Nu’uanu Congregational Church

November 8, 2020

*“Let’s Think About This”* Matthew 25:1-13

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

 AFTER PENTECOST

Jesus’ parables are always invitations to think about how we are living our lives, and this one about the ten young women who are waiting for the bridegroom is no exception. In this little story, there are five who are wise, and five who are foolish.

Having said that, it does not take too much thought as to which group we want to identify—no one wants to be willingly thought of as foolish. So, when we self-select the group we want to go and stand with, most of us will raise our hands and go and stand with the wise ones. In the case of this parable, this means that we are the ones who will go into the celebration with the bridegroom. We are the ones who will rejoice forever more and life will be an unending bowl of cherries.

Well, that’s nice for us, isn’t it?

Let’s think about this.

Jesus tells us a story about the need for each of us to be prepared to receive the great gift of being with the bridegroom in the eternal celebration of God’s love. He wants us to appreciate the urgency of this message. He wants us to take it seriously.

OK…but…what about the others?

As I said: I do not want to be foolish—none of us wants to be foolish.

Still, I find myself reluctant to want to go and stand with those in this story who are considered wise. I understand the whole concept of being accountable for our actions, or lack thereof, but what about also being compassionate and generous?

Yes, I know: this is not a story about the totality of Jesus’ message. It is *only* about being ready to receive the bridegroom. It is *only* about our own actions…but when I think about that I end up in the same place: thinking about the actions of the “wise” ones in this story, and I find myself thinking that there are, quite frankly, enough “wise” ones in the world to go around. We do not need more *foolish* ones, no!

What we need are more who are willing to embrace and live out *all* of Jesus’ message, which finds as its most important belief that we should love God…*and*…neighbor.

So, for me this is a rather disturbing story. Think about it: not only do the wise ones *refuse* to share their oil so that all will have some, they send their friends out to buy more oil for themselves knowing that the time they waste on this errand could have dire consequences…which it does.

As one writer has observed: *“In most historic commentaries this parable is spun as yet another terror-tale reminding us that there isn’t enough room in heaven for everybody. The grand finale party with Jesus has limited seating and conditional entrance, and not everyone gets a chair and a plate. This mentality of scarcity, and the competition it seeds, have brought-on more havoc and hatred to the world.”*

And so it has.

So, let us begin to think about this parable knowing that in the ancient world, it was thought it was believed that everything was in limited supply, *everything*, including space in heaven. Let us also assume that Jesus used this mindset to impress upon us the importance of being prepared because God’s gift of love is only offered. It is not forced upon us. We can refuse it or fail to cherish it.

We receive it when we cherish it; when our lives reflect generosity and hope, because the love we were offered is God’s strength and courage. So, to receive God’s love is to be strengthened by the beloved; it is to be more than ourselves alone. It is to be made hopeful—which is to say that love makes us creative. When all seems to be lost, love envisions another reality where life goes on and even thrives.

The totality of the Jesus’ message encompasses all of this, and in doing so it has something crucial to say to *all* people—the wise *and* the foolish.

The totality of Jesus’ message is to refuse to live in a world defined by the frightening belief in scarcity, but instead to be freed to live with the assurance of God’s generosity and abundance.

And when we really believe and live with *that* reality, then our thoughts and actions will *not* automatically accept the deplorable situations and relationships produced by human sin.

We will *not* accept the millions of children who go hungry every day—before the pandemic, there were almost 12 million children living in poverty *in this country*. This does *not* have to be—whenever I walk into Safeway or Costco and look around at the mountains of fresh food, I know that no one in this country, no one in this world, has to go hungry. When I see videos of dumpsters out in back of these same stores filled with perfectly good produce and bread they could not sell that day, it’s sent to a landfill. What I see is sin, and I know that no one has to go hungry.

In a world that is quickly warming, which is making significant changes in the climate fueling larger and more prevalent hurricanes and tropical storms, I remember the fledgling attempts at addressing some of the root causes, and how our country was pulled out of such relationships with other countries. It does not have to be this way.

When we see the devastation of homes and the loss of life due to the storms that sweep through the land I find myself thinking: our world does *not* have to work this way. We can do better. We have been called to do better and to care for the earth because it belongs—not to us—but to God and the next generations beyond us.

We have more than enough. It is *not* wise to refuse to share with others. It is *not* wise to withhold resources that can *sustain* the earth so that all may enjoy the good things we all need: clean water, enough food, safe shelter, and essential medical care.

The lack of these good things is *not* because they are scarce. It is not because God’s creation is lacking. It is only due to human sin. The same writer I quoted a little while ago also wrote this:

*What IS broken is a system that pits us against each other, placing us in competition, choking the flow of resources in a disproportionate and unethical way. That is why we cannot only provide harm reduction services like food pantries. We must also engage actively in legislative advocacy and community-based organizing. It is not only about ending the hunger of a day but eradicating the causes of hunger that need not exist in today’s world.*

Going back to the parable, what if there is a part missing from it—the part that tells us we can all make it to the wedding? What if we have enough oil to share and still have light in our lamps? What if the doors don’t have to be locked just because the wedding has already started? What if all people, even latecomers, can be given the same grace that many of us could not survive without?

Our wise bridesmaids are clearly smart, gifted in the Holy Spirit with foresight and resource management skills. Thus, I feel certain, with a bit of gospel redirection, they could become excellent advocates for *all* people and the many of the challenges we face. I believe we could even learn to face them together, wise and foolish, we could even learn to work together to heal ourselves, one another, and the earth we live on.

These are the things—the important things—we all have to think about, and we should do that thinking with one another. Indeed, we all need one another when it comes to these kinds of issues—even the wise among us. And we need to decide how we will live in the world and with each other.

I would like to share a poem shared by David Turner in an email he sent to his congregation the day before the presidential election this past week. It is written by another pastor, Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

Dearly Beloved,
 Grace and Peace to you.

              Choose this day whom you will serve...              but as for me and my household,               we will serve the Holy One.                                              —Joshua 34:15

Choose, this day.
As for me, I will follow the Beloved.
I will spurn violence and all claim to dominion.
I will stand for justice:
that all may be included in the blessings of life.
With the Crucified One,
I will cast my lot, and my vote,
with the poor in spirit, and those who mourn,
with the gentle, and those who hunger for justice.
I will stand with the peacemakers
and those who are persecuted.
I will follow the one
who fed all who were hungry,
who healed all who wanted to be healed,
and welcomed all who were pushed to the margins.
I will speak only the truth, and only lovingly.
I will examine, confess and resist
my own complicity in systems that harm,
and surrender what I can
so my living may be a blessing for the poor.
I will accept the power God gives me
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves.
I will live with hope and gratitude,
with courage and generosity and kindness.
Choose this day whom you will serve,
but as for me, I will serve the God of love.

I pray we will all have a week immersed in God’s strength and courage—God’s love. Amen.