November 9, 2014 Proper 27

All Saints’ Church Year A

Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-16 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Psalm 70 Matthew 23:1-12

Let all who seek you dear Lord, rejoice and be glad in you.

The first poem that touched my spirit, which moved me, was John Donne’s poem, “No Man is an Island, Entire of itself, everyman is a piece of the continent.” It was the ending that hooked me, “And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: It tolls for thee.”

It was the first time that I felt important; that meaning and value and purpose were key, and that my actions mattered.

Yesterday, Bishop Rob opened up the 212th Annual Diocesan Convention with a reference to John Donne’s devotions by referring to God as a metaphorical God. I was interested in his allusion and looked up the devotion:

“My God, my God, thou art a direct God… a literal God, a God that wouldst be understood literally and according to the plain sense of all that you sayest. But thou art also a figurative, a metaphorical God, too. A God whose words there is such a height of figures… voyages… to fetch remote and precious extensions, such spreadings… such sinews, even in thy milk. Thou art the Dove that flies.”

Inspired by the Convention yesterday and John Donne, I would like to take a voyage with you and explore the remote and precious extensions of the story of the ten bridesmaids.

Frankly, I have trouble understanding this parable. Of course, that is the point of a parable. They are meant to disturb you, to unsettle the waters, to unhinge you, at least a bit.

On one hand we are told to stick with the five wise bridesmaids who remembered their oil. Be prepared, informed; stay awake (though they didn’t do that very well, as all ten fell asleep). Be alert, be ready to recognize the Christ in your midst with your own light, your own reasoning, your own preparedness. And we will be invited to the great party. There is power in this demand, as the discipline to recognize the Christ in one’s midst leads to a mature faith.

Yet, if we take this story too literally, we can pledge ourselves to moral lessons that can be dangerous:

1. Ultimate responsibility rests with me- independent, faithful, wise, and confident, and yet isn’t all of this responsibility connected with our reliance on God? We can forget that simple fact.
2. My ability to prepare well makes me better than others. (Yikes).
3. And this may be the most worrisome: To think that the bridegroom arrived BECAUSE I did all the RIGHT THINGS. I remember friends of mine in college who were told by their minister that if they only prayed in the right way, they could get pregnant. We are susceptible to thinking that through our own horsepower (or oil), we are bringing in the Kingdom of God.

We can never prepare; God surprises us. And often things go bump in the night. Maybe one of those foolish bridesmaids had to feed her ill mother, and in her attending of her mother, she forgot to tend to her oil.

I have a lot of questions about this parable:

If it is such a festive time, why are the lamps so small, not capable of burning oil through the night?

Why is the bridesgroom delayed? Where’s his lamp? And where is his bride? No bridesgroom hangs out with unmarried women before getting married; even in the 21st century, this is not done.

They all fell asleep, and when they woke up, why did the “wise” bridesmaids feel entitled to keep their oil to themselves? It’s a party; it’s a time to celebrate. Why are these five so selfish? Hoarding all the oil to themselves? You don’t have to share oil, to share the light. Why are they leaving their sisters in the dark to fend for themselves?

What dealer keeps his shops open at midnight?

The foolish brides are excluded, not because of a crime, but because of the lack of foresight.

God’s grace seems entirely absent. The tone is grim, with no joy, anywhere.

I think this might be the key question: What happens if you are in the party, and you hear the knocking of the foolish ones outside? What are you to do?

I don’t think the point is to let them in, even if you had the power. I think the point is to leave the party and to go stand by them.

At some point, we have all experienced being outside the party, in the dark, in the wilderness, with God’s surprises as our only anchor.

We can’t prepare for the unexpected. Protection is never full proof. Sometimes all we are is alone, stripped of our defenses, frightened, confused, and in pain. Our identity fleeting.

In 2008, one of my students wrote a beautiful meditation she entitled, “Broken Glass.” Her father had lost his job, and they were moving from a very wealthy neighborhood to a poorer one, and she was embarrassed. Her friends teased her, and she was ashamed of her family.

On the day of the move, they were in the new house, her parents, her grandmother, who lived with them, and her little brother and sister, with boxes and furniture and cabinets packed into the hallways. Her four year old brother was racing around the house with a paper airplane in his hand, and he was pretending to be flying. He ran into a glass cabinet that had not been secured. It began to waver. In it were all of his grandmother’s teacups that she had collected all over the world: Her prized possessions. And then it happened- it crashed, breaking all the glass. Her little brother broke into tears and their grandmother scooped him up, held him and comforted him. “I could care less about my teacups. I care about you. You are not hurt. You are my love. I love you,” and she rocked him back and forth.

An insight dawned on my student. She would rather be in her house of “broken glass” than to be in the mansion they had just left. “I had been that girl,” she summed up, “the one who had no idea that a loving home of broken glass is better than the riches of the rich house. And to think I had been embarrassed to claim my family, my family who loved me.”

At Convention, we had to vote on a Resolution that would change the status of Trinity Episcopal Church in Tilton from a church to a mission, not in order for it to come under the Bishop’s care, but rather in order for the Bishop to close down the church, to deconsecrate it.

It was a solemn vote. The members of the Vestry of Trinity spoke on behalf of closing the church. You could see how much pain they were in.

Father Justin, the Rector of a nearby church, one flourishing, stood at the microphone and said, “I have travelled all year with these good people. And it’s not that they are foolish or unprepared.” (We all knew that he was referencing the gospel lesson). “They are in the dark, their lamps extinguished. And they are brave, and courageous, as they stand in the wilderness waiting for God’s light, waiting for what’s next. And I will stand with them. I don’t want to be any other place.”

And then he began to cry.

We are All Saints’ and we have a beautiful church and we are in the light. So many churches rely on our assessment: We pay 16.5 percent of our budget to the diocese so that we in New Hamphsire can carry out the work of lifting up the Christ in our midst, of recognizing how Christ is working in ourselves, our churches, our neighborhoods and in our world. There will be other churches in New Hampshire that will probably close. We need to be present. And hopefully help those small churches in depressed areas have life. We are carrying the diocese in so many ways, and it is our privilege to stand with them and to see where God is taking all of us. It is the wilderness that will mature us in our faith, in our love and in our understanding of community and family.

God surprises us. And it’s not us bringing in the Kingdom, but God working with all of us, prepared and not so prepared, with oil, or no oil in sight, and maybe with broken glass scattered, but yet, all of us are in anticipation of the glorious party that we will all share.

Amen

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton