

**24 Pentecost
November 12, 2023**

**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.**

Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten

Once again I have two questions I'm going to ask to begin my sermon today. I invite you to offer an answer. The first question is this: Name a game that requires a ball in order to play it. (basketball, football, baseball, volleyball, golf, etc.) Great! Now, and my second: What is the purpose of a sermon? (teach, inspire, challenge, give us something to think about, etc.).

Now, turning to our gospel reading in Matthew 25:1-13, Jesus' parable of the ten bridesmaids, the first thing we discover is that there's a dilemma! And I'm not talking about the one involving the bridesmaids. I'm talking about the fact that there are two very different interpretations of this text. Depending upon which one you prefer, you will end up in a very different place from the other. So which one should I preach?

I went back and forth, trying to decide and in the end determined that today I'm going to preach not one but two sermons. Yes, two. A double header. The first is based on a literal interpretation of the parable--and it is the more traditional interpretation. The second is based on an alternative interpretation, one which views the parable through the lens of metaphor.

Now, the first.

We begin with a bit of information about Jewish wedding practices in Jesus' day: Once a Jewish couple became "engaged" as we would call it, they were actually legally bound to each other for at least a year. (Hence the story of Joseph considering divorcing Mary when he learned she was pregnant.)

During this one year (+) period the bride was to prepare herself and plan the wedding. Meanwhile, the groom was to prepare the new home in which the newlyweds would live and raise a family. The bride didn't know when her groom would show up for the wedding since he could show up at any time after the one year mark. And actually, the groom didn't either. It was the groom's father that gave the groom permission to go. Both bride and bridesmaids needed to be ready to go at a moment's notice. And, if the groom was a bit of a character he may well show up at midnight to surprise his sleepy bride along with her entourage of attendants.

So, comparing the coming of the kingdom of heaven to the coming of the bridegroom was a clever analogy for Jesus to make. His listeners would understand him immediately. And besides, weddings were always good fodder for lessons about life.

Moving on then, we're confronted with the question of what exactly was it that five of the bridesmaids did wrong. They had prepared themselves for the wedding...or so they thought...for what they had expected anyway. What they hadn't prepared themselves for was any unusual eventuality like the one which occurred but which they hadn't expected. In short, they were prepared for the expected but not the unexpected.

Jesus message to his listeners through the parable then: The kingdom of heaven will come when and in ways you don't expect. So be prepared for the unexpected.

The only way to do that was to be constantly and unwaveringly vigilant. In so doing you will not just prepare yourself for the second coming of Christ, by doing so you will serve as a light to the world.

Not a bad message. Certainly theologically sound.

But for one fatal flaw. This interpretation of the parable leaves one always wanting, always longing for the kingdom of heaven yet to come. In a sense, it leaves its adherents in the dark. Waiting, waiting, waiting rather than in the light of Christ's continuing presence that is already here.

Sermon # two then...

One day, in the middle of a lecture one of my college professors said something that caught my attention. He said, "Make sure you take time to think about how you think." Now honestly, I don't remember the class, the course or the professor. But I do remember those words! In fact they made such an impression upon me that I've thought, journaled and written about them ever since.

Fast forward to April 17, 2020. The coronavirus pandemic was just beginning to unleash its full fury. I woke up on that date and decided I was going to contribute something to the healing of the pandemic situation. But what? As I thought about it, I remembered my college professor's words about taking time to think about how we think and decided to publish some of my thoughts online through my Facebook page. I've done it ever since, writing a post, prayer or poem twice a week. All because I believe so passionately in taking time to think about how we think--because how we think undergirds every word, every feeling, every action we ever take in our lives, including such things as how we interpret Jesus' words in today's parable.

Now, coming at this parable from a different direction...there was a lab technician who conducted an experiment where he placed a batch of fleas in a flask and placed a breathable cover over it. For three days the fleas banged their little noggins on the underside of that cover. On the fourth day, while the fleas were still actively jumping about in the jar, none of them jumped out even though they can typically jump 3-4 feet in the air. Here, though, they had decided not to do so. And the implications of that are truly profound.

Here's my point.

The sum total of our personal beliefs about God, about Jesus Christ--including his second coming--the church and life in general are like those fleas in the jar. When we put these individual beliefs altogether we call that our belief system (a collection of the doctrines and dogma of our faith). We don't just recite or sing about these beliefs in worship on a Sunday morning, we live by them all week long. Yet once we are adults, we seldom take a good hard look at them to see if they still fit us, to see if they are still relevant, to see if they still hold true--or to see if they might actually be limiting us. Even as adults, we tend not to jump out of our theological jar.

This is where I come in.

I believe the purpose of a sermon--and therefore my job as the preacher--is to help you remove the cover from your theological jar. To let your individual beliefs out where you can spin them around, turn them over, and take a good look at them to determine whether or not they are still valid, still relevant, still worthy of the belief system you need to navigate life in the world today.

One more analogy.

Imagine at any one of the several NFL football games this afternoon the teams played by their usual rules, same field, same players. Only thing different is that instead of a football the referee throws them a basketball. Or a baseball. A golf ball. Or maybe best of all, a wiffle ball.

Again, my point:

The shape of the ball determines the shape of the game. This isn't just true in sports. It's also true when it comes to our beliefs because the shape of our beliefs shapes how we experience and interpret life in general and our lives in particular..

Finally, I believe the point, or one of them at least, that Jesus sought to make in telling the wedding parable is this: The ball you and I need to play this beautiful but complicated game called life day after day isn't one made from the doctrines and dogma of the church. Rather, the ball we need is called "faith"--a faith that is separate and distinct from our beliefs. By faith I mean, to trust that we can enjoy a living experience of Christ's presence and power in our lives here and now--because Christ is always coming to us.

Imagine for a moment that this is our take on reality: That we see Christ (who said, "I am with you always.") coming into and being present in every situation, every relationship, every person--most of all within--our very selves. That kind of imagining is what we call faith or trust. It's alive...and enlivening. It's fresh...and refreshing. And it's powerful...and empowering.

This is Christ's place and purpose in our lives.

Amen.

