

Proper 27: Year A: 11 & 12 November 2017
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
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Keep awake: Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform, Treasure

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

“The kingdom of heaven is like this.”

Throughout the summer, and into this month, we have heard parables that begin with these words: “The kingdom of heaven is like this”: parables of sheep and goats, of wheat and weeds, and now, this parable about bridesmaids, both wise and foolish. These parables **seem** to be stories of separation: who is in, who is out:

sheep on this side, goats on the other.¹

wheat gathered up here, weeds cast into the fire over there ²

five bridesmaids with sufficient oil, joining in the wedding feast,
and five bridesmaids, on the other side of the closed door.

This parable about the bridesmaids is part of the eschatological section of Matthew’s gospel. It is one of the parables that seems to focus on the “end of time”, the time when G-d will “come back”, and the world will be judged.

Judgement. Ah, tricky...

There is a temptation to compare the two sets of bridesmaids. We should be like the wise bridesmaids, the ones who were prepared, the ones who brought not just lamps, but also a jar of extra oil for the lamps. Heaven forbid that we should be caught asleep, our lamps sputtering out for lack of oil. And like the wise bridesmaids, we should make certain to point out to our foolish companions the errors of their ways.

Yes, it is tempting to make this parable one of separation, and of judgement. But when we look closer at the parables,

the goats and sheep are allowed to romp in the same pasture through their entire lives.

the wheat and weeds grow together in the same field, until the very end.

And all ten of the bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom. They **all** have lamps, and, when the bridegroom is delayed they **all** “became drowsy and slept.”³

If there is any judgement, any separation between sheep and goats, wheat and weeds, wise and foolish bridesmaids, it is not the sheep who judge the goats, it is not the wheat that reject the weeds and, while the wise bridesmaid suggest that the others go in search of oil, it is not the wise bridesmaids who determine who is

allowed into the wedding feast. So **if** these parables are about separation and judgement—and I am not completely certain that they are—the parables indicate it is **G-d**, not us, to who is to judge. So if this parable is not about separation and judgement, what are we to make of it?

Remember this parable is not just about bridesmaids. There is also the bridegroom. The bridesmaids were waiting for the bridegroom. We don't know, but if this was the typical Jewish wedding, the bridegroom should have arrived around dusk. Upon his arrival, the bridesmaids would have danced, and been part of the procession leading the bridegroom and his guests into a banquet that would have lasted most of the night. Their dance may have even been the start of a multi-day celebration.

So the bridesmaids are ready. But the bridegroom does not come. He is delayed. The groom does not come until midnight. I wonder why the bridegroom was delayed. The parable does not tell us. Yet, it is only when the bridegroom is delayed that the problems occur. **If only** bridegroom had come on time—when he expected—most likely all ten of the bridesmaids would have had enough oil. All would have been fine. Everything would have been as expected.

Jesus says “The kingdom of heaven is like this.”

Paul writes “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Paul's writes to encourage the church in Thessalonica as they wait for Jesus to return. Some would say that the church still waiting. And if we are still waiting, I have to tell you, it is well past midnight!

So if we are waiting, then what are we to do during this time? **“Keep Awake therefore”** That is the admonishment at the end of **this** Bible reading. But in the parable, both the wise and the foolish bridesmaids become drowsy and fall asleep, so this call to “keep awake” must be different than being ever vigilant, and being continually prepared.

[This is not a call to keep “all nighters”!]

So maybe **“keep awake”** means **to be aware**, to look for opportunities to celebrate as if the bridegroom were just around the corner, or even as if the bridegroom were already here. So while this parable may—or may not be—about the end-time, and judgement, what if this parable is also about how we prepare for G-d's Kingdom? After all, Advent, and these weeks just before Advent, are the time when the church's focus turns to preparation and expectation of the Jesus's birth.



We, at St. James, have started to look at the Five Marks of Mission. These Anglican Marks of Mission are used by parishes and dioceses around the world as “practical ‘checklist’ for mission activities.”⁴ These Marks of Mission are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Luke Diteswig, Episcopal monk of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, suggests "that these five marks may be summarized as TELL, TEACH, TEND, TRANSFORM and TREASURE."⁵

So what does that mean for this community of St. James?

- **Tell:** We've have received good news of G-d's Love and Salvation. When people are loved and in love, they can't wait to let everyone know. So why are we so shy about letting others know about this love? Now I am not suggesting we should start standing on the street corners or pass out religious tracts...But maybe we are to be more aware of the many ways in which we live out our faith within our community.
- **Teach:** As G-d' children, we keep learning how to live out the presence of G-d. Perhaps we are being called to encourage one another to live a life of selfless serving, to be forgiving rather than retaliating, to be honoring rather than hating, and to be giving rather than receiving.
- **Tend:** How would it look if we truly **listen deeply** to **each** person we meet, respecting the Christ already present in them?
- **Transform:** What if we live as if Christ was renewing, restoring and uplifting us each and every day?
- **Treasure:** We are called to remember that all of creation is a gift to be cherished. What if we opened our eyes to all the ways we waste that gift, and what if we tried to honor this good Earth that G-d has given us?

Brother Luke Diteswig states

"... What we treasure is telling. How we tend it teaches others and transforms us. The five Marks of Mission all go together, communicating our common connection to Christ, for we are marked as God's daughters and sons... How do you tend what you treasure?"

That is a great question.

Do we treasure our family, and our friends? Do we treasure the people around us, yes, all of them, especially the least of them? Do we treasure this community of St. James? Do we treasure the air we breathe, the ground that supports us and the water we drink? All of these are gifts from God. We are stewards. How are we supporting and nurturing these gifts?

How do we, at St. James, live out these Marks of Mission? How do these Marks of Mission help us to be good attendants at the wedding feast of G-d?

And here is the thing. If we truly believe in the Incarnation, that G-d came to live among us, then Jesus has already come. As we will soon say as part of the Communion proclamation:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ is with us now

For the bridegroom has already come.

Let us trim are lamps, and welcome Jesus back into our lives, this day and every day, as we live out the Marks of Mission: Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform, Treasure.

AMEN

1 Matthew 25:31-46

2 Matthew 13:24-30 (Year A, Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, 23 July 2017)

3 Matthew 25:5

4 The Episcopal Church, "The Five Marks of Mission" <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/page/five-marks-mission>

5 Luke Ditewig, "Tell, Teach, Tend, Transform, Treasure" blog August 23, 2016 <https://www.ssje.org/2016/08/23/tell-teach-tend-transform-treasure/> originally published in Cowley Magazine (Fall 2017) of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist.
