

2 Chronicles 29:15-19; John 21

Today's message is about tending. Have you ever thought about the question – What do you tend? Who do you tend to? That was what was happening in 2 Chronicles. Hezekiah brought forth the priests to tend to the Temple. It was after their exile in Babylon, and the Temple needed to be cleansed from while it was so long shut up; from dust, cobwebs, and the rust of the vessels.

Lydia Raschka – *A Corner in the City* – Christian Century – August 11, 2009

When we moved to New York, my husband picked a corner of the city to own. He picked The Soldiers and Sailors Monument, which has also become a hangout for vagrants and skateboarding teens. Broken bottles, crack vials and newspapers routinely settle into its nooks and crannies. Chris liked the monument's grand scale and its stunning views across the Hudson River. He'd sit on a stone wall and read or sketch. Every now and then he would leave the house with a broom and sweep up debris at the monument. He performed this civic act quietly and unnoticed. I was impressed. It would not have occurred to me take ownership of public space. A few years later we chose another corner of the city: Trinity Lutheran Church on the Upper West Side. The church was built by German immigrants, and it has grand old bones. But the nails are rusted, and water trickles down through the tower and rots the window frames, causing cracks in the walls. In the basement an old stage is a dumping ground for cast-offs of the church. Every year the stage is cleaned out, but it's soon cluttered again. For me, the stage represents the futility of some of our congregational efforts. Recently we had our semi-annual clean-up day. Treasurer Joy waxed the floor while council member Dan secured loose pews. Jennifer polished wooden seats; Brad vacuumed the corners and edges of the sanctuary. I mopped the floor and worried about larger structural problems – the widening rat holes in the back garden and the water-damaged walls.

When I think about these problems, I wonder why Chris and I chose this particular building. Why did we choose this church? Why organized religion at all? Yet, when I look around at what we have accomplished here at Trinity, I am amazed at the ministry that happens. Perhaps my husband became a caretaker of the monument, a public space, because his family collects trash when they hike in the woods. At first it seemed foolish to tackle the whole outdoors and to carry the extra weight home, but soon I eagerly embraced the ritual, as well. These little acts of faith can be habit forming. Our choice of a church home is similar: while we cannot predict the outcome of our actions, we act – not blindly, but in good faith. If we tend one corner responsibly, we may find that it has become the place we want to be because we have helped make it so. Perhaps it's the tending, and not the choosing, that's most important.

A four-year old girl demonstrated careful tending when she came to church on clean-up day with her father. He put a rag in her hand and she began to polish the altar. She worked on it for a very long time, and was so intent on her task that she barely looked up. When she was finished she had polished one tiny spot – but that one small section of the altar gleamed.

There's another story, perhaps familiar to some of you called *The Rabbi's Gift*. This is Scott Peck's spin, based on an old medieval tale.

There was an abbey that had once been the site of great learning and spiritual exploration. It was known far and wide for the gentle monks who lived there and worked together. Its gardens were beautiful and bountiful. The generous monks graciously provided produce to those who were hungry for food, and solace to those who were hungry in spirit.

But recently the abbey had fallen upon hard times. People from the village stopped visiting the brothers. The gardens didn't look as nice. Singing in the chapel services became most discordant. The monks rarely sought one another's company, and often at meals they snapped at one another.

Abbott Thomas didn't know what to make of the situation. No matter what he tried, the monks just got grumpier. Off in the deep woods surrounding the monastery, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the Rabbi was in his hermitage. "The Rabbi is in the woods, the Rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other.

As he agonized over the imminent demise of his order, it occurred to the Abbot to visit the hermitage and ask if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. He left early one morning and told the monks he'd be back in time for vespers. Rabbi Jacob was delighted to see his friend. It had been far too long. The two men visited over a hearty lunch and then Jacob asked, "What's wrong Thomas? I can sense something is troubling you. What is it?" Thomas, relieved by the invitation to the rabbi's counsel, told his friend all that had come to pass at the abbey. When he finally got to the part about the insults he'd overheard in the dining room, he was surprised to see an expression of puzzlement on his friend's face.

"I had expected to hear quite a different story," Jacob confessed. "I had it on good authority, that a magi (which is a person of great wisdom and understanding) had come to live in your abbey. I'd have thought things would be going quite differently for you. This is quite a mystery." The two men talked for a while more and then it was time for Thomas to head for home. All the while on his walk back, Thomas thought about what the rabbi had said. Jacob had it on good authority that a magi had come to live in the abbey? There might be a magi?! Could it be one of the monks? Which one? None of them seemed likely.

Over the next couple of days, Thomas called each of the brothers into his office. He told them about his conversation with Rabbi Jacob, and asked if they had any idea of who might be the magi. Of course they all honestly denied any awareness whatever. In no time at the entire abbey was abuzz. Who could the magi be? No one knew; it could be any of them. Some even suspected that they themselves might be the magi.

Things began to change overnight. One mustn't be rude to a magi, better to err on the side of graciousness even to a non-magi. Those that thought there was a possibility that they were the magi began to think that, not only should they extend their best friendliness to those around them, but they'd really ought to try to live up to the standards of a magi. Yes, things began to change around the abbey.

Once again the monks' singing became harmonious. So did their meals and their greetings. The flowers and the vegetables in the gardens even began to bloom and grow in greater abundance. The people in the village once again returned to the abbey seeking solace and sustenance.

One afternoon as the townspeople were heading out of the gate, Abbott Thomas heard one of them comment to another, "I don't know what happened here, but this place is filled with the greatest joy I have ever seen. And the brothers are the most loving people I have ever met." It was then that Abbott Thomas recognized the gift his old friend had given.

And 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 realm.

This is a story about tending – tending to one another. Joan England of the University of Michigan writes, "Community is a state of being together in which people lower their defenses, and learn to accept and rejoice in differences among people."

There is not only one magi among us here I suspect there are many. And we have the opportunity to know and to be known by those other magi. To tend, and to be tended by one another. There is not only one soul here who struggles to stay on the path of a meaningful life; there are many.

We need one another. And we not only need one another in a general sense, we need to be connected—specifically in deep ways that allow our spirits to be touched and held by others, and in ways that help us to reach outward and touch and hold the spirits of others lovingly and caringly. We have Magi among us. And if we are wise enough, deep enough to explore that possibility on an intimate level among ourselves, like Abbot Thomas, we too might overhear visitors saying of us, "*I don't know what happened here, but this place is filled with the greatest joy I have ever seen... and the most loving people I have ever met.*" Our task is the age-old religious task: To love the Holy and to love one another with in it.