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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 12, 2017

Readings from Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Matthew 25:1-13

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Matthew 25:1-13

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us the word, the living word to inspire and challenge, encourage and invite us to consider what it means to be faithful in a life of faith. So be with me now as I share the words you have laid upon my heart as we wrestle with your Word together. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Last weekend, I was with some of the women in the Sarah's women's study circle on our annual trip. We go someplace every year. I think this was the sixth time. This time, we focused on central and

on with Brigham Young to Utah. Those who stayed built this new temple, designed by Gyo Obata, and they believe that is where Jesus will arrive at the second coming.

In fact, both of the passages today focus on that issue of the return of Jesus. The gospel reading is the one about the parable of the two bridesmaids who will await the return of the groom, so eloquently shared with us by the choir in song. The focus of the parable is about being prepared, prepared for the return of Christ and the heavenly banquet that will occur. In the passage, five of the Bridesmaids have prepared and brought extra oil but five others have not and this results in an uncomfortable ending that really grates on us.

It was helpful to read the work of Ken Bailey, a Presbyterian pastor, who had served and taught for many years in the Middle East. He explains the customs of that time and place: that when a couple was to be married, the groom, along with some friends of family, would walk to the other side of town or the village to the bride's home. She would then be invited to ride on some animal in a parade of all the family and friends. They would take the longest route back to the groom's house in order to share the good news of the coming marriage. When they finally arrive at the groom's home, that's where they will have the wedding banquet. So we have heard this morning about the groom who goes to collect the bride and 10 bridesmaids are waiting. The wait is very long and they understandably fall asleep. But finally, at midnight, they are awakened by the shouts of the arrival of the wedding party. The five who are ready go out to welcome the others with their lamps that are still burning. But the five who run out ask for oil, receive none, and have to leave to get more.

Now, Bailey shares the reflections of a Syrian commentator from the 11th century. He feels that there are some unusual things going on in this parable. As some of you may know, in the Jewish tradition, 10 men or a *minyan* are required for Jewish worship including wedding ceremonies. But in this parable, there are 10 women. The scholar believes that Jesus is pointing out subtly that women are equal and should be included in the *minyan*. The other thing that Bailey notes are the negative responses from both the prepared bridesmaids and Jesus. I don't know about you, but it always feels a little unsettling to me to read this. But Bailey says, "Maybe what we have read is really not the end of the story." He says, "In that culture, the word 'no' is only part of the negotiation. We aren't used to haggling." But he said, "We don't know. Does the bridegroom relent and let them in or not? In the Middle East, the word no is never an answer, it's just a pause in the negotiations." So is there more to this story that we haven't heard?

So what is this parable trying to tell us? A number of things. One as noted earlier is the changing perceptions of the role of women. Another is the reminder that life in the Kingdom of God requires a commitment to the long haul. "Advanced planning is necessary and reserves must be on hand," he said. But he also realizes we don't become perfect, faithful Christians right away. Maybe never. But faith is a journey and we grow in faith over time.¹

So in the parable, as the bridesmaids wait and wait and the bridegroom finally arrives, some are ready

difficult time. They were being persecuted and sometimes quite severely. So the promise of Jesus return in their lifetime was quite a source of hope and comfort. They thought it was going to happen and happen very soon. But Jesus, at this point, has not come yet and their loved ones, some of them, have been dying. And those left behind wonder what happens to those who died before Christ comes again? Paul knows his audience. He's sensitive to their grief and their sorrow and the source of their concerns and essentially he says, "Fear not. They will not be left out. You are bound with them forever." So he acknowledges the reality of their grief and assures them of the promise of always belonging to God and one another, whether it's in this life or the next. So he tells them to hold onto that which is fast and good and continue to serve the community of faith in the meantime.

So we are reminded as we look through histories of different groups of believers that kind of waiting and anticipation took place in many different ways in many different denominations. It did not occur then when it was expected. Other groups have anticipated dates. Others like those of the Church of Christ predict a place. The Millerites are one such group. They are one of the many called millennialists, named the date it would take place, but time after time, the predicted date would pass. And then the question is then what?

