

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
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J Mary Luti

There's Something At Stake

Matthew 25:1-13

Remember the story of the prodigal son? It's the one about the younger of two brothers who demands his inheritance without having the decency to wait until his father dies. He takes the money, heads for the city, and lets the good times roll. When his cash is gone and he's cold and hungry, he decides to go home and take his lumps. He expects to be disowned. Instead his father throws him the mother of all homecoming parties.

Not everyone is happy that the brat is back, however. His older brother, the one who has always been good, is furious. "I have been obedient and dutiful," he sputters to his father. "You never threw *me* a party." His father patiently tries to explain the unreasonableness of love, but the story ends on a note of suspense. Will the older brother ever come around, and will that generous father lose another son if he doesn't?

Whenever I preach on the parable of the prodigal son, I always get an earful from someone who identifies strongly with that aggrieved older brother. A lot of people have been that older brother. And they really struggle with the idea that the kingdom of God is, apparently, going to be populated with ne'er-do-wells who didn't do anything useful to earn their place there.

Well, cheer up, older brothers of the world (sisters too)! If you are tired of the Bible's inclination to reward the wayward, the irresponsible, and the altogether undeserving, have we got a parable for you! It's the one we just read—a story is for everyone who flosses, recycles, and files taxes on time. A story for the reliable, the responsible and the prudent. It's called 'The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids', but preacher Tony Robinson thinks it should be renamed 'The Revenge of the Older Brother.'

In the gospel of Matthew, from which this story comes, duty counts. Responsibility and obedience matter. Doing what is right is important. You can't just coast along on good intentions! Just a few verses after this parable, Matthew gives us his culminating ethical story—the parable of the sheep and the goats—with its famous tag line, 'Whenever you did it to these, the least of my kin (who were hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and in prison), you did it to me.'

In Matthew it also says: 'Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord! will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of God.' And we've also heard this wise vs. foolish stuff in Matthew's gospel before. The foolish man builds his house on sand. (And everybody knows what a storm will do to such a house!) Wisdom is

about bedrock construction, about making a solid life on the foundations of obedience to the teachings of Jesus.

In fact, some commentators on this passage say that the oil shortage of the five foolish attendants is just another way of talking about empty hands. They don't have good works of love and justice—no oil—in their lamps; thus undersupplied, they do not deserve to greet the groom or to go into the wedding banquet with him. They have not “performed” the gospel, they have only mouthed its sentiments.

And so when they cry out, ‘Lord, Lord!’ against the closed door, the groom is not moved. Matthew puts terrifying words on his lips—‘I do not know you’—as if to say, ‘I don't remember seeing you approaching me when I was hungry, thirsty, naked, and in prison.’ For the five foolish attendants, it's too late.

This isn't something we like to contemplate, that there could be a ‘too late’ in our life with God. We know, of course, that there are many such moments in our lives with each other—missed chances that will never come ‘round again, words spoken that can never be unsaid, doors slammed and keys thrown away. But we like to think that with God it is never all over, and that there is always another chance. This parable seems to imply otherwise, although perhaps it is so only to make a point about the utter seriousness of the gospel's claim on us.

If we've forgotten how serious that claim is, we would not be the first to forget. I imagine that as time stretched out, and Jesus did not come back quickly to wrap things up, as many thought he would, the first Christians began to waver in their commitment to the gospel. They may have begun to grow tired of holding up lamps against a night that was long and deep. Some may not even have remembered why they made a commitment to hold up those lamps in the first place. Maybe Matthew crafts this story to shake them up.

Notice that he doesn't castigate the ten bridesmaids for falling asleep while waiting for the groom—apparently Christians are entitled to a little shut-eye, a dip in blood sugar, a day off. You can't be completely vigilant all the time. What worries Matthew is that at a critical moment, when the groom does appear, when we do wake up, when the kingdom does come, Christians might find themselves out of fuel—by which he may mean good works or ethical behavior. But it seems more likely to me that he's talking about faith, *persevering faith*, and about the *capacity to hope*. And if he is talking about faith and hope, a shortage of those virtues would indeed be tragic.

The kingdom of God is always arriving somewhere in the world. It is not coming only at the end of time, but breaking in even now, in every place and person where the mercy and justice of God is practiced and new kinds of human relationships are forged, relationships based on mutual compassion and mercy instead of human merit and status. It is the mission of the church to light its path, to herald its arrival. It is our calling to shed a great light by which the world can see and believe in God's plan to gather into the banquet hall all who hunger for justice, and feed them

now, even if not yet finally and fully. It is our job to outshine the darkness, to attend to hope, and to dispel despair.

Without the church's light, there will be less hope in the world and more despair. And since there is already too much night, Matthew challenges his little first-century church to equip itself with more than enough oil. In effect, he asks them to stir up their first love, to be refueled by its conviction and fervor, *and to choose the gospel again*, much in the same way as people choose each other again when they renew their wedding vows, and much in the same way as Joshua demanded that the Israelites choose God to be their God again in our first reading today.

Now, talk about shortages of any kind is tempting to exploit in a season focused on stewardship and fundraising. It would be easy to appeal to you to give generously by bemoaning the various shortages we have in our community. We have a fiscal shortfall. We have old buildings that demand constant attention and sap the bank account. We have great programs that are under-funded. We have dreams we can't accomplish yet because the means are not in place. Lots of deficits.

