**Chapter 2: Qualities of the Abbot**

January 12, May 13, September 12

*The abbot should avoid all favouritism in the monastery. They are not to love one more than another unless they find someone better in good works and obedience. A man born free is not to be given higher rank than a slave who becomes a monk, except for some other good reason. But abbot is free, if they see fit, to change anyone’s rank as justice demands. Ordinarily, everyone is to keep their regular place, because “whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ” (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 6:8) and share alike in bearing arms in service of the one Lord, for “God shows no partiality among persons” (Rom. 2:11). Only in this are we distinguished in his sight: if we are found better than others in good works and in humility. Therefore, the abbot is to show equal love to everyone and apply the same discipline to all according to their merits.*

Humility asks that we be assured enough in ourselves. However, it is easy to demand what we do not have now, desiring the fulfilment of a lack that we feel life has dealt us. The rule teaches us that becoming one in Christ together requires the conversion of this kind of desire. This desire has many forms. The Desert Mothers and Fathers called them passions. Be it ambition, anger, jealousy, possessiveness, self-loathing, isolation from others, fusion with others – whatever it might be that originates from a deeply held sense of loss and woundedness.

We cannot grow in true obedience unless we are also growing in authentic humility. Humility is grounded in the assuredness that comes from being a beloved daughter or son of God, from knowing beyond knowledge that we are loved. We just know. This assuredness tempers desire. Community practice, be it meditation or a shared meal, is meant to humble and preserve in us our own beloved divine identity – as given by God.

Obedience here in the rule means deciding to commit to the good works of the community. It is the giving of our lives and daily energy to something larger than just ourselves. Ordinary and everyday ways are a good start and a good end: cleaning the sink, checking the mailbox, pulling some weeds, cooking, noticing the struggles of another, whatever needs to be done. Humility grows in the deeds done each day and together. It is also in the daily that the wise in God see our giftedness, help us name it and develop it.

It is tempting to have favourites on this journey. Indeed, many of us do. The abbot, however, because of their position, cannot be seen to. To do so would risk feeding passions. For example, if I am ambitious and out to impress as a way of justifying myself to others, how might I perceive the abbot’s favouritism towards someone else? Love is attention and encouragement given to all. Favouritism is to attend to and encourage some and not others.

The abbot is called to express a wise and discerning love for the whole of the community. If one member is responsive and stable enough in the everyday life of the community, then there is the opportunity for growth. If another member is still struggling with what they feel they can and cannot do, then still there is the opportunity for growth. A wise and loving leader loves both in the ways needed; they do not encourage one and not the other. Their loving is equitable so that all may be equal.

The abbot wisely balances, for enough of the time, their own passions, and the passions of others, so that the consistency of their loving attention contributes to the communal schooling of love in all. If this balancing is to happen, the abbot needs to be experienced in the ways that desire becomes assured. The abbot can lead because Divinity has changed them to the point where their inner reactivity has diminished causing the otherness of practical loving to claim them.

Who among you is wise or understanding? Such a person should, from a good life, give evidence of deeds done in the gentleness of wisdom. But if at heart you have bitter jealousy and rivalry, do not be boastful and false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes from above, but earthly, human and devilish. Wherever there is jealousy and rivalry, there is also disharmony and wickedness of every kind; whereas the wisdom that comes from above is first pure, then peaceable, kindly and considerate, full of mercy and good fruits; free from partiality and hypocrisy. The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:13-18, RNJB)