

**Proper 27 A    Nov. 12, 2017**

**Bring Your Light**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

Folded into the deuterocanonical Old Testament books of First and Second Maccabees, there is a brief reference to a Jewish holiday coming up often called the Festival of the Lights, also known as Hanukkah. The story behind this holiday happened during a time of revolt; when enemies had invaded Judea. Nothing was sacred to these invaders, not even the Jewish temple, which instead of being destroyed was roughly converted into a pagan temple, and the altar of God's presence was made into an altar to Zeus. For the Jewish people, there was only one word to describe such an offense: desecration.

This desecration inspired revolution, and Jewish revolutionaries eventually won back the temple, and reconsecrated it to God. The story goes that they found an oil lamp that had burned on the altar, but only a certain kind of oil could be used for its holy and sacred purpose. And there was only one container left of that special oil, which was only enough to burn for a single day. Still, they used the oil they had, lit the lamp, and miraculously, the lamp burned for a full 8 days, just long enough to find and prepare more oil for the lamp. While this might seem like a small miracle to many of us, this is part of the celebration of Hanukkah, which commemorates the small overcoming the bigger aggressor and God interceding in some way to ensure the lamp of the holy presence burned as a sign that God was indeed Present. It reminds me of many other stories about when it looks like all is lost, when it looks like there isn't enough, or it is the end, with God, somehow, there really is just what was needed. And what looked lost, forgotten, over, maybe even desecrated, was renewed, and light was seen to shine in the darkness.

This Jewish holiday came to mind as I read the parable in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew. In fact, this parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids is only found in Matthew's Gospel, which has led some scholars to believe the author of Matthew made it up as a way to help his community deal with a very real and present problem: namely the absence of Jesus. When Jesus ascended into heaven, he said he would return, and the followers of Jesus were certain he meant he'd be back quickly. Yet, days turned to weeks turned to months turned to years and the years went by quickly, as they tend to do, and Jesus did not return in the cloud of glory his followers were expecting. Perhaps this unmet expectation led to some feelings of

abandonment, or feeling disheartened, perhaps they saw their community getting older and no sign of Jesus and this caused grief or discouragement. Whatever the feelings Jesus' failure to return caused, many scholars tell us this situation was most likely the impetus for the parable we just heard.

Such an explanation might help comfort folks who hear this parable as being contrary to the message of Jesus; as Jesus usually preached forgiveness, sharing with those who do not have, and including the excluded. I also wonder if this parable makes folks uncomfortable because it has something to say to those of us following Jesus today, whether it is a parable Jesus actually told, the author of Matthew adapted or created, or both, which is why I may have remembered the story about light burning even though there wasn't enough oil.

The parable seems to be set up as a contrast between the wise and the foolish, and perhaps has an element of warning to not be like the foolish women, be prepared, like the wise. But, I can't help but wonder, what was it about the foolish bridesmaids that made them foolish? Was it that they didn't prepare enough ahead of time? Had they failed to imagine the bridegroom would be so very late to his own wedding? Were they procrastinators? Were they not taking their role as keepers of the lamps seriously?

I don't know. Perhaps what contributed to their foolishness was forgetting their stories; forgetting there was another time oil for a lamp seemed too little, yet turned out to be enough. Maybe the foolishness had more to do with their expectations than the oil itself.

I can't help but wonder what might have happened if the bridesmaids had stayed put instead of running off to try and purchase more oil in the middle of the night. Would they have been excluded from the party if their lamps were not burning as brightly as the others? What if, by some miracle, their lamps hadn't gone out like they thought they might? Was their foolishness a way of excluding the possibility of God being involved by taking matters into their own hands instead of facing the bridegroom as they really were?

Sometimes, fighting to make an outcome meet our expectations instead of admitting what is really going on can have consequences where we miss the important thing and end up excluding ourselves. Somehow, the bridesmaids ended up with enough oil, but too late to join the party. So maybe the oil wasn't the point. Maybe the point was the party.

It seems to me, the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church can sometimes behave as foolishly as the bridesmaids who rushed out to buy oil in the middle of the night when they heard the bridegroom was just around the corner. It sounds like they were frantic, they couldn't let him see them the way they were. It seems they wanted to be like or look like the bridesmaids who had extra oil, and somehow they felt they needed to be just like them. And sometimes, to me, at least, I see parishes struggle to maintain what they call health by trying to imitate other parishes, because they are too afraid to admit where they really are, and in so doing, miss perfectly beautiful opportunities to live into new ways the Holy Spirit is present, and guiding them because they are frantically trying to look like what they expect they should or what they looked like in the past.

A few days ago, I read an article about a pastor struggling with the parish she is serving's expectations to provide a Sunday school program for children. The pastor wrote about the parish's changing demographics, but emphasized no one in the parish has a genuine call to children's ministry, so the parishioners were asking her to do it, even though Sunday school is held the same time as the worship service. Her struggle and her story reminded me of the foolish bridesmaids trying to find oil in the middle of the night instead of admitting so much had changed. Instead, perhaps they need to reassess their resources, decide what they can do, and more importantly, pray about what God may be calling them to now.

It doesn't have to be Sunday school; I've seen and heard of this kind of thing happening with all kinds of ministries. It seems to me, the greatest foolishness so many parishes are guilty of is forgetting our stories, especially the Easter story, where we are reminded that death is not an end, just the other side of a beginning. Which means it is okay to acknowledge when it is time to change, because if one expression of ministry appears to be low on oil, lacking enthusiasm, or feeling burnt out, we can trust resurrection means God hasn't abandoned us, Jesus is present, perhaps in ways that don't look like it did in the past, and we can't see it because we are focused on our expectations instead of what is happening around us.

I believe it is okay to acknowledge when we feel tired, or sad, or frustrated. But these are not excuses to quit. They are the signs to help us look around and listen, and practice the important holy work of discernment. To ask what type of ministries God is calling us to now. Maybe when we feel tired or sad or frustrated, those feelings have more to do with our own disappointment about our expectations not being met, and instead of despairing, of running away to find what we think we need elsewhere, we need to instead bring our feelings to the Risen Christ. Perhaps he is longing to show us and share with us new life, new opportunities to serve, to be His Body in the world, if we would only let go of our old expectations and reach for what Jesus has for us.

Maybe we can relate to feeling like the world has changed around us. That the growing secularization of culture has made the church irrelevant, unwanted, disrespected. Or perhaps it is the change in the economy or business worlds that has us feeling displaced. It is perhaps understandable, living in such times, if we feel tired or disheartened because the world we thought we once knew has changed. But that doesn't mean Christ is absent. It doesn't mean God has abandoned us. The Holy Spirit cannot be silenced by such things, and can be heard, if we are willing to listen. It doesn't mean now is the time to hunker down, hold on to the oil, or run off looking for some other means of getting what we think we need; it means we can, like the revolutionaries who restored the temple, let that light shine. Even here at Church of the Good Shepherd, where we have our ups and downs when it comes to ministries, we can hear in today's parable is there is wisdom in changing when we need to, to praying for discernment for where God is calling as individuals and as a parish, and participating in all the ways we are and can be the light shining the love of God to our neighbors, which is how we can be part of the new life Jesus is calling us to.