

Sermon: “What the World Can Be” Deacon Kellie

November 15, 2020

During the past several months, Father Steve, Mother Becca, and I, along with Ken Casey and Billy Adams, have offered mid-week reflections each Wednesday on Facebook. These have been based on scripture passages assigned from different lectionaries or on the lives of saints whose lives and faithful witness are remembered by the church throughout the year. In October, the reflections were based on parables that the children would be learning in their online Godly Play classes, and the last reflection of the month, offered by Mother Becca, was on the Parable of Parables. I thought she did an excellent job describing how Jesus uses parables and how we might approach them individually and as a community of faith. When I listened to her words on the last Wednesday in October, I knew that it was something I would want to go back and hear again, and this past week, as I struggled mightily with not only today’s parable of the talents but also last week’s parable of the bridesmaids, I remembered her video and watched it again. (If you want to take the opportunity to watch it yourself again or for the first time, it is still available on the church’s Facebook page.)

What stood out for me as Becca described Jesus’ parables is her observation that although parables are Jesus’ preferred teaching style, often they provoke more questions than they answer as the parables break open our assumptions about how the world works as well as our assumptions concerning what we think the parables say about how the world works. Even when, and maybe especially when, we hear a familiar parable there is a challenge to try to hear it as if for the first time, expecting to learn something new and to see God’s Good News more fully. Also, when we see a parable in a new light, we aren’t necessarily saying that what we learned previously from a parable is wrong. Hearing the parable anew presents an opportunity to broaden our understanding of how Jesus’ teaching speaks to our common life today and how his teaching can shape our actions

This approach can be particularly useful as we hear today’s parable of the talents, and even if we look back to last week’s parable of the bridesmaids. This morning might be the first time or the hundredth time you have heard the story of the master who

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entrusts his slaves, or servants, with various amounts of talents to care for in his absence and who, upon his return, praises the ones who double the number of talents they have been given while condemning the one who has buried his talent and has returned the master only what he was given. Over the years, I’m pretty sure every time I have heard this parable, I have understood it to mean that whatever gifts, or talents, someone has been given, they should use them and build on them to the best of their abilities, and if someone hides or doesn’t put their gifts to work, they have fallen short of what is expected of them.

For whatever reason, this time as I read through this parable, I struggled, not necessarily focusing initially on the actions of the servants, but on the actions of the master. It hit home for me that to read this parable as simply teaching us that we should use our God-given gifts or talents, it makes the assumption that the giver of the talents, God, is the master who is quick to call the servant who doesn’t double his talents worthless and lazy and exile him as a result. Although I don’t claim to have a perfect understanding of the nature of God, I can’t reconcile this type of angry, greedy, harsh figure with the loving, forgiving God found throughout Jesus’ teaching. But if we don’t place ourselves and God in this parable in the ways I’ve described, how can we look at this parable differently? What might Jesus be trying to teach us about how the world works, or maybe how it should work?

As I wrestled with these thoughts this week, I was reminded of my lingering struggles with last week’s parable of the bridesmaids, where the wise bridesmaids, the ones who planned ahead and took flasks of oil along with their lamps to wait for the bridegroom, made it into the wedding banquet while the foolish bridesmaids whose lamps ran out of oil were left outside. As someone who likes to plan ahead (for example, when I give a sermon I read from my iPad, but always have a paper copy here at the ready in case of technical difficulties), I can easily connect with a story that praises and rewards people who have planned ahead for unexpected circumstances, and Father Steve’s sermon last week beautifully acknowledged our need to do those things that fill

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our flasks with oil and showed how practicing God’s way of love can help us to do just that. But what continues to nag at me about this parable is how unconcerned the “wise” bridesmaids are about the plight of the others. Is there really not enough oil to be shared so that everyone can enter the banquet? Is the only lesson we can learn from this parable to make sure we are prepared and we take care of ourselves so that we aren't shut out? But if there’s more to learn, how else can we hear this story?

As I continued to struggle with these two parables, I decided to read the entire 25th chapter of Matthew since sometimes seeing where a lectionary passage fits within a larger context is helpful. In the course of three Sundays in a row, with this Sunday being the second, we hear Matthew’s 25th chapter in its entirety. It begins with the parable of the bridesmaids, followed by the parable of the talents, and ends with next week’s reading, which tells of the Son of Man coming in glory to separate the sheep from the goats, with the sheep being those who inherit the kingdom and the goats being eternally punished. After reading the three stories together, I thought it might be helpful to see them not as individual, unrelated lessons, but teaching that ties together, one to the other.

In the first two parables we see situations where wise and astute people benefit from and are praised for their planning, responsibility, and accomplishments while those who are described as foolish and fearful are condemned for poor decisions, lack of preparation, and laziness. These stories don’t seem that out of place in our society today. Work hard, take care of yourself, plan, prepare and you will reap rewards, and too bad for those who don’t.

But when we get to the third scene, the story is quite different. As the Son of Man separates the gathered people, the ones who are set aside to inherit the kingdom are not those who were the most responsible or successful in the traditional sense but are the ones who have paid attention to the needs of their neighbors and have given them food and drink, clothes, care, and community. The ones who have ignored the needs of their neighbors, who have not seen the presence of Jesus in the people around them, those are the ones who are shut out.

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So in light of this third scene, might we see the first two parables differently? When the wise bridesmaids don't share their oil, is this a missed opportunity to share with Jesus? Could the master in the parable of the talents, instead of representing God, actually personify the people and powers at work in the world who exploit those who are vulnerable? Have the servants who have doubled their talents done so with fair and reasonable trading or have they taken advantage of their neighbors on the way to personal gain and security? Instead of being lazy, has the third servant made a choice to refuse to participate in actions that harm his neighbors, despite opening himself up to ridicule, at the cost of his own personal safety? When the Son of Man comes, will the bridesmaids who make it into the banquet or the servants who are praised by their master or the servant who is called worthless and lazy be considered sheep or goats?

I don't think there are easy answers to any of these questions, but I think they are questions worth pondering. As we will pray in today's collect, may we “hear..., read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” these words from scripture as we look for guidance and direction as followers of Jesus - followers of Jesus who live in the middle of a society that is often filled with assumptions about how the world is that vary significantly from what Jesus teaches us the world can be.

What are the situations and circumstances in our lives and in our communities we have an opportunity to look at in new ways? Do we rely on assumptions about how the world works that are informed by Jesus' teachings or are our actions shaped by lessons we've learned elsewhere? Every day that we wake up is an opportunity to let light shine into new places - by being alert to those places where things fall short of the abundant life promised by Jesus, by seeing the face of Jesus in each person we encounter, and by allowing our actions to reflect our hope and trust in the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Let us encourage one another and build each other up as we embrace the hope of the world shown to us in the Good News of Jesus Christ.