

Proper 27A – November 12, 2023 - Amos 5:18-24); Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20);
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13 The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Keeping Oil in Our Lamps

As we start to wind up the Christian liturgical year and head toward the season of Advent in just three weeks, we are given readings today which commend watchfulness and preparedness, as God comes to us, not just at some final and far-off time, but in our day, in moments of truth, of encounter, of challenge.

Advent, of course, is a season of expectation, full of hints of Christ's coming, as we are reminded of the necessity of being ready for God's breaking into the world and into our hearts, and watching for God's visitation. But, this gospel parable we hear today is a necessary corollary to all the watchfulness called for in Advent.

To be sure, we ought to be on the watch lest Christ's coming, like a thief in the night, catches us unawares. But we will miss any coming, any visitation, any assurance of his presence, (any heavenly banquet,) if we are not first prepared for the delay, for his absence. The ones in this parable were ready for a "coming," but were unprepared for a delay, and their unpreparedness had consequences. Today we hear a message that says, "Keep awake and tend to that which will prepare you to receive and be received by God, lest you be left outside as a result of your own negligence."

The Church as a whole has not been all that good at attentive preparation. In fact, looking over time, part of what could be called the "treason" of the church through the centuries was to settle in and settle for, to wait contentedly and complacently for something and someone in whom they hoped and prepared for less and less; and to organize 'correct' doctrines and self-assured institutions and rituals so as to wait as comfortably as possible; and finally, to no longer expect or prepare for anything at all, but to settle in for business as usual. Although it's a rather sweeping and somewhat cynical generalization, another way of putting this, as some have, is that "in the beginning the Church was a fellowship of men and women centered on the living Christ. But then the Church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved into [the rest of] Europe, where it became a culture and a government. And finally, it moved to America, where it became an enterprise."ⁱ Yet, I might add, now that it is in Africa, Asia and Latin America, in a number of ways it is becoming centered again on the Living Christ.

Now, how do we deal with delays in our lives—whether it's delays on the highway or in airports, delays in medical treatments, or in court cases...or in determining the results of elections, what have you? We have choices each time. We can become frustrated, embittered, cynical and resigned to the point of apathy - or rage, and let these responses burn out our supply of oil, as it were, as with half the bridesmaids in this gospel parable. Or, we can be prepared in hope, believing and acting in spite of the evidence to the contrary, and then watching the evidence change. We can keep oil in our lamps to guide us, though prayer that sustains us, the sacraments that nourish us, the faith community that shoulders us, and the life-giving Spirit of Jesus which animates and empowers us.ⁱⁱ

Now, it is certainly more interesting to argue with this parable than to go along with it. After all, why are the five wise bridesmaids so stingy and unimaginative? Why couldn't each of them have taken one of the foolish bridesmaids by the hand and lead her through the dark so that all of them arrived safely at the banquet? Jesus obviously is not so interested in solutions like this, at least in this particular parable. He does not want half of us unprepared and unawares, depending on the preparedness and attentiveness of the other half. He wants all of us alert, all of us prepared. I'll come back to that. For now it needs to be said that while this parable has an ominous, threatening sound, there is a promise inside of it—for we all have been invited to a wedding feast, a party! As the author Robert Farrar Capon put it, "God is not our mother-in-law, coming to see whether her wedding-present china has been chipped. [Rather, God is the] funny Old Uncle with a salami under one arm and a bottle of wine under the other. We do indeed need to watch for him; but only because it would be such a pity to miss all the fun."ⁱⁱⁱ

