

“Ready or Not”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
November 9, 2014 Stewardship Sunday, Ordinary 32A

Psalm 78:1-7

Matthew 25:1-13

Our stewardship theme this year is “Fearless Generosity,” the idea that we can give without fear, trusting that God is a God of abundance. Some people see the world as a place of scarcity where we have to hold on to what we have, otherwise there won’t be enough. But we want to think of God’s world as a place of abundance, where we find blessings and prosperity in being generous.

Our assigned gospel lesson for today seems to undermine the theme of generosity. Karen read it this morning, the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. How many of you *actually like* that story? When the groom arrived late and five of the bridesmaids didn’t bring an extra supply of oil for their lamps, the other bridesmaids refused to share because they didn’t think there’d be enough for everyone. The ones who didn’t share were welcomed into the banquet while those who didn’t have enough were shut out.

What happened to generosity and God’s grace and mercy? Is this the same Jesus who taught his disciples to (quote) “give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you?” (Matt. 5:42). And now he’s telling this story?

Thankfully this is a parable, and it’s not really about lamps and sharing. The lamps and oil represent the light that shines through us – our faith, our good works, and the light of God. And the parable is about being prepared spiritually for the coming of Christ, who is like a bridegroom. It’s about keeping our light shining brightly and not letting it be dimmed by things that turn our hearts away from God – things like pride, greed, or fear, or anything that distracts us from loving God and our neighbors as ourselves.

To be ready spiritually means that we have spent enough time in prayer and putting our faith to good works, that even if we were to show up late at the door, Jesus would still know who we are. To be ready spiritually means to be at peace with God and neighbor. Are there people you are still feuding with, or refusing to speak to? Do you have amends to make, or sins to ask forgiveness for?

These are things that take time and energy. You can’t buy faith, good works or a good relationship with God and your neighbor. You can’t even borrow them from good people. Yes, we who worship here are part of a community, part of the body of Christ, and we do help, inspire and support each other. And if we notice someone’s light getting dim, we have the responsibility to offer help. But there are some things people can’t do for each other. The elders can’t forgive your enemies for you, or give you a prayer life. And the deacons can’t love your neighbor for you. The choir can’t praise and worship God for you. And the Mission and Stewardship committee can’t save your money for

you or make you financially responsible. We each have to have the oil of the spirit in our own lives.

In the parable the wise bridesmaids were looking out for the good of the whole procession. They couldn't give their oil to the others. If they did, there would not have been enough light for any of them to last to the end. Sometimes you just have to say no. Still, it's upsetting to think that some people may be shut out of God's kingdom. We like to believe we will always get a second chance. But at some point in life, it does become too late to make up for what we have neglected to do. You can't expect to pass a course at school if you haven't showed up for class or done any of the work before the final exam. At some point it is too late to get in shape to run a marathon, too late to mend a troubled or neglected marriage, too late to prevent a war or to stop the effects of global warming. And when it is too late, we have to live with the consequences.

Now in the parable everyone fell asleep, even the wise bridesmaids. And remember the disciples also fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asked them specifically to stay awake, to watch and pray with him, but they couldn't. He was disappointed, but he didn't disown them for their weakness, and he didn't shut them out. And so the problem wasn't that the bridesmaids fell asleep or fell short of what was expected. None of us live up to all we can be. Their big mistake was to leave the procession to go and buy more oil. If they had simply waited in the darkness with everyone else, they probably would have been welcome at the banquet.* But instead they left and went scrounging around to cover for their shortcomings. Maybe it's better to stay and admit failure, than to miss out on the banquet entirely.

Jesus asked his disciples to stay awake, but most important is to be there, to stay engaged. Don't go running off to try to fix things on your own. God's Kingdom is coming whether we are ready for it or not. And we can trust that the light of God will be sufficient, even when we have failed.

Today is Stewardship Sunday, when we decide how much money we can and want to give to the work of God through this church in the next year. And don't worry if you are a guest today, or you just started coming to this church, you are not expected to participate. But if you are part of this community, we hope you will make a pledge to give a certain amount per week, per month or per year.

Now giving money is much more than helping to pay the bills of the church. If we want to have a building and paid staff, we need money. But even if our church had enough money, even if we had ten people who could afford to give \$20,000 each, it is still important for each of us to give. Why? Because giving is an act of dedication and worship. It is important for our relationship to God to give what we can, even if we can only afford a small or token amount. Someone else may pay the bills. But giving our own money as an act of worship is something only we can do. Nobody can do it for us.

You don't have to give anything to be a member of this church. But how much we give is important to our spiritual lives. The Old Testament tradition was to give a

tithe, or ten percent of the harvest. And today many churches teach responsible money management with what they call the 10-10-80 plan. Give 10% to God, put aside 10% for savings, and use the 80% to live on. This is good sound advice for many people. But what if you're trying to make ends meet working for minimum wages? You may not be able to spare 20%. Or what if you make a million dollars? Would it be good stewardship to spend 80% on yourself? That would be \$800,000.

Leonard Sweet, a Christian author and professor at Drew University, has a helpful way to think about it. He says the question is not "How much can I give to God?" That assumes that everything we have belongs to us, and we decide how much to give up. The real question is "How much can I take for myself?" That assumes that everything belongs to God, and we decide how much we can in good conscience take to live on, to spend on ourselves. People who make very little may need almost everything to live on. But those who are very wealthy might need only a small portion for themselves.

How much is enough? It's a question to consider prayerfully, before God and our neighbors in this community of faith, and the world. But the goal is to take care of the resources God has given us so we can be generous without fear.

Today Susan read from Psalm 78, "We will tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and the wonders that God has done... that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children..." If we want to pass on the good news of God's kingdom to the next generation, and the generations after that, we have to be faithful today, faithful with our words of witness, faithful with our time and talents and skills, and faithful with our money.

Are you ready and willing? Do you have enough oil? With the oil of the spirit we are alert to the needs around us, alert to what God is doing, and ready and able to join in. We are ready and willing to give of our money, time and talents without fear. And we are ready and eager to celebrate the wonders of God and to share the joy of being known and welcomed by God.

Ready or not, the procession goes on. May this congregation and all of God's people be filled with the oil of the spirit, that the coming generations may know the wonders of our God and welcome God's Kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.

* credit for this idea to David R. Henson, "The Breaking of the Bridesmaids: Rethinking a Problematic Parable" at