

*Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
Marianne K. Tomecek, Interim Pastor*

*Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – November 8, 2020
Amos 5:18-24, Psalm 70, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

Politics, Pandemic, Protests. We're still in the midst of all three, aren't we? Some of us are amazingly glad about the outcome of the elections and some of us are unbelievably sad.

Some of us are terribly frightened about what is happening to our health or that of our loved ones and some of us are relieved that it hasn't seemed to hit us yet – this time.

Some of us think that peaceful, public protest is necessary to achieve justice and some of us think that being out in the street (especially in a time of pandemic) is disorder and necessarily leads to rioting.

There are differences, there is diversity. There is uncertainty about the future. And, although each of us has our own opinions and thinks that we have reached them through logic, experience and common sense, there is no Ultimate Teacher marking each of us either correct or incorrect.

As Christians, we are one people, saved by one Gospel, called to be one people proclaiming the love of God in Jesus Christ for all the world. We are called to be a people who practice honesty, hospitality, hope and holiness.

How do we do that, when we understand our world in such different ways? Well, we hear Amos' warning to the people of Israel, not to hope for the Day of the Lord, when they expect that God will vanquish their enemies will uphold them in newly won power and freedom. Instead, God tells them that they aren't being faithful to their relationship with God. Their worship is merely going through the motions, without true piety. Their expectation of deliverance instead will bring judgment. No, says Amos, "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24.)

It is God's place to judge, so be careful that you do not judge, lest you be judged and found wanting. We are to be holy in our churches; to remember that, although we live in the world, we are not of it, so we must keep from reaching conclusions about other people and their conduct, when that is God's prerogative.

How can we practice hospitality to all when the behaviors that some people promote seem to be unjust, unrighteous? In the context of our Christian communities, we do well to remember that we all are sinners, and we all are forgiven by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Our Christian communities are safe places for all people, regardless of who we voted for.

In those communities, we are to speak honestly, and in love, about our lives in the world. In public, we are to speak out against injustice and act to relieve the suffering of others and to protect the integrity of creation. In private, we are to examine our own actions in the light of Jesus' teachings, repent of our sins and seek guidance in prayer and scripture to strengthen our practices of Christian discipline. In both spheres, we are to work to find common ground with people whose political positions, life experiences, and situations differ from our own.

This sounds like a great challenge, doesn't it? Maybe like a balancing act or walking a tightrope. Well, Jesus never said that it would be easy to be one of his followers. Take the parable that we hear in today's Gospel portion. Jesus is speaking to his disciples – this is a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, about how to be a disciple. They – and we – have heard numerous previous parables about what the realm or kingdom of heaven is like.

The one for consideration today is the first of a group that are about the end times; what the ancient Israelites would have called "The Day of the Lord." Jesus says that what he's about to tell them, is what the kingdom of heaven will be like at some time in the future (neither we, nor even he knows when).

The primary actors in the parable are ten bridesmaids, apparently from the same community. They seem to be alike although, of course, each one is an individual. They all have been invited to the wedding. They all have come with their lamps to wait for the bridegroom. They all fall asleep when the bridegroom is delayed.

When they all learn (at midnight) that he has arrived, they all awaken and trim their lamps – cut the wicks that have burned long so that they will consume less oil as shorter wicks burn with smaller flames. Five of the bridesmaids realize that they haven't brought enough oil, they will run out before the darkness will have turned to dawn. These ask the other five if they may borrow some oil. There's not enough for all to have what they need until the new day. The five who have come with enough oil – who have prepared for their task of accompanying the bridegroom – say that they don't have enough to share to keep all the lamps burning until morning. They tell the unprepared bridesmaids that they should get more oil from merchants.

This seems contrary to what we have been taught about sharing what we have with others. But apparently, the oil is not something that can be shared. Each individual with a lamp must arrange for her own supply of oil, for as long as she will need it – even if she doesn't know how long that will be. This is a matter of being prepared for the end of times, so care must be taken to prepare as much as possible. And, since five of the bridesmaids had enough oil, it does appear that it was possible to prepare adequately.

After the five unprepared women return to the wedding banquet, they knock on the door, but the bridegroom doesn't recognize them and won't admit them to the party.

The allegorical understanding of this parable leads us to see in the bridesmaids, the individual believers of the church; the bridegroom is Christ; the delay in his arrival is the delay beyond that expected by the church in Matthew's day of Jesus' second coming; the wedding banquet is the kingdom of heaven; the oil has been described as both works and faith.

“Living or waiting ... with enough oil in our lamps, when set in the context of ... [Matthew's Gospel], suggests that it is the spirit of the beatitudes that, above all else, characterizes those who recognize the bridegroom, the Lord. This spirit is the spirit of the cross that disrupts all of our ... judgmental predispositions. The life into which the beatitudes invite us is a life not centered on our works, not on our faith, but on the cross and how God is glorified through our lives.”

“[I]t is a life that is characterized by choices that make it clear God is the actor and the giver of life. In Luther’s words, a community that is characterized by the holy possession of the cross is a community that knows suffering: ‘They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord’s Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ.[Luther, Martin, “On the Councils and the Church,” 1539.]’ This description hardly fits what we would imagine under the nomenclature ‘wise young women,’ yet in the context of Matthew’s Gospel, this is precisely the suggestion.” Lange, Dirk G., “Commentary on Matthew 25:1-13,” https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4620.

Therefore, we can approach the life that God in Jesus invites us into, through our understanding of the beatitudes (which we considered as our Gospel text last week, on All Saints Day). We live out our baptisms in the community of Christ, living in mercy, not judgment, sharing the presence and promise of Christ with others. In this life, we find the hope of the resurrection to sustain us, as Paul explained to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4:13-24).

Let’s pray: O God of justice and love, you illumine our way through life with the words of your Son. Give us the light we need, and awaken us to the needs of others, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen