

Sermon for Sunday, November 8, 2020 - "Let Your Light Shine"

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I am troubled by this parable. And I wonder, is this the message we need today at such a difficult time for our country? I wonder why the wise bridesmaids refuse to share with the foolish ones who've run out of oil. That doesn't seem very Christlike. And why is the bridegroom so harsh, refusing to allow the foolish bridesmaids into the party just because they ran out of oil? Why does he say, I do not know you? Is God's kingdom really like this?

I'd like to rewrite this parable with a happier ending. I see two options. The wise bridesmaids could say, "There's always enough for everyone, of course we'll share, and all the bridesmaids could go into the party together." Or, the bridegroom could say to the foolish ones, "Hey, no problem that you're out of oil; you're good, come on into the party."

I wish the parable would unfold in one of those ways. Yet, as we're seeing all too often in 2020, things don't always go the way we would like. That's why we need parables, especially now. Jesus' parables aren't intended to be fairy tales with happily ever after endings. They aren't intended to be morality tales with good guys and bad guys. They are intended to get under our skin, to trouble and disrupt us, and invite us to live differently.

This particular parable invites us to live differently in times of waiting and times when things don't go as we'd like. So, maybe it is especially helpful at this time in our life in the US. Matthew shared this parable with his community in a tumultuous, uncertain time. It was expecting Jesus to come again and bring God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. He had promised to return, but it had been waiting for about 70 years for that to happen. In the meantime, the oppressive Roman Empire had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and crushed the spirits of the people. There was also deep conflict between Matthew's community and its Jewish siblings in faith. Things were not good and Jesus had yet not come back - not in the way they had expected him.

How long would they have to wait? Would things ever get better? How could they remain hopeful, ready to participate in God's coming kingdom of mercy and justice? Into that context, Matthew shared Jesus' parable about the bridesmaids.

Ten bridesmaids go out with lamps to meet a bridegroom and enter with him into a wedding banquet. He is delayed. The night grows long and dark. They all grow weary of waiting and fall asleep. Yet, five wise bridesmaids have prepared for his arrival with hopeful expectation and a sense of urgency. They have enough oil to let their light shine even through a long, dark night. Five foolish bridesmaids have been complacent. They haven't bothered with preparations. When the bridegroom appears, the foolish bridesmaids demand that the others share with them. They act entitled

and arrogant. Later they demand that the bridegroom lets them in though they are not prepared, that he gives them special treatment.

This year, this parable is inviting me to reflect on how we live in times of waiting and uncertainty. How can we remain hopeful and ready to participate in God's coming kingdom? How can we pray and work for this kingdom to come with both patience and a sense of urgency? How can we avoid acting complacent, entitled, arrogant? What will we do when we feel empty and depleted? How will we let light shine in long, dark nights?

These are questions we each need to ask. This is work we all must do. We each are called to internal and external work for the sake of God's kingdom. Yet we do not do this alone. Christ comes to us, even now, through the power of the word, through the sacraments, through the body of Christ on earth to give us what we need. We don't have to wait 'til the end of time for Christ to come. Christ comes to us today to show us how empty we are on our own and to empower us to live anew.

Christ comes to convict us of our sin.

We can't assume we're all good, that we have what we need on our own.

We can't put blame on others.

We can't demand special treatment.

We need to acknowledge that we are depleted, weary, in need.

We need Christ to forgive and renew us.

And that is just what Christ does. Christ meets us, meets you today to say: You are forgiven, you are known and welcomed, enter into God's presence, there is a place for you at God's everlasting feast of mercy and justice. We experience this ongoing feast even now through word and sacrament and the body of Christ on earth. We are fed and nourished. We are given the fuel we need to let light shine in long, dark nights. Christ meets us here and now to give us what we need to be expectant, hopeful participants in God's work of mercy and justice.

Right now, it can be harder for us to sense that Christ comes to meet us when we are gathering for worship in an online space, when many of us are fasting from Holy Communion to guard health during the pandemic. It can be so easy to feel alone, depleted and weary.

I want to offer you an image to help you picture Christ's presence with us all right now.

Last Sunday some members and friends of Good Shepherd gathered for an All Saints Day service. In advance of the worship, many of us gathered to prepare. We lit candles. We prepared a table for Holy Communion. Our preparations were ending as the sun was setting. As the darkness gathered, I looked and saw people streaming up the sidewalk. They were physically distanced and yet they were all moving toward the light, toward the table. As I took it all in - the body of Christ, the lamps, the feast - I had a powerful sense that Christ was meeting us there to welcome us all, to feed us, to empower us to bear light in this dark time. I had a sense that we were all there together, even those of you who could not be physically present. We were there together as the whole communion of saints on earth and in heaven.

We left the candles burning for others to see later as they drove or walked by. Many took pictures of the luminaries and candles shining brightly on the sidewalk so that we could give you all a taste of this during online worship today.

Beloved of God, we are not alone as we wait for God's kingdom of justice and mercy.
We can pray and live and work with urgency and hopeful expectation.
We can let our light shine.