In this 100th Anniversary of the Church of St. Andrew in the year ahead, as we did last Sunday we call on the "cloud of witnesses," and connect with the communion of saints and "all the company of heaven,"—all our faithful and sometimes not-so-faithful departed forefathers and foremothers, as well as all those here or near who are still with us, *and* all those whom we have loved and lost and see no longer—and even those we never knew well or never even heard of, but upon whose shoulders we somehow stand. This connection with all those living and departed is real and powerful. This awareness of being part of the wider "communion of saints" makes our hearts that much wider and stronger.^{iv} For the love with which we love is not just our own individual capacity to love; it is also the love of Jesus and all these forebears living in us. When the Spirit of Jesus lives in our hearts, all who have lived their lives in that Spirit live there, too. Our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, our teachers and their teachers, our spiritual guides and their spiritual guides, our positive and even our less than positive role models—and all the seekers and disciples who have graced this church and who deepened their own lives and the lives of others by being here—they are all part of our hearts, part of who we are. They inspire us, guide us, encourage us, warn us, and give us hope; and we can call on this eternal *cheering section* urging us onward. Life in a parish family was meaningful for our earliest parishioners a century ago—and even before that, in the heart of Mr. Wyman and his bequest, and in the early apostles of this parish who planted seeds that one day would grow—and throughout the years in each generation in the hearts of those who have joined Christ's mission of repairing the world, and who gave and still give of their time, talents and treasure; and now, here, as you head into your second century of life and work. I believe a meditative prayer familiar to many of you, and found in our leaflet today, sums up well the work of multiple generations of this parish. Let us turn to the last page in the Order of Service to this meditation from the late Archbishop of El Salvador, Oscar Romero, and let us pray this in unison:

It helps, now and then,
to step back and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime
only fractions of the magnificent enterprise
that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete,
 which is another way of saying that
 the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
 No statement says all that could be said.
 No prayer fully expresses our faith.
 No confession brings perfection.
 No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
 No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
 No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
 That is what we are all about.
 We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
 We water the seeds already planted,
 knowing that they hold future promise.
 We lay foundations that will need further development.
 We provide yeast that produces effects
 far beyond our capabilities.
 We cannot do everything,
 and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
 This enables us to do something, and to do it well.
 It may be incomplete,
 but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
 an opportunity for the Lord's grace
 to enter and do the rest.
 We may never see the end result,
 but that is the difference
 between the master builder and the worker.
 We are workers, not master builders,
 ministers, not messiahs.
 We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.

Now, having said what I said about our spiritual ancestors in this parish, again getting back to this gospel parable, we are told that the inescapable reality of our lives and our respective spiritual journeys is that nobody can be prepared *for* you. Although there is the temptation to look upon the prepared bridesmaids in the story as selfish and insensitive—after all, why couldn't they have shared some of their lamp oil or the light of their lamps with the others? Nonetheless, to ask someone else from the past, or the present, to do what only you yourself can do, will not work. Spiritual oil, as it were, is not interchangeable. Just as a student who has not studied for an exam cannot have another student take it for him or her, none of us can borrow preparedness for God or relationship with God from another; nor can we just rely on whatever goodness or openness or compassion someone else has expressed or can express on our behalf, even though they can be of support. Sure—at times, if you can't shine your own light, as it were, stand next to the light of another and receive the encouragement of their faith. But again, having said that, life's journey does not provide us with a stunt man or woman, or some double to stand in for us. Being a part of a supportive family and a nurturing community of faith is helpful and meaningful, but the oil we carry is our own relationship with God—ultimately you and I cannot

borrow that relationship. Each of us must ultimately find it in ourselves, not just through the faith of others or through hearsay, but in our own experience—and not just later, but here and now.^v

So, keep awake; seek for God's coming into your life; and be prepared during the seeming delay. That is the message of this parable. And what is the content of the preparedness? What is the spiritual oil we are to carry with us? If we want our lamps to be lit by holy fire ready to meet Christ in all circumstances of our lives, we need to have them filled and ready, stoked with prayer and Scripture, Sabbath time and worship; wick'd with hope and courage, and in the giving and receiving of compassionate love and in the doing of justice. Again, Jesus makes his point that our lives are consequential, that our relationship with God is not a matter of having or borrowing someone else's faith—nor even so much a matter of “having” our own faith—as it is more a matter of *doing* faith; and where we do not do our faith, there are consequences, for others as much as for us. In fact, the primary way we are to be prepared is not so much through offerings to God of our church services, nor our celebrations of our hallowed traditions.^{vi} What God wants from us by way of preparation is simple, but not easy: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God,” says the prophet Micah.^{vii} Keeping oil in our lamps is more a function of the doing of kindness and of justice than religious practice or piety.

