

IT'S ONLY A STORY... (PART 1)  
 WHO (OR WHAT) ARE YOU  
 (REALLY) WAITING FOR?

Holy God, whose fire of love never goes out: free us from the fear of scarcity that keeps us out of love's own feast; renew our trust in your abundance which knows no death and keeps no count; through Jesus Christ, the oil of gladness.

*A Collect for Proper 27A, Prayers for An Inclusive Church*

THE 23<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Wisdom 6:12-16; Psalm 34:1-10, 22; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

NOVEMBER 12, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

THE REV. RANDALL C.K. DAY, D.MIN., PRIEST AND RECTOR

THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 25:1-13

Jesus said, "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."

In a recent daily meditation, Fr. Richard Rohr writes: "In the end, however, the object and goal of all spirituality is finally the same for all genders [all people]: union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world."

Focus a bit on each of these elements of our spiritual quest: **union,**

**divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world...**

The presence of Jesus Christ in the world, in his ancient and present embodiment (in us/people everywhere), in friendship, teaching, prayer, action are all to this end of drawing us into union with God, the sacred, to express and to engage us in

the divine love, to draw our hearts, minds, souls into vibrant life and fullness, and to bring us into participation in the world in service....

To remind us of the sacred nature of time, and maybe to call into question the ways in which we typically understand time, the church maintains a separate calendar that is slightly askew of the Gregorian calendar that is the standard for the civil calendar. In the church year, we are arriving at the end of the year. The first Sunday of the new year is always the first Sunday of Advent, this year on December 3<sup>rd</sup>.

These final three Sundays of the church year we have big parables in front of us, like the one about the bridesmaids we have just heard. These teaching stories that Jesus frequently used are, in fact, *stories*, so when they accost us by violating our sensibilities, when we are outraged and appalled, they are doing their job. For us to do *our* job, we have to engage them both for what they are as stories, and also to delve into them, to bring our imagination, to have a conversation with them, to recognize that our spiritual quest is not an act of rigid conformity to prescriptive pronouncements of a “founder,” from long ago, but is, instead, a living, changing, adapting revelation that is ongoing. Jesus taught 2000 years ago, Jesus teaches today. Revelation was not once and done, revelation continues, broadens, evolves, includes....

How can this story disrupt us in such a way as to further open our path to union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service

to the neighbor and the world?

This story about these bridesmaids was an ancient custom that was a forerunner of what we often see in a procession in a modern wedding. In the ancient custom, when communication and transportation were very different, this waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom for a procession to what was often a multi-day feast was a chore in itself – and that is what is described in this story.

The bridesmaids get ready to go greet the bridegroom but the story divides them into two groups, the foolish and the wise. The wise had taken extra oil for their lamps and didn’t share it with the foolish ones who ran to the store for more oil. While they were gone, the procession went into the banquet hall, the door was closed, and when they arrived, they weren’t let in. They weren’t even acknowledged as friends.

So if Jesus is telling this story to say something about God and about how God treats people, it is outrageous – and may cause us to rethink how we view God – or it may cause us to rethink how we view our lives. If Jesus told this story to bust through complacency... complacency that is the same in every era... when, like all ten of the bridesmaids, we fall asleep on the job while supposedly going about the task of living, then it has our attention.

Matthew includes this story in his gospel, his account of the life of Jesus, because early Christians thought that Jesus came at the end of the world and that the resurrected Jesus would quickly return to earth after the

ascension, after his bodily disappearance from the world, and take them away.

Matthew is writing decades later and folks are getting tired of waiting for the outcome they had gotten into their heads. They were *beyond* ready to be removed from the world, to be taken away from the suffering they were experiencing, from the suffering of the world – that is like the suffering we know in the same world today. They wanted out. We may want out. (Definitely some days we do.)

So we get this story about waiting... and if *they* were impatient after five or six decades, how impatient are *we* after more than two millennia?

So here are some questions:

- What about the dualistic design of the story, the foolish and the wise? Yes, this is how we often think and speak, dividing the world into two camps, the good/the bad, what we think/what we reject, what I want/*not* what I want. But what do we miss in the process? Do we overlook that sometimes we remember the extra oil and sometimes we forget it? Do we forget that sometimes we share, sometimes others share with us?
- *All* of the bridesmaids fell asleep. How do we or people we know zone out on life? What happens, what do we miss, what escapes us, what flows past us?
- While the bridesmaids were waiting, it seems like the bridegroom could have passed by time and again but they were only looking for one image of the

bridegroom, what *they* had in mind. What if what we're waiting for looks different than what we thought? Do you recognize me *now*?

- What if one of those bridesmaids is still out there waiting, the 2000 year-old bridesmaid....?
- What if the five wise bridesmaids went into that locked room with the bridegroom's **twin** brother; what if that wasn't the bridegroom at all? And what if, when they got in there, the fake bridegroom sat those stingy bridesmaids down for a lesson on sharing?
- What's it like to be welcomed in or shut out? The church has done a lot of shutting out through the years....
- How can we live with this parable? What is it asking us about who or what we're waiting for, what we want? What kind of world or church, or school, or club, or workplace, or circle of friends? What kind of family do you want?

Is what we want ever going to come?

Or: are we going to *eventually want* what really comes to us?

Can we wait for what is actually arriving, what is coming – maybe coming for everyone, or are our eyes going to be constantly darting around to this and that, maybe leading us to race around to this and that and the other thing? When the foolish bridesmaids came back from buying the oil, had they found ten other things the “needed?” (Like when I come back from Home Depot...).

It seems to me we approach a lot of life like Christmas, with a very

specific gift list or a similarly specific guest list... what if something else, someone else is given to us?

My guess is what we are waiting for is already here and available to us, not out of reach. We experience that week after week at the altar, we reach out our hands and we receive, simple as that. God, unlike Santa Claus, does not withhold what we deeply want and need; all is here in abundance.

And so: what we are waiting for, this elusive bridegroom, is very likely ourselves. We are waiting to be *ready* to see face-to-face, even in the limited, very human ways we can (sometimes in the dark), the God, the Life, the Reality that is already and constantly gazing at us.

We are waiting to recognize *who* is, in *what* is – to get beyond our preconceived and limited ideas of God and life and to know that what is really real for us *is* God (God of our joy and gladness, God of the ages, God of the moment).

And that God, in life, has always waited for us, that we have never waited for God – we have only waited for our own appearance in the now.

It seems to me we can postpone our own appearance, our own arrival in life for our entire lives – we can hold it all at bay if we choose, but that non-arrival, that withholding, that overlooking, that ignoring, that

distraction changes *nothing* about who we are to God and who God is to us.

The God who exceeds any definition and any prior knowledge of abundance is constantly and generously providing for every human being on earth, for the entire creation, all of reality in our world, our universe and universes beyond our own – what we know and the vast reality we don't and can't know now (but will eventually).

All of this, all of God is beyond all intentions of every human being, beyond all human thoughts, prayers, religious practices, beyond dogma and doctrine or spiritual identity. We do not conjure God, we do not keep God away or bring God here.

God is for the foolish and the wise.

Union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world... these things do not need to be made up by us or from generation to generation. These are gifts to acknowledge, embrace in the living, immediate presence of God in whatever ways we can, with those who are with us, in the fullness of God who is always where we are, in us, in all of those around us, in the whole, living, created world that attends our every waking (and sleeping) moment.