

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost – Elizabeth Ahern

Amos 5:18-24; Wisdom of Solomon 6:17-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

One evening my mom, Ninfa, my Aunt Emelda, my cousin Belinda (who is six days my senior) and I were walking home after a church service. The service on that evening at the little Methodist Church had been precisely about this parable that Jesus told of the ten bridesmaids. My cousin and I were only about 7 or 8 years old and still living in Mexico at the time. I remember clearly that my aunt turned to me and my cousin and said in Spanish, “See, that is why it is important for you to go to church, so that when Jesus comes again for his people he does not say to you, ‘No os conozco’ [or, ‘I do not know you’].” I obviously never forgot these words, even almost 40 years later.

Weddings are celebrated in different ways throughout the world and some aspects change over time. Since I grew up in between two worlds, the weddings where I come from tend to be characterized by more attendants participating in the ceremony, and traditions like the presenting of gold coins. In addition, the guests tend to focus more on the reception, with a formal dinner and music that lasts into the morning hours. People plan on a long reception, and it is acceptable to arrive at any point of it. When Eric and I got married in my hometown of Roma, Texas, my parents and I tried to accommodate the traditional and also the new: my mom made a special meal for lunch for special relatives and guests to honor those that had come from afar and had been specially meaningful to our family, we had praise and worship to honor God, all aspects of the ceremony and the reception were bilingual to make everyone feel welcome. In many ways, it was an act of worship.

During the time of the wedding described in the parable of the 10 bridesmaids, it would have been expected for the couple to be in marriage contract or engagement (a betrothal). The celebration would then follow about a year later and then the couple could live together. Weddings during this time and in this place would be characterized by festival processions of both the bride and the groom and their companions. Each group would then meet at the house where the wedding would take place. Usually the ceremony would take place at the home of the groom’s parents and would include prayers and blessings for the couple. Then a marriage feast would follow, and it could last for several days. I heard my parents say that when they got married, many of their guests stayed at my grandparents’ place for as long as a week.

In the parable, the picture provided at the beginning is that the groom is on his way to his parents’ home, where he will meet the bride and join the festivity, which includes the ceremony and the feast after. We do not know why the groom was delayed, but when he finally shows up five bridesmaids are ready (the wise ones) and five of them are not ready (the unwise ones).

According to the Wisdom of Solomon, wisdom begins to develop when we sincerely want to be taught. When we care about being taught, we show love for wisdom. Then, we demonstrate our love for wisdom when we follow its rules. Observing and paying attention to its rules and doing what is right gives us a guarantee of immortality (so no

death). Immortality gets us near to God and to His kingdom. Wow! The unwise bridesmaids failed to prepare here, and that is equivalent to not starting with instruction, and appreciating instruction and the responsibility that comes with knowing. They simply were not ready to play the role that they were supposed to. The parable also mentions that they asked the wise ones for some of their oil, but the wise ones did not give it to them. There is simply not enough of it and time is running out. The message here is clear that in the end, each one is responsible in their preparation to meet their Creator.

The allegorical interpretation of this parable has traditionally been something like this (help me out here):

1. The marriage feast represents – the gathering of the Messiah and his people
2. The bridegroom most likely represents – Christ
3. His delay and subsequent coming represent – the delay and Christ's return
4. The closing of the door and the refusal to allow the foolish bridesmaids in represent – the final judgment
5. The wise and the foolish (unwise) bridesmaids represent – those who are prepared for the final judgment and those who are not

Both faith and action lead to preparedness here. If you know what is needed, why not prepare?

So what about going to church, like my aunt told me—is it the only thing one would need to prepare for Christ's second coming and Judgment Day? Interestingly enough, many of our contemporary Christian friends (including one of my neighbors) have been forecasting the end of times and the coming our Lord. Sometimes these predictions are only a few weeks apart from each other. "Repent, the End Times are near. The total eclipse of 2017 is clearly a sign, so be ready by August 21." They have a message of Judgment Day only negatively impacting those that do not agree with their views.

So let's see what God has to say through the prophet Amos. First, according to my old friend Eugene Peterson's translation, in *The Message*: *Woe to all of you who want GOD's Judgment Day! Why would you want to see GOD, want him to come? When GOD comes, it will be bad news before it's good news, the worst of times, not the best of times. Here's what it's like: A man runs from a lion right into the jaws of a bear. A woman goes home after a hard day's work and is raped by a neighbor. At GOD's coming we face hard reality, not fantasy—a black cloud with no silver lining. I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to me? Do you know what I want? I want justice—oceans of it. I want fairness—rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want.*

Again, according to the New Revised Standard Version: *Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it? I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in*

your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

What's going on here? Who can please God then? It is clear that God can reject our worship, and it is not about style or length. When our lives do not follow fairness and justice, God clearly despises our worship. During the time of Amos, God saw that the poor were treated unfairly and were taken advantage of by those that had the power and the privilege, but pretended to be righteous and good. God and Amos are clearly not impressed by anyone's title and social position. Amos even confronts the King of Israel at the time and condemns his actions.

What is required then for God to know me and recognize me, you might ask? How to prepare? Well, you can start by paying attention to instruction and learning to love wisdom, to do what is right so you can be near to God. What does your worship and ceremonies sound like and look like to God, then? Fairness and justice cannot be separated from worship. Let God speak to you. If you believe and say that God is on your side, then live like it.

We are now going to take a few moments to let God speak. As you are able, please kneel down where you are and let us lament the injustice in our land.