I think the words of Paul and Matthew encouraged those in the early church and encourage us about what it means to be called in faith in the meantime. To remember that while we are invited to new life in the time to come, life is a gift in the present and we are to be sources of new life for others. I think if we're honest, we know it's hard for us to relate to the struggles of those in the early church and the anticipation that they had and the persecution they faced. But they were invited to live in the meantime, to serve in the meantime, to love in the meantime and so are we.

There was an episode of 60 Minutes a couple of weeks ago with Anderson Cooper and he shared the story of serving in the midst of suffering, of the saving gift of being literally able to save others. He began by remembering what took place in France during World War II "fter Hitler's army entered the country, took over, and raised the Nazi flag over Paris. The Nazi's then relied on French authorities and police to identify Jews and others and round them up." And many of them were loaded into trains bound for concentration camps. But in the midst of all that, Anderson tells us "of the heroic members and their efforts of those in the underground resistant groups." One such person was Adolpho Kaminsky. Anderson tells us that "when Adolpho was 18, his family was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in the suburb of Paris." But after three months, they were suddenly released and they think it's "because they had Argentinian citizenship and Argentina was neutral at that time during the war....But he and his family, continued to witness countless others being put on trains and sent to Auschwitz." Anderson said to him, "When you saw people going on the trains, did you know what it meant?" And he said, "We knew. There were some people who didn't want to believe it, but everyone knew. So his father decided that the family should split up and get false identities. He sent Adolpho to pick up their new papers from a member of the resistance," and that day changed his life. "When a man from the resistance learned that Kaminski had once worked in a dry cleaners, he got very excited because they'd been trying to figure out how to erase permanent blue ink from official documents and

sewing machines to make perforations like stamps. Adolfo salvaged metal from junk shops and used wood blocks and inks to create rubber stamps. They also reproduced watermarks, letterheads, and official signatures. They became the biggest supplier of forged documents that helped to save probably about 14,000 Jewish men, women, and children.”

Anderson found two of the women who had been saved by the Resistance Network. And he talked with them and Edith said that she was 15 when she was forced into hiding after her brother and father were sent to Auschwitz. She still had a copy of the fake birth certificate that saved her life. She and another woman named Sarah were eventually smuggled into Switzerland. And Anderson asked Edith, "What would you say to Adolfo Kaminsky or to the other forgers?" And she replied, "They have my eternal gratitude. They saved my life." Later in the interview Anderson asked Adolfo, "Weren't you frightened?" He said, "Afraid? Afraid of what? The risk was the same if I did nothing or did something. I was fighting for humanity. If I couldn't have saved so many people, I wouldn't have survived myself. I was able to meet the challenge, I think. I did what had to be done and I was lucky to be able to do it. Many others who survived took their lives because they could not live with being the ones who did survive." So Anderson looked at him and said, "So by saving others you saved yourself?" The reply was, "Absolutely." 2

Anderson also interviewed Adolfo's daughter asking her if she was proud of her father. She said, "Yes, of course I am." And she's written a book about it.³ But she also said, "I have to ask myself, would I have had the courage to do what he did? I'm not sure. But I also learned something from my father very important that gave me hope. One person can do many things to make a difference, and it can make a difference for so many."

There's a lot of power in her words. We are people of faith invited to trust in the promise of new life in a life to come. But we are also invited to find hope and to serve others in the here and now. To make a difference. It may not be as great as what Adolfo did. But there still is so much to be done. These days immigrants and refugees in many places are attacked for their faith and may lose their very lives if they stay where they are. We make meals for those who hunger in far off places as well as nearby. Saving lives is for the here and now as well. As people of faith, we are not only called to save ourselves but to save others. When we feed the hungry, we save lives. When we talk to those in despair, we offer hope. When we do surgery or listen to someone who needs someone to care, we can heal. When we strive to help those who have lost their way find a path back, we save lives. When we serve others, we are really living for today as well as for the time to come. For what we do in the meantime matters. It changes lives. It saves lives. And that's what it means :to really live in the meantime.” Amen.

1 Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, by Kenneth Bailey, IVP Academics Press, 2008, pp. 261-275.

2 “A Forger's Life—Adolpho Kaminsky, as shown on CBS 60 Minutes with Anderson Cooper, October 29, 2017.