

26th Week after Pentecost – Year A – Proper 27 - November 9, 2008
Joshua 24:103a, 14-25, Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
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In a recent edition of *Christianity Today* author Kathleen Norris is quoted as saying, “One of the strangest things that people say is, ‘I’m a good person.’” Continuing, she says, “I am always amazed when people claim to know that about themselves... History demonstrates, repeatedly, that if enough people begin to define themselves as ‘good’ in contrast to others who are ‘bad,’ those others come to be seen as less than human.” It is, in other words an attitude that we are all tempted to adopt from time to time to make us feel better about ourselves.

When I prayed with today’s Gospel reading a rush of opposites and comparisons popped out at me. Matthew’s continuing story of the kingdom of heaven versus a worldly kingdom; the foolish and the wise; scarcity and abundance; darkness and light; knowledge and mystery; preparedness and a lack thereof; bridesmaids and bridegroom; asleep and awake; the half who are in and the half who are out; and justice and injustice. However, there is also a measure of equality here. There are ten bridesmaids – a symbolic quorum for solemn occasions like worship in the synagogue or marriage. Each bridesmaid has a lamp of her own, implicitly filled with oil and burning, since all pick up their lamps and use them to light their way as they go to meet the bridegroom. Half the bridesmaids – those described as wise – pick up flasks of oil along with their lamps.

Unlike Matthew’s other kingdom parables that we have heard over the last several weeks, there is something of a twist in this tale. At the beginning of the parable, all ten are blessed with provision for their going out and take their leave for a specific rendezvous. By the end of the parable, five are ready for the meeting and are welcomed through the door. The other five have used up the oil that came with their lamps, and have gone in search of more oil. In so doing they miss welcoming the bridegroom, and the door is closed when they finally arrive at the wedding banquet.

In that most famous of lines, “I think, therefore I am” is one defining characteristic of human creatures, made in the image of God. It is that we have the ability to reason, to weigh our choices, and make rational, and sometimes irrational decisions. With reason comes the imperative to exercise right judgment. Judgment itself is a complex matter. In its positive embodiment, it is demonstrable through the virtues of wisdom and prudence. Negatively, the gift of judgment becomes judgmentalism, often accompanied by self-aggrandizement at the expense of others. As Norris implies, when we say, “I am a good person” what we are omitting is the unspoken, “compared to me, you, him or her.” In fact, who am I, or you, to define who is good? Even Jesus said, “No one is good, but God alone” (Luke 18:19).

In the journey of Christian discipleship, as apprentices of Christ’s way, you and I must learn to exercise a specific type of judgment. Virtuous? Yes. But our weighing of choices must also be done with intentionality, with prayerful self-examination and with reflection that leads to discernment. We are all part of the quorum of God’s children. We each begin our own life journey with the light of God that is the gift of life within us. The challenge that this parable reveals for us is whether we will kindle that light to become God’s Light bearers or not; and how the flame within is fueled to become a guiding light of fire. What’s more, this parable also reveals that not everyone who professes the name of Christian becomes a Light bearer. To be a Light bearer is to be known as a steward of God’s grace in the darkness that blinds the eyes of so many, and stunts growth.

As tempting as it is to judge between the five wise bridesmaids and the five foolish ones, or even to decide that we are obviously amongst the wise is the kind of trap that, as Norris points out, will eventually manifest itself in violence and oppression towards others. What you and I fail to do, whenever we fall into judgmentalism, is to acknowledge that God’s grace is a pure unearned and unmerited gift. Furthermore, called as we are, to practice God’s graciousness, you and I must also accept the gift, and allow God’s grace to flow through us to fuel the flame buried deep in the hearts of others. You and I are

the lamps. God's grace is the oil that fuels our work as Light bearers in the world. In Jesus' day, olive oil lights the lamps of the bridesmaids, and that is not accidental or trivial to our discernment today.

Throughout Scripture, the olive tree is a symbol of God's graciousness. In the Book of Genesis, the dove brings Noah an olive branch as proof of God's bountiful provision. Even today, the olive branch is a symbol of peace. God promises the Israelites a land full of olive trees. Paul describes the faithful Israelites as a great olive tree into which the gentiles are grafted, to be fed and nourished in the ways of God, and to receive God's gift of salvation. On a more mundane level, olive trees provide wood for furniture and building and precious oil for fuel, food, and commerce. Olive oil is used in all aspects of ancient middle-eastern life. It is not just fuel and food, but used for anointing, in healing and for medicines, as well as in religious rites. Today, nutritionists tell us how healthy it is to cook with olive oil, and we continue to use olive oil at baptism, and in anointing the sick. One more thing to note here, unlike the black gold pumped from the earth that is rapidly running out, olive trees can live for thousands of years, are relatively easy to propagate and are, therefore, a renewable resource. Olive oil is a symbol of God's grace and abundance, as much as it is a gift from God.

Our parable suggests a journey and a destination. You and I are also on the same life journey. We even have the same choice that the bridesmaids have. That is to grow in grace, or simply to take the gift of life. Being awake is a question of knowing who the source of 'oil' really is, accepting the gift, and then using God's grace to glorify God by making a difference in our earthly journey. In a nutshell, the knowledge, the faith and the actions are characteristics of Jesus' disciples. Dallas Willard says this, "It is almost universally conceded today that you can be a Christian without being a disciple." We become Christians through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Becoming *disciples* of our Lord Jesus is the journey that starts at Baptism. Willard extends an argument from theologian, William Law. In Law's seminal work, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, he ponders the question of "why the generality of Christians fall so far short of the holiness and devotion of Christianity." In his own time, Law saw many who professed to be Christians, and who came to worship services, but showed no outward and visible signs of the transformation that is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Law's conclusion is that Christians who are not yet disciples of our Lord are those who do not intend to please God. This lack of intentionality in the lives of so many who claim the name of Christian is, as William Law points out, the reason why there is such an evident "mixture of sin and folly in the lives of [Christians]."

The gift of salvation for every Christian is assured through faith and by God's grace. However, this parable does speak to us about how we engage the Great Commandment in the way we attend to turning our hearts intentionally and lovingly towards God. And by God's grace, how we intentionally live as stewards of God's immeasurable gifts. The journey of life is our opportunity to grow in grace as we love and serve God and our neighbors, each one of us, in the unique way that God desires of us. Murdered Archbishop, Oscar Romero was a Light bearer. He dared to speak out against the oppressive regime of his country's government, working tirelessly for justice, equality and peace. Here are some of his words, "God's reign is already present on our earth in mystery.... We know that every effort to better society, especially when injustice and sin are so ingrained, is an effort that God blesses, that God wants, that God demands of us."

May the Lord help us all in our discipleship, to grow in grace, and so let our lights shine for the glory of God, that this mountain becomes an even brighter beacon of God's love and grace.

Amen.