



Sunday Sermon  
November 16, 2025  
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

**Feast of St. Hilda**

Ephesian 4: 1-6  
Matthew 19:27-30

*Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you.*  
**AMEN.**

Let me say at the beginning that it is a privilege to begin today as your rector. To be sure, there is always anxiety in moments like these. You may wonder, did the search team do okay? Is this person going to love us? And on my end, will I measure up? Will they love me? But slipping beyond these fears, we might see God's invitation to joyful wonder—a holy bidding to discern how we might be evermore the Beloved Community on the Sunshine Coast in these days.

And how wonderful that this new beginning is on Feast of our patron, Hilda of Whitby. Almost everything we know about Hilda comes from the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and there is a wonderful presentation of her story in the bulletin. Hilda lived in the tumultuous 7<sup>th</sup> Century, an age that makes our times look tame. The daughter of royalty, whose father was poisoned, raised in household of King Edwin of Northumbria, she was baptized with the King, Queen and royal household in a small wooden church near where York Minster now stands. Exiled for a time after King Edwin's death in battle, she returned to Northumbria as a monastic first at Hartlepool Abbey and then as founding abbess of Whitby.

As was common in the Celtic tradition, Hilda served in monasteries with men and women together. Members shared small houses with two to three people. She was responsible for pastoral leadership of the monastery, but she also administered substantial land and livestock as a part of her stewardship of the Whitby community attending to care workers and the well-

being of the community. She was remembered for her administration, care, wisdom, and teaching—and kings sought her counsel.

It was at Whitby in 664 that King Oswiu gathered a synod to deal with quite a thorny dispute, whether to observe the Celtic or Roman date for Easter. Hilda, a daughter of the Celtic branch of the Church, accepted the decision of the Synod to observe the Roman date—a gentle peacemaker in a tense time.

A teacher, peace maker, reconciler: We are heirs to Hilda, a wise, caring mother, who strived to build a community of holiness, not separated from the world but engaged with the world that Jesus so loved. And like mothering Jesus, Hilda was about gathering and unity. Words from today's epistle seem both an apt description of St. Hilda and attributes to which we may aspire, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

However, in our brief gospel, we do not find a scene of peace but one of consternation. We need some context to understand why Peter is so beside himself. If we rewind the tape just a few verses, we find Jesus encountering a man asking him what he must do to enter into eternal life. Jesus reminds him of the commandments to be obeyed. I've checked all those boxes says the man. Then Jesus invites him to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor and follow him. The man goes away grieving. The astonished disciples wonder who can be saved, and Jesus responds, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

This is what prompts Peter's exasperated complaint: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" We can almost feel Peter's frustration...really? Maybe, he and the others are wondering if they have taken the wrong path, betted on the wrong horse.

Peter's stumbles where we too often stumble, trying to make Jesus fit our world rather than letting Jesus' words and way change us. Jesus says to Peter, and to us, that God's way is not about wealth or rank and order, it is about God's gift of life and love. Jesus turns the world, well, right side up. His relentless desire is for us to have life and have it abundantly. And the path to that life is not the way of the world through fighting, taking and enriching; it is through humility, bearing with one another in love. That is the mission of the beloved community, that all will be one. In Whitby of once upon a time, in this community in this time and place, we being made new to sow love, "with open doors, open minds, open hearts."

Those words, your words of openness and invitation drew me here. They resonate. I love your heart and hope. And as I contemplated Hilda and Jesus' call to us to worry not about who is first and last, I felt drawn to share a story that has long been at the center of my own faith journey. It comes from the late Scott Peck and is entitled "The Rabbi's Gift."

*Once upon a time a great monastic order had fallen on hard times. As a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution and the rise of secularism, all its branch houses were lost and only five monks were left in the decaying mother house: Abbott and four others, all over 70 in age. It was a dying order.*

*In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a Hermitage. Through years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could sense when the rabbi was in his Hermitage. "The Rabbi is in the woods, the Rabbi is in the woods once again," they would whisper to each other.*

*As he agonized over the imminent death of the order, it occurred to the Abbott to visit the Hermitage and ask the Rabbi for advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbott. When the Abbott explained the purpose of his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he explained. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old Abbott and the old Rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the Abbott had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the Abbott said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?" "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 Abbott return to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "well, what did the Rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," The Abbott answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving - it was something cryptic - was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant. "*

*In the days that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered about any possible significance to the Rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the Abbott? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbott. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant brother Thomas. Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.*

*He could not have meant brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the Rabbi did mean brother Elred. Surely not brother Philip. Philip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Philip is the Messiah. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? Oh God, not me. I couldn't be that much for 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 among 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, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends. It happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more with the old monks. After a while one would ask if he could join them, then another, and another. Within a few years the monastery once again became a thriving order and, thanks to the Rabbi's gift, a vibrant centre of light and spirituality in the realm.(1)*

St. Hilda's last words were "Keep the peace of the gospel with one another and indeed with the entire world." Situated by the sea, a place of beauty that slips through these windows with magical light, I wonder if we might keep peace with each other and the world by receiving the rabbi's gift, "bearing with one another in love" and treating all with extraordinary respect—indeed with open doors, open minds, and open hearts. Might we become a vibrant centre of light and spirituality in the realm?

(1)Adapted from M. Scott Peck, M.D., *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, (Simon and Schuster, 1978). With gratitude to my mentor, the Rev. William S. Wade, who used this story in a chapel sermon at St. Andrew's-Sewanee School, where he was Head of School for 27 years.