

A Story of Courageous Hope

By Dana Peterson

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Good morning, everyone – those here present in our sanctuary, those who are attending virtually through our live stream, and those who will view the recording of this message later. I am happy to be here with you this morning, and I am also grateful to Sarah for inviting me to tell a story of “Courageous Hope.” In many ways this is a story about us and the possibility we embody together. It begins back at our annual meeting in January of 2019 – a time before COVID, if you can remember what that was like.

On January 26, 2019, I shared a story, “The Monk’s Story,” with the parish at our annual meeting. I read it from the book *The Art of Possibility*. Winnie Grace was inspired by “The Monk’s Story” (**Located at the end of this address**), and spoke to me later about *The Art of Possibility*. She ended up buying and reading the book. She subsequently talked to me at Coffee Hour a few weeks later about discussing the book with me. Little did I know that she had bigger plans to run a book study around this work. I told her that I would love to participate. I had no idea what that fateful, brief exchange would engender. As it turns out, it would be the first action taken towards “stepping into possibility” as a group of Trinitarians and sharing our passions and interests. Sometime in

May of 2019, Winnie spoke to me again at Coffee Hour and she seemed dejected, and she shared with me that her idea for sharing this book with others as a book study had not met with much support or approval. I told her that we could continue to think about it and pray for what might be.

Fast forward a month or so, when Winnie and I had another Coffee Hour conversation. Liam was preparing to leave on sabbatical, and the church was going to have to exercise greater lay leadership. I thought maybe her idea could be part of that leadership and suggested it to her. I proposed that we work together on the timing and the audience. She picked the Women of Trinity as the group to approach and the October meeting to raise the idea. She invited me to be a speaker at that meeting and to share my thoughts about the book. I did that, and the Women of Trinity decided to sponsor the book study as one of their ministries. They expanded the audience to anyone in the parish, and some people invited friends from outside to join. At first, I didn't realize that I was going to be the leader of this book study, but that is what ended up happening. What I had imagined was that I would be learning alongside others and perhaps co-facilitate the study. I'm still not quite sure how it happened, but Winnie can be a quiet, soft spoken persuasive presence. She works perhaps a

little bit like the way the Holy Spirit works to move us. She certainly moved me. We began in late October, and for the first few meetings (months) we had between 12 and 18 people participate.

We had only journeyed about 1/3 of the way through the 12 practices in the book (they are called practices for a reason – because they take work) when COVID struck and put a pause on our study. After about 3 or 4 months, once we had started using Zoom for interactive prayer services, Winnie, Wendy and I talked about resuming the book study virtually. I realized that we were growing together through this study and that we were actually living “The Monk’s Story” – we were growing together as a small community. As the facilitator, I began to realize that I was learning as much if not more than the other participants. They were having a transformative impact on me. The growth that I felt occurring was important because for the past three years I have been experiencing some challenges both professionally and personally. The *Art of Possibility* practices require courage and emphasize hope. I have been able to grow in both courage and hope through sharing and executing these practices. The linkage to spirituality, and what we are called to do, was empowering.

So, I want to thank everyone who participated in any way in this activity, but especially those who finished this book study with me. I am a better person because of their support. I would like to thank each of you individually for what I consider your distilled influence on me:

- Winnie - for your support and encouragement throughout the process along with your abundance of hope;
- Wendy - for your connections to personal insights and keeping us all going;
- Nanci - for your reflective spiritual connections along with a focus on having fun together;
- Sally - for your helping us/me to remember all of the little things we can do to be helpful and make a difference;
- Jim - for your pragmatic connections and intuitive insights into intentional growth and outreach;
- Kathy - for your focus on collective responsibility and being open to the changes we need to make.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge you, Sarah, for your courage, hope, enthusiasm and validation of the work this study group was undertaking together and inspiration to carry it forward.

We finished the book study and application of the 12 practices - that in itself was an act of Courageous Hope. Now, we are called to tell our story more fully as a parish and share it with the wider community. That will be another act of Courageous Hope.

By the way, if anyone really wants to know why I carry the banner up to Main Street, it is for those who inspired me to do so through this book study. Thank you.

Also, as “The Monk’s Story” suggests, look around, the Messiah is among us.

The Monks' Story

A monastery has fallen on hard times. It was once part of a great order which, as a result of religious persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, lost all its branches. It was decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the mother house: the Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly it was a dying order.

Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. One day, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. "I know how it is," he said, "the spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together, and they read parts of the Torah and spoke quietly of deep things.

The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. "It has been wonderful being with you," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming. Have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?" "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 other monks heard the Rabbi's words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. "The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Of course-it must be the Abbot, who has been our leader for so long. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is certainly a holy man. Or could he have meant Brother Elrod, who is so crotchety? But then Elrod is very wise. Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip-he's too passive. But then, magically, he's always there when you need him. Of course he didn't mean me – yet supposing he did? Oh Lord, not me. I couldn't mean that much to 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 of 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, People occasionally came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths, most of which led to the dilapidated chapel. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks, permeating the atmosphere. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Some of the younger men who came to visit began to engage in conversation with the monks. After a while, one asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years, the monastery became once again a thriving order, and-thanks to the Rabbi's gift-a vibrant, authentic community of light and love for the whole realm.