And finally, although our passages call forth our personal and social responsibility; they also point to the Grace of God that underlies it all. The Gospel—the Good News—is that God can and will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. None of us is ever fully prepared, and no one is ever “running on full” when it comes to the spiritual life. In the end, we are saved by Grace, not by how much oil we've been able to keep in our lamp. God is at work in our world and in our lives whether we recognize it or not. The good news is that the bridegroom comes not just once but over and over again, opening wide the banquet door to see if we are ready to receive and be received into his fuller presence, into his feast of joy. And in fact, God is “not only the feast, but the way to it,” as George Herbert put it.^{viii} So, whether we are wise or foolish, whether Christ comes fully tomorrow or not for another two millennia, we, along with the cloud of witnesses who have come before us here have all been made one, and continue to be made one with God by God's unconditional and unending love. Amen.

ⁱ Quote from Richard C. Halverson, in a speech before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1984. An earlier version of this was written by Leonard Ravenhill.

ⁱⁱ Listen to one observer, who writes about the importance of guiding lights:

“Circumscribing the illumination of darkness, [the] lamp has been associated with consciousness and its capacity to sustain the flame of life, hope, freedom, creativity and the sacred and divine. Perpetually lighted lamps in a temple, mosque, synagogue or church are a sign of divine presence suffusing the ordinary world. The Paschal candle of western Christianity is ritually lit each year at Easter from the ‘new fire,’ and represents the light of Christ. Eternal flames at gravesites suggest the continuity of life—death and resurrection... With the progression a century ago from the oil lamp to the electric, to footlights, headlights, stadium lights, we have tended to identify with the great genii of the lamp, as if we owned the night and had the freedom to light up the darkness any way we want [in fact, could we, in our day, have even located the guiding light of the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem, given all our modern light ‘pollution?'] But...[some of our guiding lights can still evoke] subtler illumination in accord with nature—psyche's luminosity, for example—the dawning of an idea; the moment of clarity; [the way to the ‘Light of the world’—‘this little light of mine; I'm goin' to let it shine.’]” (Quoted in “Lamp/Candle” in The Archive for

Research in Archetypal Symbolism, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 580).

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, The Parables of Judgment (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 166.

^{iv} See also Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. Nov. 13-14

^v As the Zen poet Basho stated, “Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. [Rather] Seek what they sought.”

^{vi} An incident that took place in England some years ago involved Mark Gibbs who wrote an interesting book entitled God’s Frozen People. Gibbs was traveling through a number of ancient cathedral towns, and in one location he stopped at an old parish church and was met by the vicar who gave him a tour. At the end of the tour—and having described the parish’s life—the vicar rather proudly stated, “What we have here is 500 years of tradition,” whereby Mark Gibbs couldn’t resist as he untactfully replied, “I don’t think so. What you have here is one year of tradition, and you’ve repeated it 500 times!” He made a point and that reminds me of the light bulb joke: How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Change! Change? My grandfather gave that light bulb! Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that tradition and well established ways of doing things are wrong or bad. In fact, often the opposite is true. What I am saying is that it is how we approach our tradition and familiar ways of being a church in either dynamic or static ways, that determines how positive or negative it can be for us now as a community in transition, and in the future. The seven last words of the Church are “We have always done it this way,” as an old adage goes. Or as Jaroslav Pelikan put it, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (Jaroslav Pelikan “The Vindication of Tradition: 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities”). Jesus, who leads us into all sorts of new situations and challenges, new wanderings and adventures, is the one to whom the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of as “the same yesterday and today and forever. [13:8]” Jesus who was and is and is to come is our dynamic tradition—old but also new, changeless but ever changing.

^{vii} Micah 6:8

^{viii} George Herbert, A Priest to the Temple; or the Country Parson (1652): Ch. XXII.