

## **A Wider Welcome**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD September 22, 2024**

There was once a thriving monastery which began to crumble, falling apart at the seams, as numbers dwindled and beloved monks left this refuge. There were but a handful, including their leader, the abbot, that remained. Those who remained bickered and fought as they blamed one another for the downfall of the monastery. One day, a traveling rabbi visited the sacred space in hopes of a night's rest. The monks and abbot and rabbi joined together over a shared meal and communal prayer. As the sun rose the following morning, as the rabbi was preparing to leave, the abbot pulled him aside. The abbot lamented the array of difficulties that had befallen the monastery, asking for the rabbi's advice and wisdom. The rabbi replied, "the monks will not listen to the advice I have to offer. Perhaps, however, they could learn from observation." For, he elaborated, "The Messiah dwells among you here, at this monastery." The abbot replied, astonished, "Who among us is the Messiah?" "I cannot say," replied the rabbi. "Tell your monks, and soon it will be revealed." The abbot spread this blessed news amongst the monks. The monks mused about this together in earnest, wondering who the Messiah may be. Things began to change at the monastery, as each monk began to see the Messiah in the other's eyes and hear the Messiah's sacred words spoken on the other's lips. Soon, the monks that had left returned, and the monastery thrived. <sup>1</sup>

Stories similar to this one are shared throughout faith traditions. Sacred beings hidden in the ordinary and the mundane, interacting with humans entirely unawares. In Paul's letter to the Hebrews, as offered in the New Testament, the disciple wrote "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."<sup>2</sup> A minister reflecting on the Greek mythological story of Philemon and Baucis we heard earlier, offers us that, quote "The god ... travels in disguise. He or she can bring gifts of good fortune

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<sup>1</sup> "The Messiah is Among Us" from *Doorways to the Soul* Edited by Elisa Davy Pearman

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 13:2

and happiness.”<sup>3</sup> How can the world and each soul in it be blessed if we engaged with every being as if they were the Messiah? As if they were a goddess or an angel or prince or prophet in disguise?

What a Messiah is, what an angel is, this is unique to each of us in blessed and holy ways. And yet we can offer that there is a god or a goddess, a spirit of love, or a great, eternal mystery, that lives and resides among us. The monks bickered and fought and argued as they blamed one another for the downfall of their monastery, but rejoiced when they were invited to see the holy in each other’s eyes, heard on each other’s lips. It became a blessed invitation – that theme we’re exploring this month. These stories evoke a wider invitation – one that stretches beyond our comfort zone. One that includes and celebrates strangers, as well as ideas and worldviews that expand our minds. One that is not simply “welcome,” which is passive, but an active verb of intention - intentional invitation. So, what do these specific stories offer? An invitation to see the holy in each other’s eyes; to treat everyone as if they were a god, the most blessed being in this realm or another. This is how life flourishes, as, with the monks, a tale of disarray and angst becomes one welcome and love as the holy entered it. And so, who might the Messiah be? In Christianity the Messiah is held in the least of these – the addicts, the ill, the poor, the ostracized. What if the Messiah likewise dwelled within your mail carrier? The cashier at Safeway? Your cousin with vastly different political ideologies? The stranger on the street? Who might the Messiah be?

Which leads to another question. Not only who is the messiah but how can we invite them into our lives? An ancient practice of welcome and invitation is to share a meal. Come to my house where you will be watered and fed. This ham? It is for you. This salad? Please indulge! These vegetables? Fill yourself! What if we left an empty seat, one with a plate filled with food placed in front of it, expecting no one yet inviting the chance of entertaining a Messiah, a sacred being, an unexpected guest? My mother did just this. Spaghetti was her offering, and the neighborhood children and youth were her Messiah. Always, the door was open to those who

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern, from *Setting a Place for Elijah*

wanted to share a meal. And often, those who arrived were those with no family meals, who wanted to be cared for just as they wanted to be fed. A messiah? Perhaps. May this metaphor serve to guide you.

Exploring true Invitation and inclusivity flips our understanding of the world, just as does this idea of offering the Messiah a bowl of spaghetti with marinara sauce. angel Kyodo Williams Sensei offers this: “Inclusivity is not ‘How do we make you a part of what we are?’ but ‘How do we become more of what you are?’”<sup>4</sup> Who is “we”? When I think of “we” in the context of this statement, I think of what has been taught as ideal. There is a façade of superiority, of excellence, of supremacy. White, cisgender, wealthy, educated, heterosexual, able bodied, beautiful. And the “you,” in this context? Those on the margins. Poor, addicted, Black or brown, transgender. How can you become like us? No. How can we celebrate you and learn from your journeys and become stronger, wiser, and more compassionate for it? Your strength, your perseverance, your hard-won insights and wisdom. How do we become more like you? Hospitality, invitation - this becomes a moral issue, it becomes a values issue, it becomes an integrity issue and it challenges us to live with love at the center. Let us stretch our margins. Let us broaden our understanding of inclusivity and intention. No one should feel shame for being just who they are.

