

## CHRISTMAS EVE – 2021

May the words...

Last Sunday, I heard a story told by my good friend David Klutterman in his sermon for Advent IV. He had remembered it from a time when he heard John Westerhoff, Episcopal priest and educator, tell it some years ago. Neither David nor I know if it is true, but we both agree that this is one of those stories that one hopes is true or wishes it were true.

It seems there was a monastery near some European town, in some century, that had a wonderful reputation for being a very special place. The monks seemed to have a wonderful relationship, and the whole monastery communicated love and grace, so that everyone who went there, whether for a lifetime as a monk, for a long or short retreat, or for a Sunday service—as many of the people from the town liked to do—everyone experienced that grace and came away feeling better about themselves, more hopeful, loved and loving.

The reputation grew and people came from all over and that monastery touched and changed many lives.

No one knows quite how it happened and whether it happened swiftly or slowly, but there was a change, and it did not feel the same to those who participated, neither the monks, the retreatants nor the townspeople. The visitors noticed it first because we never seem to notice things that change gradually in our own lives. While the monks had for some time lived in great harmony, they started to get on each other's nerves and even pick on each other with their criticisms.

Of course, the abbot noticed this, too, and after a little while he took a leave of absence and a walking pilgrimage in the surrounding area, to contemplate what he might do. One day he came upon a hermit, and after a little while, he told the hermit of his concern about the monastery. The hermit made a suggestion: When you return, I suggest you tell your brothers that the Messiah has come among them. But don't say any more.

When the monks heard this, they were startled, and they were all guessing who it might be. They each knew it was not himself, but who? Although they had been sniping and growling at each other, they stopped that. Since they did not know who might be the Messiah, they stopped for fear of being unkind to him. They began to treat each other with respect, and with kindness, and they learned how to see things in each other that they had never seen before—good things, lovely things—and the respect grew into love.

The few visitors who had still been coming began to notice the change, and they, too, were treated with great respect and warm hospitality, so that they left feeling loved and much better about themselves. Of course, they told all their friends, and soon the monastery was regularly honored with retreatants and townspeople and other visitors, each of whom considered him or herself blessed.

Of course, what happened deep down, is that each of the monks and each of the visitors treated each of the others as if he or she were the Messiah.

Do you know now why I hope this story is true, and if not, wish it were true?

Let's come to our present moment. I am one of those who believe this story can come true. For one, every child who is born is called to be at least one person's messiah. I'm not saying the child is Jesus, but think of your own life: how many times have you thought or even said, "S/He saved my life!"? It may have been as small as being saved from an embarrassment, or being lent a piece of clothing at a last minute because you thought you had nothing to wear (and maybe you didn't). I think most of us could and might say that about someone who helped us get over a resentment that was killing us, or helped us forgive someone which changed at least two people's lives (our own and the other's), or set you on a course that was to become your vocation for your lifetime. There are so many ways we think of people saving our lives, and though they are not Jesus the Christ, all of those moments are true; all of those moments were holy, and remain holy for us.

I want to say to you the same thing the abbot said to his monks: the Messiah has come among us. Oh, I'm not talking about the cuteness of a children's Christmas pageant. I am not even talking about those personal moments I trust each of us has had (or we would not be here) of the gift of life and salvation that God gives to each of us, and which many of us have experienced for the first time or several times on Christmas.

I believe the Messiah has come among us. Oh, I don't want you to think that I have one person in mind. That's not it. Think about a year and a half ago and the spiritual condition of this parish. I don't want to enumerate the different kinds of pain, and anger, and suspicion, and distrust and fear that you felt among you, but it was here, and just about each of you said that to me in your own way and from your own experience. And there was some sniping and snitching and criticizing that was happening in real time.

Now look around you today, and see and feel the difference. If you want to be really bold to challenge yourself, do a subtle looking around right now and find someone you, shall we kindly say, weren't too sure about, whom you now trust, even like, even love. And don't go attributing that to me. I mean it. I am not here to be your Messiah. But I believe I am here to help you see the Messiah in each other, and what I am celebrating is that you are doing that very thing. You look at each other differently, as individuals, and as you look at us as a whole. I am not describing perfection. We are a work in progress and not a work in perfection. God is not finished with us yet, but let us celebrate what we know to be true now, this Christmas: the Messiah has come among us. Alleluia!! and Thanks be to God. A blessed Christmas to each and all of you and those you love. *Amen.*

+JLJ