But sociologists of religion like the UCC's Kirk Hadaway tell us that the most dangerous shortage mainstream churches have is not numerical or programmatic or financial. What plagues moderate and liberal churches is a shortage of imagination, leadership, vision, joy and courage. In some mainline congregations, the authors say, you will search in vain for signs *that anything is actually at stake* in what some churches are up to.

The researchers also tell us that people in our culture—especially young adults—are engaged in “a true spiritual struggle, a battle against exhaustion, bewilderment, and estrangement. In response, they are searching for direct and countervailing experiences, a sense of presence, a compelling teaching or discipline to lean on.”

When everything that surrounds us is increasingly trivial and alienating, we can't afford to pour resources into churches that do not know what is at stake. We can only afford to support faith communities that are equipped to proclaim with confidence that Jesus' gospel of mercy, justice and joy is substantially different and difference-making.

We need churches that know that Christian faith and Christian community are not just another choice among a thousand other choices in a consumer society. The world needs churches that do not hesitate to extend an invitation to make the one choice that really matters, and then will help the people who dare to make that choice put off old ways and put on new—daily, and throughout their lives.

If there is a hook to First Church stewardship here, it is not about budget shortfalls and old buildings. If I am going to pledge sacrificially again this year as I have every year that I have been a member of this congregation, it is not going to be just because I want to help erase the deficit. It will be because I am persuaded that we are becoming the kind of congregation that knows what is at stake, and therefore

is worthy of extraordinary generosity.

I will indeed give so that we can pay the light bill, but only because I am persuaded that you and I are committed to sustaining another kind of light and seeing to it that it is always glowing here—the lamp of faith and hope, the light by which we and others can see our way to living differently and not trivially, in a new kind of human arrangement that (when it is in full swing) could easily be mistaken by the uninformed for a wedding party with an indiscriminate guest list—a bash outdoing all bashes, a justice unlike any other justice, a joy to deepen all joys.

A banquet, yes! The story of the wise and foolish attendants may be about ethics and good works, about being prepared and prudent, about a seriously final judgment. But more than anything else it is about a *promise*. It is about what Jesus says is waiting for us when we have lighted his way into the world with hearts full of faith and expectation. It is about an unheard-of celebration at which older and younger siblings will embrace and no one will remember what the old tensions, jealousies and arguments were all about.

That promise is being kept even here and now. Like the prodigal's father who was not content to wait until the kid came trudging up the porch steps, but ran way out onto the road to meet him, our God simply cannot wait until some far off judgment day to give us the joy that can hardly be described, but gives it to us also now in flashes of indescribable delight even in our sorrows and grief, in the oddest and most unexpected moments, whether we are good children or wayward, or both. There isn't anyone here who has not known such breakthroughs, such refreshment. Our God even takes our dutiful obedience and our ethical earnestness and wrings juicy grace and possibility from them.

We have a God who is alive and who make us alive with a hope that really can save the world. This is the God the church is supposed to be proclaiming and offering. It is to this God's embrace that we are supposed to invite the aimless, the bewildered and the searching. And this is the kind of church I think we are becoming in the image of our God—inviting, proclaiming, seriously different, deliriously extravagant. And that's why I can't not give.

I love this story that Tony Robinson tells about a visit he and his spouse Linda made to another couple in their church as part of the annual stewardship drive.

It was a dark night. We were tired. A long drive. We dragged ourselves out, doing our duty. As we sat talking with this other couple, the husband mentioned a recent event at church. A speaker has told a story about when she worked for Hospice and accompanied an older woman home to die. After getting her home, she bathed her, got her settled, and then, noticing a large bottle of Christian Dior perfume on the shelf, asked, "Would you like a little perfume behind your ears?"

Said the woman, "Honey, I don't have long, why don't you just splash it on!"

“Well,” said the man, “we’ve been thinking, thinking about our pledge. We may not be able to do this every year, but we’ve decided that we want to splash it on.” So saying, he filled in the blank on his card with an amount that more than doubled their previous pledge. And we drove home feeling a bit like those disciples who had trudged mournfully to Emmaus, had their eyes opened, and then ran all the back to Jerusalem to share the news that God is alive.

And then Robinson adds this memory:

A night at Iglesia Morava in Managua, Nicaragua. We were just about to sit down to dinner. We had waited a long time, but now dinner was ready. Suddenly the lights went out. Not just in the church, but all over Managua. We were plunged into darkness. Suddenly the congregation burst into song. As if it were written, “When the lights go out, when the darkness descends, sing, sing as loud as you can.” Then, candles, like stars in the sky, began to flicker on one by one. One here, one there, until the room was full of song and light.

Friends, the mission of the church is to fill the room of creation with song and light. It is to splash on the sweet scent of God making the whole earth feel unaccountably alive even under the threat of death. Please think about these things when you pledge. Give because you also want to be alive with that hope, aglow with that light. Give because you want to encourage and enliven a church that knows what it is called to be and do, a community that knows what’s at stake. And then on Sunday, November 20, All Saints Day, when we dedicate our pledges to God, show by your joyful generosity that *you* know what’s at stake too.