

**23 Pentecost  
November 8, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

As we all know, it took four days to get the ballots counted, but Joe Biden has won the election and will become the 46<sup>th</sup> President on the United States. I believe we are at a new beginning in our life in this nation. I believe this not just about politics. This new beginning is not simply a restatement of old progressive good intentions. I believe it is rather a moment when we must consider that God is doing a new thing. If that is the case, then the old things we may cherish must be relinquished. The “old things” to be given up are whatever it is that resists the purposes of God for our life in the world today.

And, I believe that the “new thing” to be received is a newness of what God desires and wills for the world. It will be a world not grounded in fear, greed, and violence, but a world that pivots on the generosity, civility, and restorative justice that honors all neighbors, and that provides for all the impoverished in need. This story is deeply grounded in the values our faith is built upon, and it is not only a gift ... it is an assignment ... it is a task to be done ... it is a story of which each of us is a living part ... and it must be acted upon.

We are at a breaking moment in the life of the world. There is no going back. There is no holding on to what was. There is no chance to continue to treasure what we have long treasured that is in contradiction to the purposes of God. It is not “liberal” or “progressive” to see that the future will be a society in which all persons will share in an equitable economy. The burdensome old divisions between rich and poor ... male and female ... gay and straight ... White and Black and Latino ... native born and immigrant ... all these old distinctions are no longer sustainable. Such an awareness is not at all “progressive” ... it is the good news of the Gospel. It is what it means to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. In the midst of all that we have to deal with, we hear a story this morning about a wedding, a bridegroom, and ten bridesmaids. I’ll be honest with you ... I do not like this story ... especially at this time.

Let me tell you one of the ways I hear this story. I will let you know that this interpretation comes out of my skepticism ... and sarcasm ... even my anger.

First, notice that this story is about a wedding, but the bride is never mentioned. So where is she? The story is all about a wedding ... and all about a **bridegroom** ... but no bride. Oh, I know ... it is **always** just about **the bridegroom**. There are ten bridesmaids waiting for **him**. They wait and they wait and they wait. They wait for the **bridegroom** for the party to start. They wait until they fall asleep. So where is **the bridegroom**? Oh, that’s right, the text says **he** was delayed. **DELAYED!** Delayed for **his** own wedding ... who does **he** think **he** is? Oh, that right.

**He's** the bridegroom ... if **he** wants to be delayed I guess **he** can be delayed. And then, when **the bridegroom** does shows up, **he** invites into the party only the bridesmaids who have oil in their lamps ... the ones privileged enough and wealthy enough to have bought enough oil to last. And, when the other bridesmaids go all the way to the oil shop after midnight, get the owner out of bed, and get their lamps filled, and return to the party, the **bridegroom** shuts the door in their face. What a self-centered, narcissistic and petulant **bridegroom**.

No wonder I don't like this story. If it is understood this way, it sounds too much like it is about the life we have lived for the past four years ... all because of a self-centered, narcissistic and petulant "**bridegroom**." Does it sound like anyone you know? No wonder I don't like the story ... especially right now.

However, the story ... this parable ... begins with "The kingdom of heaven is like ..." That tells me that the author of Matthew's gospel wanted us to learn something about Jesus' understanding of what the world might look like in a "new" normal ... a "new" normal that is closer to the values of God rather than the values of a world led by self-centered, narcissistic, and petulant leaders.

First of all, there will be a wedding. Even if the bridesmaids have to wait for the bridegroom until midnight. Even if the bridesmaids fall asleep ... there is a wedding in the end.

Think about that un-mentioned bride. Can you imagine how she must be feeling? Wondering whether she has been stood up on her wedding day. But, the story says that the bridegroom was delayed, and we know about delays ... just think about the last four days. Somethings take time. Sometimes there are extenuating circumstances that cause holdups. However, the wedding does happen ... the story says the bridegroom did show up. The "new" normal will arrive ... it just may take some time. The parable of the bridesmaids ends with a wedding. It ends in celebration and joy. We dare not abandon this glorious ending simply because we've grown tired of waiting.

However, what about the bridesmaids and their lamps. Sure, there is going to be a wedding, but it is not necessarily going to go the way we think it's going to go. In the parable, the bridesmaids have to wait so long for the groom's arrival, they fall asleep. Surely they didn't want the party to begin at midnight, and it was not their choice or desire to wait. However, the five bridesmaids who brought extra oil in their flasks prepare themselves for the long haul, just in case. They considered and took seriously the possibility of a surprise ... a delay ... a hardship ... some unpredictable event. They didn't allow their preconceived ideas about the bridegroom or the party to distract them from what was actually in front of them. They remained open and adaptable to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

I wonder if we are ready for the long haul. Do we have the flexibility to handle the unexpected? Or, do we still clinging to rigid and narrow notions of what God's presence might look like and, in so doing, we miss God when God actually shows up? Can we bear an unpredictable expression of the divine in our lives? In the life of this nation? A divine "new" normal that surprises us? If God's notion of time, faithfulness, fulfillment, and celebration look different

from ours, will we still follow God into the wedding hall ... or will we find an excuse to give our regrets.

