

Sermon
23 Pentecost—Proper 27-A-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
November 8, 2020
William Bradbury

Amos 5:18-24

Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

God knows this has been an anxious week for our country! From last Sunday to Thursday I helped staff a national hotline set up by our Presiding Bishop and I prayed with 14 anxious and hurting people who called. In such times it does little good and often some harm, to focus solely on a person's worries, because if we go down the rabbit hole of anxiety our minds get more anxious, not less. **After all, God knows our problems better than we do.**

But if we focus on the God Who Is: Creator, Christ, and Comforter, our hearts begin to relax and open up to God's ever-present Life and Love. It is comforting to remember that no matter who is president, God is still on the throne of the universe, Christ is still our Friend and Guide, and the Spirit is still filling us with the love and purpose of Triune God, so we might fulfill our role.

And what is that role?

Is our role to be a partisan who cares more about our political party than about the Kingdom of God? To care more about our political opinions than about people?

750 years before Jesus, the prophet Amos reveals our role as nation, parish, and individual:

In the wonderful paraphrase translation from The Message God says:

"I can't stand your religious meetings.

I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.

Do you know what I want?

I want justice—oceans of it.

I want fairness—rivers of it.

That's what I want. That's all I want.

Jesus may be thinking of this passage when he tells us in the Sermon on the Mount: **"Set your hearts FIRST on God's Realm, and on God's saving justice...."**

 Setting our hearts first on God's Realm brings us to the parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids:

Both groups, when they wake up the morning of the wedding, have the same goal: to meet the groom when he arrives that night, so they can join in the celebration. They all have the same goal, but what separates them is **what they do in the meantime.**

The foolish bridesmaids, instead of using the day preparing for his arrival, wander off doing whatever makes them happy. **This foolish group has, as the British say, "lost the plot."**

The wise bridesmaids, on the other hand, spend their day **PREPARING** for the groom's arrival, by buying enough oil for a long night.

Maybe the foolish sing hymns about how much they love Jesus, **but in the meantime**, they ignore the injustice done to the People of Color, the immigrant, and the unemployed, the people Jesus wants us to serve in his Name.

The wise, on the other hand, work for the common good and not just for the good of people who look, believe, and think like them.

 As Fred Craddock says, there are two basic types of parables: those that offer a surprise of grace at the end (a party for a prodigal, a full day's pay for one-hour workers, a tax collector justified and others). And those parables "that follow the direct course from cause to effect as surely as the harvest comes from what is sown. There are no gifts or parties".

This is one of those parables: **at the end the foolish find that by forgetting to act like they care about the groom, there was no reason for them to be at the wedding.**

 In the meantime of our lives, we are called to be, not bridesmaids, but stewards: stewards of God's grace and stewards of God's justice.

In my experience I've known too many church folks who find it easy to imitate the foolish bridesmaids. They say they love God and their church—yet when they fill out their pledge card each fall, they are out of oil, so they give a drop or two of what's left over.

They give a tip instead of a tithe. And when they do that, they miss their calling to be faithful stewards of the abundance of God.

When I was a young priest in charge of new mission south of Atlanta, I attended a diocesan stewardship workshop for the clergy. As I listened, I

started getting angry. The speakers had the nerve to tell me that I should be working to give back to God 10% of my income. I thought: who do these people think they are—I've got a young child, seminary debt, I'm earning far less than my friends, and I'm working for God 24/7. I stormed out of that workshop and drove home in a huff. But, by God's grace, later that night it occurred to me who I was angry at: I was angry at myself—angry that I was a reluctant giver, giving out of a place of scarcity and fear, not out of a place in touch with the generosity and courage of God.

IN short--I was trusting in myself and not in Christ. I was working hard to keep myself afloat, instead of trusting God who is: Creator, Christ, and Spirit.

So my wife and I had a heart to heart where I learned she had always been a better giver than me and was on board with slowly raising our pledge each year by 2% on the way to a tithe that reflected trusting in God to supply our needs.

Here's the thing: When we only tip God, we become like the Dead Sea, which receives an abundance of water every day from the Jordan River, but then hoards that water instead of passing it on to the surrounding desert—**and by keeping the water to itself it ends up dead.**

There is a party at the end of this parable and the wise get to enjoy it. But their joy doesn't come just at the end, but is present in every moment during the day as they fulfill their role as stewards of the abundance of God.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple famously said, **"The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."**

As we let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream, we become channels of God's abundance--not just ourselves and our church, but also for our nation and the whole world that Christ loves.