

November 15, 2020

Unfolding Truth

Text: Matthew 25: 1-13

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids[a] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12 But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Sermon:

It has happened to me on a golf course, and it has happened to me on an airplane. It has happened to me in the company of cherished family members, and it has happened to me in the company of total strangers. It has happened in cemeteries in moments of grief and despair, and it’s happened in nightclubs in moments of joy and revelry. In many different ways and with countless different words, the question of what this thing called religion or faith is all about has reared its challenging and beautiful head. People have come up and asked, “What does it all mean? What is the answer? What is this thing called *faith*? Who is this man *Jesus*? Give me the answer!”

In my own yearning and seeking, I’ve heard many different answers to those questions from all sorts of people, and here’s what I’ve learned. Each and every one of those answers matter, but they matter very differently depending on who you are and where you are on life’s journey. One of my theological heroes, Henri Nouwen, was asked to summarize the Christian faith for a young man. This young man was religiously connected but living his life very much in the secular mainstream. He had come to know Henri over time and was deeply intrigued by Henri’s infectious faith, and he was compelled to try to find an answer that might draw him in too. Seeing how Henri responded to this life of meaning made him want to know what the answer was all about and where he could look. So Nouwen gave him his answer. And his answer was that we simply must learn to live as the beloved of God—not for anything we have done or might yet do, but simply for who we are—to accept that love and that grace given so freely that we might turn around and give that love away in an echo, no matter how imperfect. That—Henri Nouwen said—is the answer to faith. Accept that you are the beloved of God.

I’ve got to tell you that that answer makes my heart sing. It keeps me going in this calling of mine, and yet it was a thoroughly unsatisfactory, completely unmoving answer not just for the one who asked but for others too. I have to tell you that many times I have shared that beautiful

book, “*The Life of the Beloved*,” with many people to be met with a simple (unemotional) “Okay.” Nouwen’s answer did not bring that young man closer but instead allowed him to drift away.

The more questions I get, the more I serve as a pastor, and the more life unfolds around me. I become more and more convinced that this endeavor of faith is not as much about coming up with those answers or with important responses about who Christ is and why Christ matters but rather opening ourselves up to the questions, to the revelations, to the truth, to the examples throughout his life and absolutely to include these vexing parables we have on display today. As important as it may be, our life of faith is not so much about what we believe but rather how we believe—how it is that we engage this faith and how we give our life over to things of meaning. I hear this often too—that parables are among people’s favorite Bible passages. There’s the Prodigal Son, and the Good Samaritan, and for gardeners—all those parables about seeds. People tell me how much they love parables—what a great teaching device they provide—pithy stories that transcend time and defy categorization—how wise Jesus was.

What Robert Capon would remind us, though, is that we sometimes deceive ourselves into loving just those parables like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, that seem so friendly and so agreeable and that we have so neatly tied up with meaning and are absolutely sure who we are in those stories, who God is in those stories, and how it will all work out in beautiful ways, closing down with answers rather than opening up with questions. Far too often we look at parables as teachings to explain things to our satisfaction, rather than realizing that what parables actually are, are models to call our attention to the unsatisfactory answers of all previous explanations. They are not so much good illustrations to shine the light so carefully on what we already know, but rather a surge of power to pop every circuit breaker in our minds. I think sometimes we do to parables what we do to Jesus himself—that is, make him a neat answer to a complex question, using him to confirm what we think we know rather than seeing him as Capon does—his life, his work, his essence—all of it as a parable too.

Jesus, the embodiment of love—Jesus the one who draws the Kingdom near, the one who helps us catch a glimpse of the Divine—the impossible possibility and the way that is life-giving—used parables and everything at his disposal to help us see the elusive promise and truth that God lays forth all the time, even though we might not fully grasp it, at least in this lifetime. Religious scholar G.K. Chesterton says this: “When you’re dealing with something that defies all rational understanding, it is a good thing to offer an analogy. If they say they don’t quite get that analogy, go ahead and give them another. If they still say they don’t get it, give them another, and if they still say they can’t quite understand, what you should simply say, is, ‘Well, that is the truth.’”

You can’t quite *understand*. And what I would add to Chesterton’s beautiful illustration is that Jesus seems to say in these parables, “Stay open. Let these stories and these parables dance on your heart and understanding will eventually unfold and one day you will draw closer and maybe even catch that glimpse. Both of today’s parables are not easy or tidy. In one, the servant ends up in outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth—and not just landed there—but *thrown* there by the master. The bridesmaids end up shut out of a party that they begged the Lord to let them enter. These were tragic, seemingly permanent endings to what was supposed to be so good—a source of such joy. And I’ll tell you this: neither of these parables are ones that are

brought up by clergy or by lay people that I know as one of their favorites. And yet, what you need to know is that they are the two final parables that Jesus offers here in Matthew's Gospel. If we understand Jesus' teachings to be unfolding and gathering strength—then this is his summation—this is where it ends—his final wisdom—parting stories.

