

“Do It Now”

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Amos 5:18-24

November 6, 2011

Matthew 25:1-13

Here we are on this first Stewardship Sunday with one of four stories toward the end of Matthew’s gospel about a very big theological topic: Jesus’ coming again to judge the world and set things straight.

This isn’t the most obvious text to use for stewardship emphasis, at least not at first reading. But as it turns out it happens to have much to teach us about living in response to God’s loving initiative toward us. And that, it so happens, is what a congregation’s stewardship activity is all about.

We begin with a wedding scene, something familiar to all of us, whether we have ever been married or not. We have all put in our time at rehearsal dinners and wedding ceremonies and the receptions that follow. We may not always have ten wise and foolish virgins attending the bride at our weddings but we know something of what it is to anticipate this significant rite of passage for a family.

In Jesus’ day it was traditional to have bridesmaids outside the bride’s home, ready to welcome the groom and his entourage as he arrived to greet the bride’s family. Together, he and the bride and her friends and relatives would make a procession, led by the bridesmaids, to the groom’s house where his parents waited, as though for royalty, and pretending to be surprised by this visit when all arrived. Of course, they were more than ready and, we assume, approved of their son’s choice of bride.

All goes swimmingly as the customs of the day dictate. If it is dark the bridesmaids have an even more important role to play: they must provide lamps fueled by oil to light the way of the processional. If the groom is late in arriving,

as in our story, they better have an extra supply of oil in a flask to keep the wicks burning. It is all very logical and goes according to plan until it is discovered that five of the bridesmaids, the so-called foolish virgins, have no extra oil. “Oh share with us from your extra supply of oil,” they cry to the wise bridesmaids who planned ahead and brought a flask filled with oil. “No, no,” say the wise bridesmaids, “if we do that, by the time this delayed groom gets here we may all be out of oil and there will be no way to light a celebratory procession to his family’s home.”

We get the picture. We also think such thoughts as, “Are we not taught to share our resources? These bridesmaids with oil in reserve are more self-serving than wise. They should have been generous,” some will be heard to argue.

On the other hand, we can also hear it as a parable about the reality of boundaries, the importance of planning and preparation, and the joy of living “expectantly and hopefully” as we anticipate our future with God.¹ That is what makes this an eschatological parable, a parable about “the last things”. And it is also what makes it a pretty good parable to think about on a Stewardship Sunday.

Let me show you what I mean. The parable makes us think a lot about being prepared. It also makes us think about how often we are not prepared and how we put things off, assuming things will work out for the best, even if we don’t act now to assure that. This is where we find ourselves in the company of the foolish bridesmaids. They were betting that the bridegroom would be on time, arriving about dusk, and that they would have plenty of oil for the procession over to his parent’s house. But they were wrong. He was on his own schedule and they were caught short of oil.

But there are times when we can say that we are like the wise bridesmaids who thought ahead, brought extra oil just in case it would be needed, and had the courage to say to their foolish colleagues, “If we give our extra oil to you we may all run dry and have no light for the procession.” In other words, they were not afraid to make boundaries and to hold to them. Leading the way for the bridegroom was a priority for them and they had planned for plenty of resources to respond to his presence among them.

Here is a parallel that I think will hold up to scrutiny on a Stewardship Sunday. If you and I have some savings from which we expect to fulfill our pledge

¹ John Buchanan in commentary, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4 (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press) p. 286.

to the church the chances are we will complete the pledge and find our reward in furthering the mission of the church for yet another year. We might even plan farther ahead and leave an annual gift in our wills.

But if you and I go through our savings by spending on junkets to Las Vegas several times during the year we will have no reserves from which to make or fulfill our pledge to the church, now or later. You see the logic here and realize we are talking about the importance of preparation and discipline. It all sounds very responsible and fairly dull on the one hand. But it can also suggest expectant and hopeful living as we go through our days knowing that we have acted now in responsible ways as God would want us to. That is where we come up on the edge of the eschatological dimension of the story. This is where we get close to the matter of how pleased will we be to see Jesus when he returns?

If Jesus (think bridegroom for a moment) arrives early or late we will be glad to see him, to show him our scrapbooks, to tell him what we have been doing and how we have planned well for and anticipated days on end in his company, and it will be a celebratory time because we can't wait to do "Show and Tell" with the Christ of God in our midst.

And this is where we move into the heart of any eschatological passage. The key to understanding this matter of Christ coming again is to realize that it has already begun. Our preparations for God's next big moment with us have already started as we read and see and hear and experience signs of Jesus' intention never to forget us but always to remember us as we remember him. He is coming again, we just don't know when or where. But the signals of divine activity in our midst are everywhere. They are seen in your gathering here to worship the God of our ancestors, the God who promises never to stop loving us, the God who lifts up high expectations of us for faithful, generous, courageous, loving living, through a prophet like Amos.

What God was doing in the incarnation with the gift of the holy Jesus to the world, God is doing still with support and direction and challenge and spiritual direction for our lives. These are ways in which we experience God's presence in Christ now. We see him, in the words of the theologians, "*already...but not yet ...in full disclosure.*"

It is as though word of the bridegroom's coming have been heard. There have been reports of sightings. He has not changed his mind. He is not lost. He is just on his own schedule. Can you handle that? Will you be ready to welcome him? Or will you dread his coming because you have wasted your life and your resources and have nothing to show for it but a dead lamp?

In our Stewardship Season we recall that this time is about more than numbers and budgets and giving units and goals. It is all those things and more in the most practical dimensions of this season in November. But it still is most importantly about thinking *theologically* about our lives as they are intersected by this great God that Amos declares to be one who has acted firmly, but generously, with us.

Because God is generous we can be generous.

Because God acts with confidence we can act with confidence, no matter how much our financial portfolio has changed for the worse.

Because God does not suffer fools gladly neither do we, Amos implies.

God has high expectations of us because this God knows what we are capable of being and doing. We can and will move beyond empty worship of idolatrous things that provide no security and promise no hope for the future. We can and will hear ourselves judged in love and led in our Lord's promise of new beginnings.

Our lives are not as long as we used to think they are. There is a limit to how many more years any of us has to respond to God's generosity with us. For some it is longer than for others, of course. But for each of us the time for acting is now. Plan, prepare, name your priorities and then fulfill them. God is waiting to see what we will do with our abundance and, I believe, God can't wait to see our slides.

Thanks be to such a God as this.