

Matthew 25:1-13

Nov. 8, 2020

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, this past week, we experienced a little bit of what the bridesmaids experienced in today's parable. They were waiting for the groom and we were waiting for the election results.

The traditional understanding of this parable of the bridesmaids is that we have no idea as to when Jesus will return, so we always better be prepared for his arrival.

This can be an end times kind of thing – Behave yourselves, because the judgment is coming at any minute. You don't want Jesus to catch you being unrighteous.

Or, it could be a right now kind of thing, in that we serve Jesus by serving our neighbor. So, be prepared to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and stand up for the oppressed, because at any moment your neighbor may need you, and we love God by loving our neighbor.

In the first case, we need to be prepared to go to the party in heaven. In the latter, we need to be prepared for service right here and now. The latter one actually makes more sense if you know that oil is a symbol for good works. You often hear Jesus talk about how we need to produce good fruits, good works, for our neighbors.

And, if we take Amos into account, the latter explanation makes even more sense. As Lutherans and Episcopalians, we use scripture to interpret scripture.

Amos was a prophet in the 8th Century BCE. This was just before the kingdom of Assyria came into their height of military power.

As Assyria was amassing its great strength, Amos was recalling what God had told the Israelites through Moses before they entered the Promised Land. They were told that if they did not follow God's commands, they would be kicked out of the Land.

As with what happened for all of the Prophets, the people thought that offering sacrifice was enough. They thought they could do whatever they wanted, and because they were the chosen people all they had to do was offer a sacrifice and all would be good. Today, thanks to Bonhoeffer, we call that cheap grace.

So, being a good prophet, knowing that God was not pleased with their actions, or inactions. Amos warns them to get their act together. The orphans are starving and the widows are naked. The powerful, wealthy, and elite were oppressing the poor.

The people thought that it was enough to just worship God, but Amos warns them that that's not enough, they also need to take care of one another, especially the widow and orphan.

You may recall Martin Luther King Jr. taking up Amos 5:24 as it pertained to people of color in the US in the 1960s. You can't go to church on Sunday and then stomp on your brothers and sisters of color the next day. That's not what God wants from us.

God calls for justice. God's justice of everyone being treated fairly in love and equity. God's justice is the oppressed being set free, the hungry being fed, the naked being clothed, the thirsty getting a drink of water, and the homeless having a place to go.

God doesn't care how many sermons we hear or how many times we have communion. Those things are purely to empower us to go out and do justice in the world. The justice part is the important part. Worship without actions of love towards others is unrighteousness. And so in our baptismal covenant we put justice before peace.

No justice. No peace. If we do not love our neighbors as ourselves, there is no peace.

And so, the foolish bridesmaids are short on oil for their lamps. They let their lamps go out. They stop carrying about the groom, Jesus, by not caring about other people. And so when Jesus does show up, they have no oil and demand it from those who have brought extra.

And the rest of the parable seems pretty harsh. Will Jesus not let these women into heaven, into the party? Does Jesus really not know them? Does he not know them, because they didn't know him in those who needed their oil, their good works of love?

I always get transported back to the Garden of Eden. What if they would have just waited without any oil and went into the banquet without their lamps trimmed? What if they would have just repented? What if they just said, "I'm sorry. I didn't bring enough."? Surely they would have been forgiven and been able to join the procession, right?

Parables are always complicated. They are chewy as I like to say. They are something to be pondered. They can be taken way too literally and they can be too easily dismissed as well.

So, what are we to make of this parable, Amos, and oil being a symbol of good works? Is Jesus the groom? Is the banquet heaven? Do we need good works to get into heaven? And what about repentance?

Maybe in what seems like an injustice, the foolish women not getting into the banquet, we realize that what we need is a savior. We need someone to get us into the party.

Or, maybe it's just that we never know when Jesus will return, so we need to keep diligent and never give up.

In Thessalonica, the Christians there were worried that those who died would be excluded from the resurrection when Jesus returns. Paul reassures them, and us, that no one is outside of the resurrection – dead or alive.

And so, we use scripture to interpret scripture.

We know Christ crucified and risen, seated at the right hand God, and promising to come to us again, some day. When? Nobody knows. But until then, we are charged with loving our neighbors as ourselves, loving our neighbors as Jesus. To let our light shine before others so that they will know God.

As it says in Matthew 5 ¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

In baptism, we are handed a candle and we are told – let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Without oil, a lamp will not shine. And so, maybe the oil isn't the good works, but the love within us that enables us to do God's good works in the world.

There is a reason the Holy Spirit looks like wisps of flames. It is God's energy, which resides in each and every one of us.

But, how do we get that spark to blaze?

And now we are back to worship – hearing God's word, praying, being in fellowship with other believers, remembering our baptisms, and having Holy Communion when possible refills our oil flasks.

The thing to remember is that worship is not an end in and of itself. Worship leads to our light shining in the world. Worship and then action. Like putting the oxygen mask on first when the air pressure in airplane goes down so that you can help others.

In Amos' day, worship had become a reaction to previous actions instead of empowerment for future actions, and that was the problem. The people took advantage of the poor and then went to worship to offer sacrifice to make up for their bad actions, and then they would go out and perpetrate the same injustices.

For us, as Christians, Lutherans and Episcopalians, we worship to fill our oil flasks so that we can shine our lights out in a dark world. Worship leads to action, righteous actions of God's justice in the world. That's why we do confession and forgiveness at the very beginning of worship – so that we can focus on being light when we leave. It's forward looking, not backwards.

In worship, we are loved so that we can love others. Time with God fills our flasks for the sake of the world. We're already good with God. Now we are sent to make known the Kingdom of God here and now, and we can do that no matter who the president is. The government can never prevent us from living God's kingdom, because God is our ultimate ruler.

So, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Good works are not about us and how great we are. Good works are about God and how great God is. Loved, we love. Loved, we shine.

As Luther said, the Christian shoe maker does not put little crosses on each shoe. The Christian shoe maker makes the best shoes possible and then sells them at a fair price so that their neighbors can have good shoes.

Loved, we love.

So, let's trim our lamps. We've got a party to get to – and it's right outside of our own front doors. Just be sure to wear a mask, for now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.