Let us bring these abstract ideas into the trials and tribulations of today. We live in a time that is entirely divisive. Likewise, we live in a time where we can be bold, brave, and compassionate. Aligning with our morals, our values, our integrity. When I reflect on the state of our country this September of 2024, I think of politics. The huge schism between liberals and conservatives, growing ever stronger as the election looms ahead of us. We’ve grown, not to see each other as people, but as inherent adversaries. We dehumanize one another due to political strife. And yet. Last week we spoke of loving-kindness meditation, praying for the wellbeing of all – even our enemies. Each time an opponent is seen as fully human with joys and sorrows, delights and laments, those fighting for division lose a small battle. Even more

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<sup>4</sup> angel Kyodo from *Soul Matters Worship Archive: Invitation*

compelling and necessary, may we learn about one another. May we open a doorway for understanding that invites compassion and understanding, not hatred and division. How can we invite an opponent into our lives? May we be curious of others' histories – the question, where did these ideologies arise from? Why do these policies speak to you? And we uphold our values and we uphold our convictions and we uphold our morals and we uphold our liberal faith and encourage and invite others to share this love and compassion as well. Not to proselytize, but to converse. To talk. To ask questions. For to initiate this – to initiate conversation – this is a sacred act of invitation; an invitation towards compassion and understanding. May a perceived enemy be the Messiah?

In reflecting on that perhaps difficult question, I invite us to return to an opening quote pulled from a minister's reflection on the Greek mythological story Philemon and Baucis, comparing it to a wide array of similar stories, quote "The god, the prince, the prophet travels in disguise. He or she can bring gifts of good fortune and happiness." These gifts, Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern elaborates, "will come from experiences we would rather have avoided. They will be given to us by people we imagine have nothing at all we want."<sup>5</sup> What gifts do we receive when we welcome those society would rather ignore, when we receive those who seemingly have nothing? I think of the addicts I have met who taught me about true faith and the power of perseverance. Was that a goddess murmuring strength to me? I think of the unhoused, blind man who regularly stood outside of my seminary, brought coffee and treats from all who knew and grew to love him. He taught me the power of compassion and strength. Was that an angel whispering love into my unexpecting ears? I think of a rejected man in a hospital when I was a chaplain, named in the charts simply John Doe, whose hand I held each day, teaching me the power of quiet, consistent, compassionate love. Was that an offering of a spirit of life, the great, eternal mystery? These gifts are far greater than even the most extravagant monetary acquisitions – jewels or cars or yachts or exquisite vacations. These are cherished offerings of happiness and good fortune. Would I be who I am today without these hidden, unexpected lessons? No, I would not. Prepare a place at the table for the unwelcome and welcome them in

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<sup>5</sup> Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern, from *Setting a Place for Elijah*

– a god, a prince, a prophet. “They will bring you gifts beyond your wildest dreams.”<sup>6</sup> Offer a placemat – offer love.

Nun and theologian Joan D. Chittister offers us this: “Hospitality is simply love on the loose.”<sup>7</sup> Love in our homes, our neighborhoods, our states, our countries, our world! Rippling out one small act at a time until all of humanity is held in loving embrace. Let love run rampant, welcoming all to a table of spaghetti and marinara sauce. This, beloveds, is a wider welcome. What if we saw every being in the streets through the lens of love and beauty? Through a lens, not distorted by unsolicited, cultural norms of white, rich, cisgender beauty, but a raw, real, authentic beauty. Skin that is coal black. Bodies that have learned to navigate the world on wheels. Beloveds of any gender twirling on the sidewalk with skirts billowing up around them. Angels whispering notes of strength and love and perseverance and beauty in our ears. For this is to invite genuine beauty. You are beloved, and we would cherish your presence. We need one another, monks and rabbis and goddesses alike. Sorrow, loss, mourning, and lamentation, yes. A shoulder to cry on, a hug to catch a body falling to the ground. And, likewise, through joys and celebrations and all of life’s wonders! So may we never leave another blessed being alone – invite them in, unconditionally. Invite them in. You are beautiful, and you are beloved. Enter, Rejoice, and Come In.<sup>8</sup> You just might be the Messiah. Remember the invitation cards we referenced last week? May we slip a small note of love and compassion and an invitation to share joys and laments alike into the mailbox of every blessed being.

For, let us challenge ourselves with this idea - We are more alike than we are unlike. There are entirely unnecessary dichotomies that we have created which serve to divide rather than create any sort of benefit for society. Black and white, old and young, rich and poor, able-bodied and disabled. What of all the blessings we hold in common? We all desire to be loved. We all desire community. We all desire fun. We all desire a life that will be remembered after we have left

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<sup>6</sup> Rev. Amy Zucker Morgenstern, from *Setting a Place for Elijah*

<sup>7</sup> Joan D. Chittister from *Soul Matters Worship Archive: Invitation*

<sup>8</sup> #361 from *Singing the Living Tradition*

this realm./So, when we invite one another, any other, we invite a beloved, kindred soul. Think of this amidst layers of division and opposition and anger and strife. We are all kindred souls. So, let us strive for beautiful commonalities here, now, in this sacred and hallowed space, our sanctuary.

Together, may we welcome strangers into both the daily monotony and the most intimate moments of our lives. May we look for the Messiah among us, seeing the sacred in each other's eyes, hearing the holy in each other's words, and as such inviting one another into the shared depths of our hearts and souls. May we invite all to share our meals, meals of cabbage and onions and scallions with that empty seat, ready, each day, for the Messiah to arrive and be welcomed in. May we grow from another – may we see the beauty in another's eyes and hear the compassion in another's words and cherish this – finding another's strength and striving to embody this. For alone, we are lost. Together, we are found. In times of stark division, may we choose to invite love and curiosity and wonder and conviction instead of aversion and animosity and anger and hate. May we be on the lookout for those unexpected gifts, for hospitality is love on the loose. The Messiah is among us. May our lives be one continuous act of sacred, blessed, holy invitation.

May it be so, and amen.