

A Sermon by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
8 November 2020

Proper 27A: Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16; Song of Wisdom 6:17-20; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Matt.25:1-13

“Ready or Not”

My grandmother had no formal education, but she was wise. And that wisdom was hard-won. The Armenian genocide forced horrible choices upon her, a then-young mother desperate to save her family. Drawing upon her own reserves of faith and practical intelligence, she recognized a critical moment and was prepared to act. This is not a perfect translation, but throughout my life, she would say,

If you wait until you're ready, you wait forever.

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives a parable about readiness. Ten bridesmaids carry oil lamps as *they* await a moment – the arrival of the bridegroom. Five are prepared, called wise, because they also carried oil for their lamps. The other five are called foolish because they carried lamps but bought along no oil. And when they ask the wise to share their oil, the answer is no – they are told to go out and find their own.

But by the time they return, it is too late – the bridegroom had arrived in their absence and the critical moment was lost. They were not able to enter the feast.

This parable is often taken to represent the second coming of Christ, where he is the bridegroom and we are the wise or the foolish, based on our readiness for his arrival.

But arrival *how*? Those who take it literally believe that the first-century Jesus will return as he was, to preside over a Great Judgment, where all persons will be sorted – wise or foolish, rewarded or punished, entering the feast or the finding the door locked.

Others see the return of Christ not as a literal *event*, but as a spiritual *truth* – that if we are wise – if we are faithful to his mission and prepared to *be* the Body of Christ – to be his hands, mind and heart in this world – then he has, indeed, come again, and not only at *one* point in time, but within *every* moment in time. And the wedding feast of the parable represents the marriage of God and all of creation – a new life of justice, mercy, and peace.

Whether you understand the second coming literally, figuratively, are unsure, or never even thought about it – the wisdom of the parable speaks of readiness, of being prepared.

But it is puzzling, yes? The Gospel usually promotes radical generosity and sharing of what we have, yet, in *this* story, the reward came to those who did *not* share their oil.

You can see why preachers sometimes prefer to skip right past this reading!

But if we ignore it, we miss a subtle, but compelling edge in the parable – that some things in this life – spiritual reserves, hard one wisdom, the work of readiness – *cannot* be received from others, but must be nourished and developed within ourselves.

For example, you can borrow someone's homework, but you cannot borrow the depth of understanding derived from their hours of study. A surgeon can transplant a heart into someone's chest, but cannot transplant the donor's devotion to family, love of music, or commitment to public service.ⁱ We can be *inspired* by others, encouraged by others, but at some point, each of us must decide whether we will fill our own spiritual lamps with the oil of the Gospel and shine the light of Justice, Mercy, and Peace.

Of course, there are other oils in this world and plenty of hucksters who would try to sell us on it. And all of that can be tempting – maybe that's why it's called snake oil.

But it is *not* the real thing and we dare not buy it. It will not brighten our lamps with true and guiding light. Spiritual fuel is *not* the stuff of money, status, or ego, it is *not* the way of ugliness, violence, oppression, or coercion. It *is* the reserve built up by steady, patient, thoughtful practices of human compassion, listening, decency, and fidelity to the common good. And the light itself is love of God and love of neighbor.

And we need to reflect that light in our own lives, in this world and in this time, lest we become like those bridesmaids who waited too long and missed their moment. We sometimes make the mistake of assuming there will always be more time to act, more time for important things to be done or said in this life:

One of these days, I'll start spending more time with my family...

I've always wanted to volunteer in my community – I'll eventually get around to that.

Someday, I will speak up about the wrongs I see.

But remember what Grandma said: If we wait until we're ready, we may wait forever.

Thing is, we *can't* wait forever – this world knows far too much darkness and pain. It needs us to lift our lamps right *now*. Fueled by the oil of faith and strengthened by the oil of courage, we need to light the way of justice, mercy, and peace. Because when we do that, we light the Way of Love...

...and Jesus will, indeed, have come again.

May it be so, which is to say,

Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to the Rev. Beth Sanders (2014).