already had the first – a place to receive – in each other. And they already had the second – a place to give – in the bruised and fractured community of the monastery and of the village around them. But their ability was stunted and useless without the third – the courage to share.

Today, as we think about all of those people who are already a part of our lives, we, like the monks, can feel fear. Our prayer in this holy place is to that divine One whose power creates and sustains all that is good and holy in the muscle and bone of affection and memory and love. We pray that that Spirit would cure us of our malignancies, cure us of envy and pride, cure us of hopelessness, cure us of isolation and despair. Oh, One who is the Wholeness to which we all shall return, grant us the courage "to go ahead and be what we were made to be," these "excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body." Amen.