

Meditation

Matthew 25:1-13

November 9, 2008; Tim Devine

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We have experienced a week – even with local rain and flooding and worldwide financial insecurity – that has been historic in a positive way. No matter what any of us might think about the political elections, the length of the process, the millions of dollars spent on advertising, or the issues and candidates themselves, we have moved through a doorway that cannot be closed. And with that reality, people of color and African-American people in particular, now may have a personal vision of themselves as possible and appropriate at the highest level of leadership in this country. That is cause for celebration. And as we do so, we also long for that day when whatever word that precedes the hyphenated-American category will no longer matter.

So, with this cultural context it may seem odd to have such a strange and minor story as our “ten bridesmaids” Biblical reading for this day, as well as one that sounds limiting rather than grand. But at St. Paul's we generally follow the common lectionary, and this was the passage chosen for this day. The lectionary is an ordered system of Bible readings that are chosen by an international ecumenical group for those of us who choose to use them. These are on three year cycles and probably about two thirds of mainline Protestant churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church use this resource.

Many clergy gather on a weekly basis to read the upcoming scripture passages together and to discuss them. I participate in a group of United Church of Christ clergy including a spiritual director and pastors from Broadview, Keystone, Prospect, and Richmond Beach UCC churches and the downtown Church of Mary Magdalene for homeless women.

And “an ordered system of Bible readings” has been a part of “organized religion” for a long time. When Jesus made his public debut in the town of Nazareth we are told in the Gospel of Luke that he stood up to read the lesson and was handed a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. That would have been the “lectionary reading” for that day in that time.

So, we look at the reading attempting to take ourselves out of today's context long enough to begin to see how this was originally heard, and then to hear it in hopefully new ways that may be helpful for today.

In these later chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, as Jesus draws closer to the end of his earthly life, he speaks at length of “the end times.” His disciples have started it all off by asking him, at the beginning of the previous chapter, for something that sounds like insider information. They want to know when are all these things that he is talking about are going to happen, and how will they know when they're about to happen? Not unlike today, they sense that they are close to power and they want whatever benefits there are that may accompany that reality.

Today's reading of the ten bridesmaids is one of several parables that all respond to the phrase "the kingdom of heaven will be like..." Just before this story Jesus has spoken about a master's unexpected return that catches his unfaithful servant off guard, who thought he had plenty of time to misbehave and to take advantage of his temporary power. Today's parable follows the harsh warning about the fate of that unfaithful, unprepared, and surprised servant.

Most commentaries on this text provide some background on marriage customs in the first century. Scholars tell us that getting married took both time and effort. There were actually two stages: first, the agreement, not between the bride and groom but between their families; and second, the actual fetching of the bride by the groom for the wedding ceremony, followed by a celebration that went on for days. I have experienced such weddings in traditional Palestinian Middle-Eastern culture in Ramallah and Bethlehem. And, in a traditional society, the wedding celebrations are one of the few places where unmarried men and women can actually talk and dance and even flirt together. I think that the opportunity to party and to flirt was probably more important to the "foolish" women than the actual job of watching for the bridegroom.

But these parables are allegories and not to be taken literally word for word. The bridegroom is symbolic of the return of Christ into the world. Some are ready – the "wise" five – and some are not. There was quite a bit of anxiety at the time because there was a common belief in a literal second coming and it hadn't happened. That is part of what the "insider information" requests from the disciples were all about.

And this has been a part of our human experience ever since. Today the "Left Behind" series of popular novels evokes this feeling and yearning. In the history of the United States, the Millerites were one of the most intriguing examples of this desire. In short, these folk were followers of William Miller who believed in these end times. But in this particular belief system they went so far as to set a date – April 18, 1844. When this day came and went without anything happening there was much confusion. But, yielding to popular pressure, a second date was confirmed – October 22, 1844. This time there was more at stake and especially in parts of New England and upstate New York, people sold their goods and climbed to the tops of local hills to be closer to Jesus when this event would happen. When nothing happened for a second time the movement did not survive. It is, however, a root of history and belief in two streams of faith that have evolved to become the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses.

For me, setting an actual date for the Second Coming is much like reading an ancient parable and then trying to interpret it literally in the present day. It is more helpful, I believe, to look at context and themes and deeper messages.

And we also need to take note of what surprises us, or what may make us feel uncomfortable. We may be surprised to hear that five of the bridesmaids refused to share what they had, a note that seems to clash with the rest of Jesus' teachings about generosity. (And, remembering that this is an allegory – dealers of oil would not have been open at midnight and five unaccompanied bridesmaids would not have gone out beyond their village at that time.)

But on a second look and letting go of literalism, the story isn't about generosity or sharing, it is about being prepared.

The disciples want inside information and to feel important. Jesus instead offers them preparation and insight in the coming unprecedented events.

The five foolish bridesmaids aren't able to pay attention and then let their lamps go out. The wise bridesmaids are an early version of "tough love" when they say no. Suffering the consequences of behavior and decisions is not what we may want, but it might be what we may need. We don't often learn from being rescued, but more often from our mistakes.

"Keep awake." Jesus tells those first listeners to this parable. "Pay attention" is what I hear in today's contemporary context.

The virtues that are rewarded in this text – patience, prudence, wisdom – are not the things that are richly rewarded in our wider culture. But, like much in our faith, we are called to be counter-cultural. We are called to love both God and our neighbor. We are not told to "only look out for number one."

Loving our neighbor may lead to deeper compassion and a firm commitment to justice, to making this a different and better world for all of God's children. And this kind of living is not passively sitting around and waiting. It is active and fully engaged in the present moment. It is trusting in a future that is in God's hands, even if the timing of that future is unknown to us.

We can carry many things from this story.

Step outside of your own experience. Ask your questions, but be open to answers that may confuse more than confirm. Pay attention. Judge less. Love more.

The African-American spiritual "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning" comes from this scripture text. It is thought to have been code for slaves keeping a lookout for a conductor for the underground railroad.

In that spirit may we hear Jesus who tells all of us "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Amen.

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”