

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 27A 2008

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

I found it was difficult to work with the lectionary texts this week. The first reading was our first introduction to the Book of Joshua – and it is the conclusion of that book! Actually Joshua isn't all that interesting. The first half is about the various wars of conquest of the land and the second part is about the division of the land among the tribes. But the conclusion is interesting because Joshua is offering the people choices about what god they will worship – the gods beyond the river, the Egyptian gods, the gods of this place or the God that brought them out of slavery. They choose the God of their salvation and this is the beginning of monotheism and the start of the relationship between Israel as a people and God. It started with choice. This leads us into Matthew's community's choice – to follow the way of the Pharisees or the way of Jesus.

But what to do with this parable about the ten maidens at a wedding feast? When I read it carefully, none of the characters were particularly attractive. The story is straightforward enough. Ten young women wait at the groom's family home for the groom to arrive with his wife. The bridegroom is delayed and when it appears he will be coming shortly, it turns out the 5 of the ten had brought extra oil and the other 5 did not. The five with extra oil will not share it with the others, so

the others go to the marketplace to buy more oil. Where they expected a store to be open is beyond me.

When they do return to the house, they find that the bridegroom had already arrived and the five prepared maidens entered with him to join the wedding feast. When the five others arrive, they find the door closed and there pleas for admittance, “Lord, Lord, open to us,” they are rebuffed: “Amen, I say to you I do not know you.” How is this like the kingdom of heaven? Matthew, almost always ready to give us an answer, closes with this moral: “Watch therefore, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

God is frequently referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures as a bridegroom and a wedding banquet is often a reference to heaven. Why does God in one parable send his servants out to invite everyone to the wedding banquet when the invited guests refuse to come and now in this parable bar those who sought to make themselves ready by buying more oil? The five who were admitted were the five who refused to share with the others? That sounds, perhaps, rather selfish. As for Matthew’s answer of watchfulness, well, didn’t all ten fall asleep?

I think it is hard to understand this parable on a stand alone basis. It is one of a series of three parables about watchfulness and choices that form an introduction to his account of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. Interestingly, this parable is found only in Matthew.

Matthew’s community was a largely Jewish group of followers of the way of Jesus. In following Jesus, they were in conflict in their community with the Pharisees following the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. Matthew is saying that one’s decision about Jesus has consequences.

What were the differences between the different groups of maidens? The ones who had brought extra oil were able to conceive that the unexpected might happen. They were open to the idea that the groom's arrival might be different from what was expected, he might be delayed or things may not go as planned. They were prepared for the unanticipated and thus could deal with it. The other five apparently expected everything to go as they had expected and thus were not ready for a different scenario.

Another difference is that the first group also kept their eye on the ball by staying to await the arrival of the bridegroom. The others were distracted by their need to have their lights shining. They left to get more oil (at a time when all stores were closed) and thus missed the arrival of the bridegroom. What's more important – etiquette and appearances or truly being there to joyously welcome the bridegroom and new wife?

So what can we in the 21st century take away from this story? Just as the Incarnation of the Word in a child was unexpected and, indeed, improbable to most, the Living Christ can come to us in unexpected ways. Watch, be open to God, keep our eyes on the ball that Christ seeks to enter our lives. We don't have to go looking, we don't have to have our lamps filled. We just have to be there and aware enough to welcome him when he arrives.

This past week the American people elected a bi-racial man as its next President. Given our history, that was as unexpected as his candidacy. That some news stations call him a "black man" and most others call him an "African-American man" rather than an "African-English-German (or whatever) American man" is an indication to me that old expectations still keep many from seeing the fullness of the event.

My point here is not political and is not about Barak Obama. It is about how our expectations, traditions and prejudices can limit all of us. Our church is in the midst of change and thus controversy. First it was over the adoption of the 1979 prayer book. That was 30 years ago and I still hear people say that they miss the language of the old 1928 prayer book. In most cases, I think what they miss is not the Elizabethan language so much as the old theology and individualistic piety of the '28 prayer book. The same was true of the role of women in the church and their full inclusion in all orders of leadership.

Keep alert, Mathew was telling his people in his Gospel; open your eyes and see what is. You have heard or read the story of Jesus. You have heard his teachings, his healing power and who he touched and embraced. Ask yourself if you see the love of God in him. You will now hear of his arrest, conviction and crucifixion as a blaspheming heretic and enemy of Caesar. Do you see God in that? So don't go running off preoccupied with appearances and lamps. Stay with us, follow his way and you will be with us to witness, experience and celebrate the arrival of the Bridegroom.

That offer was made by earliest followers of Jesus. It is an offer that is open to everyone in every generation and culture to whom the story is told.

Amen.