But here's the thing. What if instead of scouring them for some final answer, we took them as the invitation to linger with the openness of the one who stood before Pilate, refusing to answer him either; it might offer us the chance to find one more answer to bring us closer to that Kingdom drawn near. I can tell you this; these parables evoked brisk and rapid conversation among my clergy study group for the two weeks that we looked at them. As a couple of examples—that parable of the talents that I was telling Jakey during Children's Time, there were some who saw the master in that story as a loving God who simply says, "Hey, put your faith to work and do whatever you can. Just don't sit back and do nothing. Give it a try. I'll love you no matter what." Even though that interpretation leaves out some of the details of the parable, if you read it more closely. There were others in my group who said, "This master is no God. This master is a worldly force who should be utterly disregarded and thrown out—that this master reveals the temptation of trying to accumulate more and more wealth that is never enough. Just to hold onto what you've got is never good enough—get rid of that one so I can make me more and more and more." So which is it?

In the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, there were some in the group who said that the foolish because of a lack of oil. Why they were foolish is that they were invited to be themselves in this celebration; the bridegroom just wanted them there. He just wanted the joy of their company. Why would they run out to get light and then miss the coming of the one we know as the coming of Light to the world? Others found themselves wondering where they stood in this parable. Are they the ones who forgot to do something? Or are they the ones who thought they had everything together, only to find out it didn't really matter. And still others maintained that the labels of wise and foolish are intentionally backwards and upside down, applied only to get us to question what is wisdom and what is folly because, after all—this was supposed to be an afternoon wedding. How ridiculous would those bridesmaids have looked all dolled up for the wedding, carrying not just their lanterns but big jugs of oil too? And yet in this world, don't we often have to prepare ourselves for the unpreparable? And in this case, whose fault is it that they ran out of oil? Maybe it was theirs but it wasn't just theirs because not only was the bridegroom late, but tragically late.

Both of these parables are really about the reality that life gives us limited time to find faith. There is a return both of the master and the coming of the bridegroom. There is only so much time to do whatever is needed—whether it is preparing or doing—whatever it is there is limited time. And what Capon would go on to say in his wonderful work is that what this is really about is finding trust in the relationship with Christ. For in our lifetime, we have the chance to build and develop relationship as long as we live; relationship here in the church is not so much about a creedal affirmation of anything in particular but rather a feeling deep down in our hearts that we know—we really *know* this guy Jesus, and more than that—we are in relationship with him. In the end our relationship with Christ doesn't end on his cross; in fact, it finds brand new beginning there.

So what do we do with these two parables? First, listen to them for what they are. Don't try to make them fit neatly into any box. Oh, don't forget that throughout Jesus' ministry, he would serve the poor; he would eat with the outcast; he would heal the sick; he would talk about grace and forgiving seventy times seven times; he would talk about all these things and so these parables would absolutely have to be held in contrast and tension with all those things. But in the end, we are left with these parables with which to ruminate and wonder and so the thing that I want you to ruminate on as we come close to the end of this church year and the beginning of Advent and the new coming of Christ again, is that these parables give us a chance to reflect on the fullness of who Jesus is. They give us a chance to sit with them over an extended period of time and let their truth simply unfold—not as an answer to a question we know but as an answer to a question we have not even imagined yet, and fundamental to all of these parables is—who are we and where is God in the midst of all of them?

We give the Parable of the Prodigal Son that title, and yet it's woefully wrong. That parable isn't so much about our waywardness, whether leaving or staying at home. It really is about the parable of the Forgiving Father. Isn't it? Where is God in the parable of the Good Samaritan? Think about that for a moment. It's a parable that we think we know; it's a parable that we love, but where is God in the midst of the Good Samaritan? Is it the one who heals? I don't think so. I think where God is in the Good Samaritan is Christ as the one beaten and lying on the road—Christ as the one waiting to be served, and Christ as standing with the victims, Christ as standing with the hurt or the foolish—or those who are afraid. Friends, in both these parables, wherever it is that those who fail to quite live up to the calling of God end up in a place where Christ is. I think Matthew is all about saying that what we do matters. It fundamentally matters what we do in Matthew, but never as much as the fact that we are in proximity to Christ—always able to take his hand, always able to walk forward no matter how scary it might seem or impossible it might be. Friends—that is what we need to do in our world right now. We need to reach out—take the hand of Christ and walk forward into this world—not with all the answers but rather with openness to the unfolding love of God—that mystery that surpasses all human understanding. Friends, will you join me in doing just that?
Amen.

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