

November 9, 2008

Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 27 (Matthew 25:1-13)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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I really don't like being unprepared. It is almost a phobia of mine. It might stem from the fact that I'm not particularly good at thinking on my feet. I know that about myself and so I do my best to not have to McGuyver my way through life. I keep back-up plans and supplies handy, just in case.

We have several of those never-spoil boxes of milk around in case our regular supply runs out before grocery day. I have a plastic bin in my car with emergency "essentials": diapers, plastic bags, bottle of water, snacks, change of clothes, hand sanitizer. Of course most of this stuff also lives in my mammoth handbag, but you never know...

Parables like this one don't do much to soothe my neurotic fear of unpreparedness. When I hear about the parable of the ten bridesmaids, instead of thinking about the kingdom of heaven or getting excited about Jesus, I think, "Seriously, I just figured out how to handle getting stuck in traffic at snacktime and now I need to worry about the Second Coming?"

I like to think that I'm one of the prepared bridesmaids, that I would not only have enough oil, but an extra wick handy, too, maybe even extra matches and a mini flashlight if my handbag were big enough.

When I think like that I don't have to feel anxious about being ready for God, and can spend more time being anxious about being ready for the vestry meeting or my next toddler playdate.

This parable is not, of course, about matches and oil.

On a very fundamental level, it is easy in a parable like this one to get mired in the questions of being good enough for God.

Which am I? Foolish or wise?

Do I have enough?

Am I good enough?

Is my light bright enough that God will recognize me?

It is dangerous, this parable.

In her lecture here on Thursday night, Professor of New Testament Studies Amy-Jill Levine reminded us that parables *should* make us uncomfortable. If we ever read a parable and feel good about ourselves and our status in the kingdom, we're probably not reading it right. Dr. Levine reminded us of Martin Luther's

invocation that the church should “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,” and reiterated that the parables should fill the latter half.

So I guess in light of that idea, this parable is right on the mark. I, for one, am feeling uncomfortable.

We like to think of Jesus as loving us all, regardless of how much oil we have, how peaceful we are in our hearts, how deserving we are of that love. That is what the resurrection was about, right?

And I still think that’s true. But we still have to be prepared. I think that we have to be prepared to receive that love we are so generously offered or we’ll miss it altogether.

We will not be any less loved, but we will be totally incognizant of it. Unprepared for the lavishness of the love of God in our lives, we won’t know it when it arrives. We’ll be left in the dark without knowing why, feeling unrecognized and shut out.

But fear isn’t exactly the proper response either. There’s nothing to be afraid of in the kingdom of God.

Fear is counterproductive here. To be afflicted or made uncomfortable by the idea of facing God unprepared is a healthy response. That discomfort can motivate us into action, it can get us going.

Fear, however, shuts us down, it causes us to hoard our resources, batten down the hatches and close ourselves in ignorance to the relationships that in the end will prepare us to be known by Christ.

Because that is where our preparation begins, as always, in relationship with one another. In order to be prepared, to have our lamps, wicks and oil in good order, we should be trying to experience God in as many ways as we can. We should be trying to see that face in every face. It is an easy, mild prescription for a remarkable reward.

We have, in fact, multiple opportunities to get it right, every day. We have chances to fill our lamps every time we interact with others, every time we are able to be in right relationship, to build up a new relationship or mend a broken one, you are getting prepared. It is that simple.

We are indeed good enough. We are wise enough. And your light is bright enough to draw others to it. Let’s let ‘em shine.

All Saints’, you have a marvelous reason to be proud this morning. Seventeen reasons, in fact. This morning, we are baptizing seventeen children into the body of the faithful.

We have seventeen more lives to fill with the goodness that this place has to offer in the name of a glorious and loving God. Seventeen opportunities for preparation, for ourselves, but even more importantly, for these little ones who will be learning about community, about relationship and about God from you. All of you.

Not, let me be clear, from me or Geoffrey, Elizabeth, John or Chuck, although we can help, but from you, the people who will promise to raise them to the light of Christ.