One of you is the Messiah

October 23, 2005 (Proper 25, Year A)

Exodus 22:21-27 Psalm 1 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 Matthew 22:34-46

Iza and I have been hanging pictures in our house this week. To keep the larger pieces even, we have to use two nails, two picture hangers, about four inches apart. Instead of tilting to the left or right on a single axis, the pictures stay level – provided I made sure to put both picture hangers on a level line!

The lawyer in Matthew's Gospel tries to trip Jesus up by having him hang the law and prophets from a single nail. But Jesus seems to have seen through their trap, so after he drives in one strong nail, love of God, he immediately drives in the second, love of neighbor. "And the second is like the first." One leads to the other: they are reflexive statements: Love God, love neighbor: Love neighbor, love God.

Independent of one another, they are almost impossibly abstract commands. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and with all your mind, a close translation into Greek (and now in English) of the *sh'ma*, the great and essential prayer of Judaism, taken from the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers, the prayer we will hear today at the offertory anthem.

The *sh'ma* begins: *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad.* Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And goes on to state: And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

It is a beautiful prayer, and a wonderful practice. But this love of God can tilt off-center, can become abstract and vague, if the law only hangs from this one peg.

So there is a second great commandment: <u>Love your neighbor as yourself.</u> Here too, a beautiful idea -- and as a statement on its own, it is an ethical injunction we share not only across religions, but with most secular humanists as well. What keeps this second great commandment in balance is the first. What keeps the first great commandment in balance is the second.

We can read the relationship of these two commandments as two picture hangers, keeping the law upright and even. I think you can also view them as a Celtic knot, flowing one into the other.

Let's pick up the thread of that knot right in the middle of its twists and bends: I *can't* really love my neighbor without loving God. I mean, I can love the people I *like* pretty well on my own. There are folks that are easy to get along with, people who are easy for me to be around, to laugh with and sing with.

But there are people I don't like. Some of them, in actions and intention are cruel – and their cruelty disturbs me. Some people, on the other hand, I have no good reason for not liking. They just rub me the wrong way.

How do I learn to love *them?* I believe that practicing loving God helps me learn to love my neighbor, because, through baptism, we have been called to see the face of Christ, of God's anointed, in each person.

There is a story that you might have heard – often called "The Rabbi's Gift":

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, 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 little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi 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 my 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 Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. 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 rabbi 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 rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah 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 this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. 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 Father 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 rabbi 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 rabbi 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 rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the land.[1]

When I first read this week's Gospel, I wondered why Matthew put these two *pericopes*, these two passages together – the two 'pegs' of the commandments, and Jesus' exegesis on the Messiah, God's Christ, God's anointed?

I believe that they are inseparable – the search for the Messiah flows from, and flows to, the twin love of God and neighbor. Because learning to love God and to love one another is what opens our eyes to the Christ. Keep your eyes open for the Christ. In this room, in this neighborhood, in this world. Keep your eyes open for the Christ. With the people you love, with the people you struggle to love, keep your eyes open for the Christ. Around this altar, around your home, with the friends you break bread with, at home and in this place, keep your eyes open for the Christ.

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[1] Paraphrased from a version of this story printed in Dr. M. Scott Peck's A Different Drum

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