

Proper 27 A November 8, 2020
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Let Your Light Shine
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

What was with those bridesmaids in today's Gospel? The selfish mean girls who hoarded all the lamp oil. Didn't they ever read the Bible? Did they suddenly forget you are supposed to share? Isn't that what Jesus preached? How could the bridegroom prefer those mean, selfish, evil girls over those innocent poor girls who didn't have any oil? Maybe those poor girls couldn't afford any extra oil. Maybe there wasn't any left after the hoarders got to the store first. Maybe it's always the same old story that the wealthy get privilege while the poor get excluded.

Or maybe, we need to step out of our judgmental, capitalist, consumerist, Western mindset when we look at the parable Jesus told in Matthew's Gospel today. Because if we go judging the bridesmaids for their choices and behavior, we may make ourselves feel better, but by participating in self-righteousness we'll completely miss what Jesus and the author of Matthew's Gospel were trying to invite their listeners and those of us reading the Gospel into.

First, we need to remember the story about the ten bridesmaids and their oil is not an actual account of what happened at an actual wedding. Today's reading is a parable. Parables are not events that really happened. They are fictions Jesus told in order to get his listeners then and now to think about things like recognizing the Messiah in their midst, their relationship with God and each other, and what following Jesus means in their everyday life. Parables are not only not to be taken literally; we have to be careful not to project too much of our culture, biases, and traumas on them.

Most scholars and commentators believe today's parable is about judgement and the second coming of Jesus. The church word for the second coming and judgment of Jesus is *Parousia*. It is the belief all Christians, even us Episcopalians, have that ultimately, one day, Jesus will return to earth and through judgment restore all creation to the dream God intended for it and for us. We have a four-week season of the Church Year dedicated to this belief. It is called the season of Advent and will begin at the end of this month. Many of our prayers, including those in the Eucharistic prayer state Jesus' second coming as part of our core belief when we say, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

Different denominations interpret the second coming differently. Some believe it will be traumatic and violent because it will be the embodiment of God's anger and

wrath. Others believe it will be uncomfortable because God's justice is God's mercy, which means what God envisions for the world is different than what we do and so we might be unpleasantly surprised when Jesus flips the power structures. For some, especially those of privilege, such judgment might feel like things are being taken away. Some denominations put more emphasis on the second coming than others. But whether it is a belief we emphasize or not, it is part of our core belief as followers of Jesus.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Matthew's Gospel is the author's emphasis on Jesus' second coming, on the Parousia. Matthew's Gospel has more references to the Parousia than any of the other Gospels, including today's parable which is found only in Matthew. Historians can help us understand why when they remind us that at the time Matthew's Gospel was written, there was a lot of trauma the community of Jesus followers were experiencing. They had been excommunicated from Jewish temple life, which was painful. On top of that they were struggling with waiting for Jesus to come again and restore all things to the way they should be. The belief at the time was Jesus was going to return not long after his resurrection and ascension, but as the days turned into weeks turned into months turned into years with no sign of Jesus, they grew anxious. Waiting can be extremely hard, and hard on people. Some started to doubt Jesus would ever return. Others wondered if they were interpreting Jesus correctly. It was a time of uncertainty.

Perhaps we can relate to feeling anxious, uncertain, maybe even heartbroken when things don't turn out the way we wanted or expected. Those who can relate can probably understand the temptation to go after each other in harsh judgment during such uncertainty. To blame or accuse. Or worse; to dehumanize or demonize each other. But that is not where the author of Matthew or Jesus who told the parable were going.

We need to remember this is a parable not only about judgment, but the final judgment. So, we need to pay attention not to what we think made five bridesmaids wise and the other five foolish, we need to focus on who in this parable made the judgment.

It wasn't the bridesmaids who didn't share their oil. They didn't say anything we could interpret as judgment to the bridesmaids without oil. They simply stated they couldn't share their oil. The bridesmaids who didn't have enough oil did not judge the ones who did as being selfish or evil. Instead, they seemed to understand the reasoning. Judgment was not the role for any of the bridesmaids in the parable.

The role of the bridesmaids whether they were wise or foolish was to let their light shine. They were to light the way for the bridegroom, and perhaps for others. This imagery might make us recall other places in Matthew's Gospel that were about the role of all who follow Jesus to let their light shine before others so that they may see the good works being done and give glory – not to the workers – but to God. In today's parable, there may be something of the same in the imagery of light.

