

Sermon for Sunday 12 November 2023

[Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25](#)

[Psalms 78:1-7](#)

[1 Thessalonians 4:13-18](#)

[Matthew 25:1-13](#)

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer. Amen

Once again, our gospel text contains a rather confusing parable, this one about a group of bridesmaids who fell asleep waiting for the groom to show up for the wedding. Half had come prepared, bringing with them oil for their lamps so that they could make their way to the banquet hall, when the tardy groom arrived after dark. The other half were not ready, having no oil for their lamps so that, when the groom arrived, they were left, quite literally, in the dark, unable to see the way and, ultimately, ended up outside the banquet halls, locked out of the feast. It ends with the exhortation, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

I remember a sermon on this passage from my youth, a sermon we referred to as the Boy Scout Sermon, which the pastor entitled, “Be Prepared.” The message focused on death, and what would, in his view, happen after. He noted that we could not know the date and time of our deaths—we could be hit by a bus at any moment (an interesting example, since we lived in the country with no public transportation, so we weren’t really sure where the bus would come from, but still, we could be squashed at any minute)—so we needed to make sure that we were continually up to date with our prayers of forgiveness, that we had done nothing sinful that had not been confessed, so that when that moment of death happened, we would be let into the heavenly banquet hall, not left outside in the dark, cut off from God.

Now, even at that fairly early age, I knew that I was not perfect, that despite my efforts to be good, to follow God’s teaching, I still was not always patient with my sister or joyfully obedient to my parents. I could be resentful and stubborn at times, in other words, a fairly typical child. And so, for period of time after this sermon, I lived in a minor state of anxiety. I had bad dreams, nightmares, where I was one of the foolish bridesmaids, running around town knocking on doors in the dark, trying to find some oil. Or pounding frantically on the locked door of the church, trying to get in. I’d wake up abruptly, all hot and bothered, trying to remember what unconfessed sin I was carrying with me. Anxious, afraid that I would die unexpectedly, cut off from God.

This interpretation of the parable is actually fairly common. I found numerous variations of it in my studies this week. And, as is often the case, we don’t have Jesus’ explanation of just what he was getting at with this message. But I am convinced of one thing—Jesus, who spent his time as a healer, as a teacher of truth, as a bringer of light—this Jesus does not want us to live in fear. This Jesus declared, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even if they die, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-16) So there must be some other

meaning, so other truth, that we can extract from this confusing story. Let's explore a bit together.

Like many other parables, this one begins with the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven will be like this." This often leads to discussions of the end times, or references to an afterlife, where those who are in good standing with God at the time of their deaths get to go to that wonderful place with a heavenly banquet, and many mansions prepared for us. And we don't want to think about what happens to the others—but it's clearly not good.

However, that is not the only way in which the term, the kingdom of heaven, is used in the New Testament. In fact, in a conversation with the Pharisees, recorded in Luke, Jesus tells them that the kingdom of God is among you. (Luke 17:21) Some experts see this, not as a reference to a heavenly afterlife, but as a reference to the way the world should be, the way the world could be, if we followed God's teaching. The way God wants the world to be, for us and those around us, to live fulfilled, purposeful lives.

So, what could this parable mean if we look at it, not as a commentary on the afterlife, but for insights on how to live in the here and now? First, there is a communal celebration, a wedding banquet, a time of festivity as we rejoice in the creation of family. It's easy to get lost in the negative and lose track of the fact that this is a story about a celebration. And Jesus seems to be telling us that we can, in fact, make it inside to participate in the party.

Yet, weddings don't just happen. As anyone who has prepared a wedding celebration can attest, they are a lot of work. Decisions on dates, locations, guest lists, food, flowers, the list goes on. To carry out a welcoming wedding, the couple must put in quite a bit of effort. And the guests also must do their part to make the event a success.

Similarly, in order for God's kingdom to come on earth, in order for us to live as God intended, for us to experience that generous communal feast, takes preparation on our part. It does take effort. It does take work.

The good news is that we already know what is required of us. Love God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Love justice. Show mercy. Walk with God. Walk with God.

And put aside our fear—our fear of failing, our fear of inadequacy, our fears which prevent us from living life in the joyous manner God intends for us. When I was completing my training, working as a hospital chaplain at PeaceHealth, I once shared with my training group that there were times when I felt inadequate, when I did not have the right words, in the face of the enormity of what some of these patients were facing, the pain, the suffering, the loss. And one of the more experienced chaplains said to me, "You are enough, because God is enough." You are enough, because God is enough.

God does not ask of us more than we are able to do. God wants us to live in this kingdom, to partake in the feast. And yes, it does require effort on our part, it does require persistence and thoughtfulness and faith, but it is not impossible.

I'd like to close with an idea from Sister Joan Chittister that we are exploring in the Women's Spirituality Group. In her writings (*For Everything a Season*), Sister Joan asserts that our time is now. We are each born into the time in which we are meant to be, and we are called upon to act in this place, in this time. We don't need to be overcome with worries, with fears, about tomorrow, about all the possible things that may go wrong. Rather we are to live each day according to God's commandments, showing love toward ourselves and toward others. And in that, we can rest assured that we will be invited into the banquet hall. We are enough, because God is enough.

Amen.