

All Saints Sunday Nov.5 2011

Matthew 25:1-13 (parable of the ten bridesmaids)

Listening to today's parable you might think that we are jumping the gun on Advent. The five wise and five foolish maidens with their oil lamps, waiting for the bridegroom, sounds like waiting for Jesus. In Advent we can hardly hear the Advent message because all around us the marketplace has jumped ahead to Christmas. So maybe the lectionary gives us this text today as an Advent prequel. However you hear it, this parable has something to do with waiting, being prepared and God coming to us, all Advent themes.

I am reading a book now called *What's the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?* I may use it later as a textbook for a class. The author, Martin Thielen, organizes his material around twenty chapters, the first, "Ten Things Christian's Don't Need to Believe" and the second, "Ten Things Christians Do Need to Believe." *What's the Least I Can Be Believe* has a subtitle, too: *A Guide to What Matters Most*. I bought the book a few weeks ago and set it aside to read later, maybe after Christmas.

But then this week I saw in the newspaper an article called, "Doomsday prophet gives up." You may have seen it, too. Its subtitle was "Bible scholar said to have retired after 3rd failed prediction." Harold Camping is 90 years old, and has finally learned that the business of predicting the end of the world is a lot like baseball: Three strikes and you're out. Camping and his Oakland, California-based "ministry" on so-called Family Radio first lined up his biblical prophecies to conclude that Jesus was coming back in 1994. Then the predictions landed on May 21 of this year, and finally October 21. *The Christian Post* reported that Camping was both saddened and surprised at the failure of the end times to arrive as predicted. And, oh, yes, his staff estimated that \$100 million had been spent on trying to convince audiences that Camping knew what he was talking about. Talk about giving religion a bad name.

When I finished reading this, I went to Thielen's new book, lying there uncracked on the end table. Sure enough, one of his first ten things Christians don't need to believe is there in chapter six: "Bad People Will Be 'Left Behind' and then Fry in Hell." Left behind doomsday prophecies are far too popular and beside the point, despite Jesus' words of warning about predictions, "Nobody but God knows the day or the hour [of the end]." On his way back to the dugout, doomsday strikeout

victim Harold Camping had it right when he muttered, “God is in charge of this whole business and we are not.”

Point number one of this brief All Saints sermon is this: Left Behind theology is best left behind. Today’s parable is not about the violent end of the world in rapture. I am not here to scare you.

Point number two is that Jesus nevertheless invites us to be prepared for God to come into our lives. Five foolish bridesmaids bring no extra oil for their lamps. (No extra batteries!) When the bridegroom is delayed, all ten fall asleep, and when he comes at midnight, five wake up to useless lamps and five are ready to meet the bridegroom and join the celebration. Jesus invites us to be prepared because God is coming! It isn’t about the violent and disastrous end of the world, though. Jesus does not mean to scare us straight here but to love us into hope. The coming of God is less doomsday and more hopesday. There is a difference. God comes to us, not only in the baby Jesus at Christmas, but in many ways, all the time, offering not doom but hope.

Being prepared as a wise bridesmaid means having some extra oil for those lamps. It means being spiritually disciplined enough to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear God’s coming, whenever and however and through whomever it happens. The best way to be prepared for guests involves more than having a shelf full of cookbooks and a few good ideas. If the pantry doesn’t have the ingredients, and if you haven’t logged time in the kitchen, you know when that doorbells rings that you simply are NOT prepared.

Your presence here in worship today is a small but important step in your readiness training, both to be prepared for disasters and delights in life. Without grounding in faith, the disastrous in life is just random and nasty fate, and the delightful is just good luck with nobody to thank. Last week’s stewardship witness from Jodi and Kevin Staus beautifully illustrated the point. Kevin’s mother’s death last January drove them back to the Staus family’s spiritual home, where through our gathering for Judy’s funeral, her family found comfort and strength. Being here together is one of the best ways I know to prepare yourself for whatever may come in your life, and at whatever hour.

The third point merely elaborates on the second. “Come to Jesus” has become a popular way to talk about moments when one person tells another to get down on their knees and repent, or else. “Come to Jesus” refers to the finale of an

evangelistic sermon or crusade, when everything points to you, and it is time to come down out of your pew or seat in the grandstand and walk down front and publically give your life to Jesus as everyone sings “Just as I am.” I was in the choir of 250 singing just that in the old County Stadium thirty years ago when twenty-five thousand of us gathered to hear Billy Graham. It was a stirring moment when a thousand individuals came to Jesus that way, right then and there, making their pensive way down the steps and out on to the infield.

I am not saying “coming to Jesus” in this way isn’t legit. But I am saying that in today’s parable and throughout the gospels, Jesus says and represents a different truth: God comes to us. “We love because God first loved us,” as the first letter of John has it. God comes to us. That’s what we need to be prepared for. There is a Quaker idea known as “all there-ness.” Being quietly centered in spirit, being prepared for God, means being “all there.” It means living fully in this moment. The other day when I opened my pension statement for the third quarter of 2011, I came unglued from “all-there-ness.” Cindy calmly said that it is a good thing I am not retiring right now, after losing more than another year’s salary through the loss of stock value. I did not reply, but did step outside to chop some firewood. Sometimes you really have to work at being “all there,” living fully in this moment, and not replaying some old recording of the past or fixating on an imagined future that you may or may not live to see!

When the past and future mess up the present to the place where you can’t live fully in it, it is time to repeat the words we say in the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.* God comes to us, past and future, but if we don’t live today in a way that allows us to see that God is with us right now and searching us out, we won’t have the eyes to see or the ears to hear or the heart to know that coming. The biblical nickname of Jesus, Immanuel, does not mean God was or will be with us. Immanuel means God with us, now and always.

Finally: point four! The parable contains a mean little twist that has always bothered me. When the bridegroom comes, and the ten bridesmaids awaken, the wise ones refuse to share their oil with the foolish. This seems harsh. But perhaps the lesson here is that each one of us has to do our own preparing and waiting. I can’t bring enough oil for everyone. I can only bring my own. I can’t be the church for you. We all have a role to play. You don’t pay me to be the professional Christian here, leaving the rest of you off the hook. If I am the only one reading the Bible or praying or visiting the sick or fighting for a more just, peaceful and

green world, we don't have a church. The Christian faith is not a solo. It is a chorus, an orchestra, a team effort, but each player needs to be committed, involved, engaged in the present moment and "all there" prepared.

If there is anything that the saints who have gone before us have to teach us, it is that life goes on, with or without us. Jesus calls us to awaken, with those bridesmaids, and trim our lamps and greet the bridegroom in this very moment, the only one we are assured of having. God in Christ comes to us. Right now. Wake up. Get up. Shine your little light. Join the party.