

Proper 27 Year A—Mt. 25:1-13

You may all be familiar with Joan Chittister's *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*. It includes a dialogue between a master spiritual seeker and a disciple.

“Where should I look for Enlightenment?” the disciple asked.

“Here,” the elder said.

When will it happen?

It is happening right now.

Then why don't I experience it?

Because you do not look.

And what should I look for?

Nothing. Just look.

But at what?

Anything your eyes alight upon.

Well, then, must I look in a special kind of way?

No.

Why ever not?

Because to look you must be here. The problem is that you are mostly somewhere else.

This illustration, although it sounds like it probably comes from the Buddhist tradition, is linked in my mind with the story of the wise and foolish virgins which we have today. God comes to us before we come to God. There is no rest from whatever is coming next, so “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Belden Lane wrote:

“The practice of paying attention is the rarest of gifts because it depends on the harshest of disciplines. So uncommon is it for us to grasp the beauty and mystery of ordinary things that, when we finally do so, it often brings us to the verge of tears. Appalled by our own poverty, we awake in wonder to a splendor of which we had never dreamed.”

But let's look at the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in context. A wedding was a great occasion in ancient Palestine. The whole village turned out to accompany the couple to their new home, and they went by the longest possible road that they might receive the good wishes of as many as possible. When a couple married, they did not go away for a honeymoon; they stayed at home; for a week they kept open house. To the festivities of that week their chosen friends were admitted; and it was not only the marriage ceremony, it was also that joyous week that the foolish virgins missed, because they were unprepared. It is also true to life that traditionally the bridal party waits for an indefinite length of time. None of them know for sure when the bridegroom will show up, so the bridal party has to be ready to go out at any time to meet him. Other important points are that no one is allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp and also, when the bridegroom has arrived and the door has been shut, late-comers to the ceremony are not admitted.

This parable has both an immediate meaning and a wider meaning. Its immediate significance is that it is directed against the Jews. They were the chosen people; their whole history should have been a preparation for the coming of the Messiah. They ought to have been prepared for him when he came. Instead they were quite unprepared and therefore were shut out.

The more universal meanings are: 1) There are certain things that cannot be obtained at the last minute. We should not leave things so late that we can no longer prepare ourselves to meet with God. 2) It warns that there are certain things which cannot be borrowed. The foolish virgins found it impossible to borrow oil, when they discovered they needed it. Similarly, we cannot borrow a relationship with God. We cannot always be living on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. There are certain things which we must win or acquire for ourselves.

It is likely that certain elements of the parable are allegorical for Matthew. The virgins represent Christians who await the bridegroom, Jesus. The bridegroom's delay alludes to the fact that Jesus has not returned as soon as many had hoped. The marriage feast symbolizes the life of the age to come. The closed door stands for the last judgment. The entreaty of the foolish virgins, "Lord, Lord, open to us" is reminiscent of the false Christians who address Jesus as "Lord, Lord," but fail to do the will of the heavenly Father. Finally, a parallel can be seen between the virgins without oil and the guest without a wedding garment. So "Keep awake, for you know not the day or the hour."

In *Plan B*, Anne Lamott says “You have to start your relationship with God all over from the beginning every day. Yesterday’s faith does not wait for you like a dog with your slippers and the morning paper in its mouth. You seek it and in seeking it you find it.” Sr. Cornelia, who was my mentor in some ways and has to have been one of the most organized people I have known, taught me: When she got up in the morning she would ask “What is the most important thing for me to do today?” She would avoid doing more than one thing at a time.

A favorite modern poet Mary Oliver wrote:

“I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

Into the grass, how to kneel down into the grass,

How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

Which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?”

Sometimes people ask, “If we make such an effort to do things properly and in order, to make an effort to pay attention, where does the grace of God come in?” My favorite answer to that question comes from an Indian saint: “The breeze of grace is always blowing. Set your sails to catch that breeze.” “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”