Most everyone is familiar with the hymn, "This Little Light of Mine". It is a gospel song that originated sometime between 1925 and 1933. Over the years it has been adapted to the civil rights marches and children's church music. It is an uplifting song about letting your light shine, no matter the suffering or circumstances you are enduring. And what is that light the song is about? The light is not a resource that can be distributed to others. It is not the works of charity or other good works. It is something only a person can embody. It is in their inner being. It's their joy; their connection to and reliance upon God. It is deeper than belief; more than faith, it is the culmination of their daily decisions and choices that help them grow and mature in their relationship with God.

That is why the bridesmaids with oil were not able to share with those who asked. There are some things that can't be shared, even if we want to.

Like skills or talent or ability. For example, a musician who has been studying, practicing, and performing for many years cannot share their ability to play music with the person who is just starting. To play at the same or similar level, the new musician will have to study and practice day in and day out for years. In the same way, artists cannot share their talent with those who wish they could paint or sculpt the way the artist does. The artist can teach about techniques, but only by practicing and learning and discovering their own style can someone become an artist. The same is true for mathematicians, physicists, and engineers. Some things like skill and practice and talent cannot be shared because they are part of a person's heart, soul, mind, and life practice.

The same is true with our relationship with God. Pastor James Moore told a story about a parishioner of his who came to him in crisis because he had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. The parishioner told James he was distraught because all his wealth couldn't buy him a cure or buy him peace he desperately needed. In frustration he said, "It's not fair! I can pick up the phone, call any bank in the state and on my name alone borrow as much money as I ask for." Then he stopped talking, looked at his pastor and said, "But all the money in the world isn't going to help me now. I guess there are some things you can't borrow."

It was at that moment the parishioner realized he alone was responsible and accountable for his relationship with God. No one could do that for him; not his pastor, not his church, not his spouse. Our relationship with God is the culmination of our own experiences, attending worship, study of scripture and other theological writings, and of course prayer, listening to God and following God. Each of us has a different relationship with God depending on how much we have invested in that relationship, and no matter how much we may want to, we can't share it. We can talk about it, teach about it, I can promise you that if you do invest in your relationship with God you will discover God really does care, and will participate in that relationship, growing as your relationship grows, even stepping in to pray when you are too tired or overwhelmed because that is my experience, but I can't make you love God the way I do. Nor can I love God for you. You have to do that yourself.

Perhaps that is why the bridegroom told the bridesmaids who came back and found a closed door that he did not know them, even though they professed knowing him. That was the judgment in this parable and the character who had the role of judgment was the bridegroom. In the end, judgment wasn't about what actions of the bridesmaids, it was about relationship, or rather the lack thereof with the bridegroom.

Perhaps there is some wisdom for us in this parable, although it might be hard to hear. While it might be easy to do, and feel good in the moment, self-righteous judgment of others is not the role of those of us who wait for Jesus to come again. We are a diverse group, to be sure. And whether we feel wise or foolish, our role is to let our light – our love for God, God's love for us, our trust in Christ's salvation, our belief that Jesus will return and restore this world to God's dream for it and us – shine. This is not work for a season, but a way of life, the culmination of our daily choices and decisions. That is the relationship we will find gives us the peace we need when a crisis comes, and what helps inspire us to make the adaptations and changes we need to stay true to God's call and ensure we can continue to grow. Like the changes we've made to our worship service and ministries during this pandemic.

Judgment is not our role. Even if someone voted differently than we did. Even if they have signs in their yard we don't care for. Disagreeing with someone doesn't have to mean hating them. God's kingdom of heaven is not furthered, nor is the light of Christ witnessed in the dehumanization or demonization of someone different from us. Our role is to love God, to let our light shine, to do the work of healing, listening, meeting each other half way, loving and respecting all people, for all people are made in God's image. This is not easy to do, for sure. But it is work we won't do alone. If we are paying attention, we might catch a glimpse of Christ himself present in the beginning of an estranged family taking the first steps to forgiveness, in the suffering

that creates empathy for another, in any relationship that bridges the gaps that divide us so that we can feel a little closer together. Such kingdom of heaven miracles are possible when we let our light shine.