I don't like the fact that the five "foolish" bridesmaids in the parable arrive too late to gain entrance to the wedding. I don't like the fact that the bridegroom closes the door in their face. I don't like the fact that the story leaves five women out in the cold. It has too much of an exclusionary tone to it. It has too much of an "us and them" sound to it. If God's unconditional love is all inclusive, what about those five bridesmaids left out of the party.

The fact of the matter is, whether I like these things or not, they happen. Opportunities vanish ... windows close ... chances fade ... time runs out. We know this because it happens to us regularly. The opportunity to reconcile the friendship ... to forgive the debt ... to break the habit ... to write the check ... to heal the wound ... to confront the injustice ... to embrace our faith ... to release the bitterness. All these opportunities all too often close down ... they slip away ... the possibility to act vanishes.

We hate this, of course, so we tell ourselves it really isn't true. We tell ourselves that there is always tomorrow. That we'll get to it ... whatever "it" is ... eventually. That there's still time left.

But what if there isn't? What if this parable is telling us to be alert now ... awake now ... active now? What if it is inviting us to live as if each day ... singular and fleeting ... is all we have? Tomorrow ... if it comes ... will be its own gift, its own miracle, its own challenge. Don't presume that it belongs to you. Do what is holy ... and right ... and necessary ... and do it now.

I remember four years ago this Sunday. Someone asked me how my week had gone. I said, "Fine ... until I woke up on Wednesday morning and learned that Donald Trump was elected President." I felt like one of those bridesmaids left out in the cold. Well, 70 million of our fellow Americans voted for President Trump in this selection, and now they are feeling like they are out in the cold. For me this means that if I am to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, that I must "love my neighbor as myself," and treat them as I wanted to be treated four years ago ... with humility, compassion, and inclusion.

As far as I can tell, the fatal mistake the five "foolish" bridesmaids make is that they leave the wedding venue. They assume that their oil supply is more important to the groom than their presence at his party. So, they ditch the scene at its most crucial moment and go shopping, thus depriving themselves of a wonderful celebration, and depriving the bridegroom of their companionship, support, and love on his special day.

Perhaps one of the lessons of this parable is ... don't allow your fear ... or your sense of inadequacy ... to keep you away from the party. Be willing to show up as you are ... complicated, confused, disheveled, unsure, half-lit and half-baked. The bridegroom delights in you ... not in your lamp. Your light doesn't have to dazzle. Remember, God created light. God

is light. And Jesus is the light of the world. Your half-empty flask of oil isn't the point. You are ... so stay.

We are at a breaking moment in the life of the world. There is no going back. There is no holding on to what was. There is no chance to continue to treasure what we have long treasured that is in contradiction to the purposes of God. It is not "liberal" or "progressive" to see that the future will be a society in which all persons will share in an equitable economy. The burdensome old divisions between rich and poor ... male and female ... gay and straight ... Black and White and Latino ... native born and immigrant ... all these old distinctions are no longer sustainable. Such an awareness is not at all "progressive," it is the good news of the Gospel. It is what it means to take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

I had written most of this sermon before I heard the news that former Vice President Joe Biden was now President Elect Joe Biden. I was going to begin the sermon with "Are you as exhausted as I am?" It wasn't the physical exertion that had exhausted me, rather it was the emotional and spiritual energy that it has taken to get through this last week. And it is not like any of us were in great shape going into this situation ... COVID-19 affecting every aspect of our lives and how we relate to one another ... our efforts of reckoning with racial issues ... dealing with an economy that seems to work for some but is leaving a lot of hard working people behind ... and a divisive nation, and state, and city, and neighborhood. We couldn't even have a casual conversation with someone down the block without having to be heavily guarded and acutely aware that one wrong word, or a misunderstood reference, or one of us wearing a mask and the other not wearing one, just might set off an argument.

However, I then heard the news. I felt both relief and hope ... yet there was still something nagging me as if this wasn't really the end, but rather a beginning of something "new" that was going to require much of me. I sincerely believe that we are at a new beginning in our life in this nation. I believe this not just about politics. This new beginning is not simply a restatement of old progressive good intentions. It is rather a moment when we must consider that God is doing a "new" thing. And, if that is true, then many of the old things we cherish must be relinquished ... we will have to let go of them. The "old things" to be relinquished are whatever it is that resists the purposes of God for our life in the world.

Then the "new" thing to be received is a newness of what God wills for the world. It will be a world not grounded in fear, greed, and violence, but a world that pivots on the generosity, civility, and restorative justice that honors all our neighbors, and that provides for all the impoverished in need. I believe this story is deeply grounded in the values our faith is built upon, and it is not only a gift ... it is an assignment ... it is a task to be done. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously we cannot be passive in this moment ... it is a call to action.

Amen.