

Matthew 25:1-13
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The Sunday after Election

I am in St. Helens Hall at Trinity being taped midday on Friday November 6. The election results have not been finalized as of this moment. What can be said this Friday and will still be true Sunday, the election was close.

What to say on the Sunday after what some have considered the most consequential election of our lifetime?

And by the way how is it that I got appointed to preach today?

I am going to reflect on the Gospel reading for this Sunday, November 8. It has no relation to the election. But when we read Bible and Gospel stories we hope that they may speak to us even in our day.

In light of how I am going to talk about our Gospel reading I want to say that my understanding is that all Gospel stories, the entire Bible for that matter, are interpretations and subject to interpretation. Some believe that the Bible is the actual words of God or the actual words of Jesus. We know that is not true.

That is not to say the words and stories in our Scriptures are not important. And even revelatory. They tell us a lot. About what mattered to people in the ancient world, how they thought and saw and understood the nature and character of God and us and history. And Jesus. We continue to puzzle about the same things. God, us, history, Jesus. How is it all going to turn out? We interpret our stories then and now for understanding and meaning.

Interpretation is a given. It is operative in all we do. And how we interpret affects what we believe, what we think is possible, our sense of hope, and reality and future. Interpretation, whether we do it consciously or not, affects how we live and act. And yes, how we treat one another. We all interpret. Whether we accept someone else's or choose our own. And our interpretations become our life's story.

We know that the Gospel writers offer their own interpretation of what they think Jesus said or might have said and what his life and death means. The Gospels have some things in common and a lot of things different. Each Gospel writer makes inclusions or exclusions to better express their interpretation of the good news for their community, for their time.

All of that said, establishing that interpretation is what we do, I am going to share my interpretation of this parable today. Well, my interpretation is more of a critique.

Today's parable is The parable of the ten maidens. Matthew attributes this story to Jesus. But I am not convinced. I don't think this parable goes back to Jesus. My interpretation is that this parable sounds a lot like Matthew Not so much like Jesus.

Let me explain...

The setting of the parable is maidens waiting for the Bridegroom. The Bridegroom represents the Messiah, the hope that is to come, Jesus himself. Matthew thought the return of the Messiah must be imminent. It had already been 60 some years since Jesus execution. And claims that he was the Messiah and would come again. The expectation was that he could come at any time now.

The ten maidens wait for the bridegroom. The wise maidens took plenty of provisions not knowing the day or hour of the bridegroom's arrival. They had plenty of oil for their lamps. The foolish maidens didn't prepare for a delay. Soon they realized they would not have enough oil for their lamps. So, the foolish maidens ask the wise ones to help them out. To give them some of their oil. The wise maidens, unequivocally said, No! There will not be enough for you and for us! Better go buy more oil for yourselves.

So the foolish maidens went off and did just that. When they returned the bridegroom had arrived. The wise maidens went inside the banquet hall with the bridegroom. An image for the great feast and celebration when the Messiah returns. And the door was shut.

It's worth noting that this parable is often called the parable of the shut door. Because of this very detail.

So, the foolish maidens are left out. But they implore, Lord, Lord, open to us. Open the door so that we may come in to the banquet. And be with you. But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

Now I ask you. Does this story really sound like one Jesus would tell?

Jesus was not about shutting doors. He was known for his "indiscriminate" welcome. He was not known for creating boundaries but for loosening or shattering them. He was known for his care. And for open invitations. I cannot imagine Jesus telling a story where, No, I won't help you! I have to look out for myself is attributed to the wise nor making virtue of shutting the door.

This, however, is quite characteristic of the way Matthew tells stories. Matthew has attributed to Jesus other stories that sound like this: like separating the sheep from the goats and promising reward to those who do good, forbidding those with improper attire from attending a party, sending evil doers to eternal punishment and gnashing of teeth. This just doesn't sound like Jesus to me. It does sound like Matthew.

Matthew's story telling invariably makes distinctions between us and them, who is in and who is out, who gets reward and who is punished. It is very transactional. I don't think Jesus thought that way.

And this parable is about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven as Matthew calls it. Remember the kingdom of God is not a place. It is a description of how we treat one another. The opening line of this parable is: "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." And the parable that follows an illustration.

I don't think Jesus would delineate us versus them in the kingdom of God. I don't think he would publicly shame one group and exalt another as the way we behave in the kingdom of God. I don't think he would tell us to shut our doors and keep those "others" out

Matthew thinks that way. We do. But I don't think Jesus does.

Jesus said be compassionate, be just, love one another. Do not be afraid. Jesus calls us to find our way. And learn to live with one another. And Jesus says we must act as if we are responsible for one another. Because we are. That is how I understand Jesus.

So why am I spending so much time on this?

Because deeds and sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels don't necessarily go back to Jesus. We know this because of what we understand about the development of the Biblical tradition. There are many layers that make up the tradition. Many voices. Each layer is an interpretation. That reflects understanding. Hopes to communicate meaning. And serves an agenda.

I suggest as we discern layers of the tradition, we need to develop an ear for what has been called "the voice print of Jesus." To my ear, the parable we heard this morning does not sound like the voice print of Jesus.

Regardless of whether you agree with my take on the parable of the ten maidens, the parable of the shut door, I think it is important that we wrestle with our Biblical stories and their possible meaning. And be thoughtful. Is what we do and think in the name of God or in the name of Jesus worthy of the name? Invariably we will not agree on everything. But then we are called to learn how to live with one another anyway.

We all interpret. It is a very human thing. We all do it. And it matters how and why we do it. How we interpret the Bible or anything in our lives affects how we believe, what we believe, what we think is possible, what matters, how we act. How we love. And sometimes why.

To shift stories. An alternative to our parable this morning.

There is a series on MHz, MHz is a worldwide kind of Netflix, called Bulletproof Heart. It's Italian. Has subtitles. It is about an aging investigative journalist involved in a variety of cases. How he writes them up affects people's understanding of the cases and public perception. I loved this series.

The character's name is Bruno. I loved Bruno. He is charming. Funny. Empathic. Courageous. He loves. He knows loss. And things do not always turn out the way he wants. As hard as he tries. As much as he loves. Bruno has a bulletproof heart. A bullet proof heart. The name of the series. Spoiler alert, his bulletproof heart was soft. Not like stone. Not hard. Not impenetrable. His "bulletproof heart" is soft. Compassionate.

The last scene of the last episode in the series has Bruno reflecting on life. And on his life. This very scene was used as a tribute to the actor's own life, (Gigi Proietti), who died November 2 of this year.

His character Bruno writes:

"Justice is served' would be the final words of this story.

But what is justice really?

I always thought life was not a scale that weighs wrongs and rights. Just and not just are territories of what is relative. And **we are only small dots** inside nothing, **trying to understand which way to go....**

But I go on cultivating hope that in the end, nothing of what we do for others is completely lost, like dust in the wind. That every small gesture, every phrase, every thought done with love, leaves an imprint however small that can be traced for a long time.

And now I ask myself how many and which fingerprints did we leave during our life? And are we sure to always mean well and do so with a sense of responsibility?"

Bruno pauses for a moment. Closes his computer. And says I don't know.

"...Are we sure to always mean well and do so with a sense of responsibility?" I say that is our task. We can argue whether we think we will or not. Or just live this narrative as our story. Individually and collectively. Now.

To mean well and do so with a sense of responsibility. And to do so with love which will leave an imprint that can be traced for a long, long time.

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.”