

OUR JUDGE AND OUR HOPE

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Wisdom of Solomon 6:12-20 - Wisdom makes herself known
Matthew 25: 1-13 - Parable of the closed door

I'm glad that the lectionary incorporates readings from Wisdom, and I appreciated the introduction, too, Eileen [Hunter]. I think it's very valuable for us to understand a little more about the Apocryphal books and especially about the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The tip in the New Testament reading that pointed the lectionary scholars toward Wisdom is the language of the "wise and the foolish." That language is the language of Wisdom, and we're recovering an awareness of how important Wisdom is in the Old Testament. Consequently, we're gaining an understanding of how much that is a part of who Jesus was and his teachings. It's something we've underestimated. When we start thinking in terms of the Wisdom tradition we have a dynamic tension between two streams of Wisdom thought. One is simply the conventional wisdom, what we all teach our children--you know, the work-hard-and-you-will-succeed sort of wisdom. And there's an alternative wisdom which confronts the reality of our lives that just doesn't follow conventional wisdom all the time--bad things happen to good people, and so on.

We have that alternative wisdom which tends to turn the conventional wisdom of our world onto its head, and that's very much the wisdom in Jesus' teachings. For example, we have this little story of the bridesmaids; some had enough oil to make it until the groom arrived, and some didn't. We could read that in terms of very conventional wisdom similar to the Boy Scout "always be prepared" kind of thing. But there's another side to it that plunges deeper into what life really is. That's the bad- things-do-happen-to-good-people side of life that looks more deeply at the truth about our lives, and then turns the conventional values of this culture around us onto its head.

First of all we have a passage like this, a story like this, the reason Jesus tells a parable like this: it is in relation to some question about life. I remember some years ago there was a popular bumper sticker that said "Jesus is the answer," and then a little while later there was another one that kept showing up saying "What was the question?" It may be that the second question is the more important theological question. What is the question to which Jesus is the answer? When we look at this parable of the bridesmaids we need to recognize that it's set in Matthew's gospel which is organized around five major discourses. This parable is the fifth, the one that is called the Apocalyptic Discourse. The word "Apocalyptic" refers to that part of the literature in the New Testament that talks about "the end." And so it's in the context of the question about what the end looks like. Later in that chapter, for example, Matthew tells that story about separating the sheep from the goats; and earlier, of course, we've had stories like the wedding banquet. "Banquet" is a metaphor that is common throughout the Old

Testament as well as into the New--a picture of the day of Yahweh, the day of the Lord, and then a New Testament thought of the Kingdom of God. "Kingdom" is more about the reign of God than the realm or domain, and so talk about the Kingdom or Reign of God is talk about a time. It focuses, therefore, on that end-times question. What is the end of life?

So this parable is set from Matthew. The parable is a question that became even more important in the life of the early Church after Jesus' time because there was a sense that history was moving toward fulfillment that was immediate. And then the Church came into a time of crisis around what the scholars called the delay of the, *parousia* being the coming again of Christ. And it didn't happen right away, and so how do we live our lives waiting for this thing that seems to have been delayed? We have this image of the wedding feast, the wedding being a symbol of a fulfillment of God's purpose--the coming together into wholeness--the banquet itself being the symbol of the fulfillment. And so the question: How do we live our lives during this awkward delay? It's raising the question of the end.

Douglas Hall in discussing that question says the end of life has always been an important question for Christians to think about, but during the 20th century that question changed dramatically. Previously, the question was about the end in a chronological sense--in the sense of the termination of life--and asked what it would be like when life came to an end and what would happen after that. The question is asked on both levels--the individual, my own life, how will my life end and what will there be for me after the end of this life. The question is asked also at the level of the whole of the world, the whole of humanity, the whole of history. What about when history comes to an end? How will that come about, and what will lie beyond that? Doug Hall says the question changed during the 20th century. It now asks what the end of life is in the sense of what is life's purpose. The word "end" has both meanings in English--termination and purpose. And for us now it's more a question about the purpose of life, the meaning of life, and where it all leads. It's not that we just let go of the question about the termination of life; it's just that it's not so important any more when the question of purpose emerges.

Years ago I heard Gregory Baum speak. He is one of the prominent Canadian Catholic theologians. He was talking about death, how we approach death, and how we come to death in peace. He said if that to which we have dedicated our lives is safe, then we die in peace. And then he spoke of dedicating our lives to something beyond this world, beyond this life. That's what the Reign of God is about, and hence the question of the purpose of life. If we can look at our world and our lives and see a purpose, and if we can see a movement toward its fulfillment, then we're at peace because we're making progress. Then we have a sense that there is some purpose of fulfillment and we're working to build the Kingdom of God and we're making progress. That gives us a sense of satisfaction about the meaning and purpose and fulfillment of life.

Doug Hall says that kind of thinking is the foundation of modernist liberalism--the ideology of progress that looks at life as a positive movement, at history as a positive movement of a world that's getting better and better all the time. We're curing diseases; we're learning to live at peace; and we're becoming more of that gentle, loving, world that Christ showed us. That was so satisfying that especially liberal Christianity virtually

turned into the “ideology of progress” until the 20th century--until the Great War, the wars that followed it, the depressions and especially the Great Depression, the increase in economic poverty throughout our world that has accompanied the so-called economic progress, the degeneration of our national ideals into a cynical defensive approach that gets lost in greed. In other words, that progress ideology has crumbled around us in the 20th and 21st centuries.

It’s still true that every politician who wants to be elected in North America has to stand up and talk optimistically--to express optimism--and it’s becoming clearer and clearer that none of them really believes it. They’re doing it just because it’s their job because no one will be elected without standing and speaking optimistically. Optimism is a denial of the truth about the world around us. The truth is we’re a world living deeply in despair, and North American Christianity especially has come to base itself on a shallow optimism that turns our gospel into a half-view of life, a quarter-view, a view that has the blinkers so narrow that 90 % of life and what is really happening in the world around us has to be denied and ignored.

This is where the twist comes in from the Wisdom tradition, because what we want is hope. The question is: What is our hope? The conventional answer of our culture is not “hope”; it’s “optimism.” And as that optimism shatters, more and more people fall over into the opposite which is pessimism, and we live today in such a pessimistic, cynical, world. People who should know better--our leaders--tell us we have to succumb to the greed because it’s the only way to survive in our world. They tell us we have to build up the piles of armaments and continue the military aggression because that’s the only way to keep the world safe. That’s pessimistic cynicism; that’s the flip side of shallow optimism. The true hope that our Christian tradition offers us is a hope that’s not based on what we see happening around us in the world. Rather, it’s a hope that’s based on this picture of the banquet, of the end of time in which the purpose of life is revealed. It’s a God who looks back at life from the end-point. What happens in life in the movement toward true hope is not a cause-and-effect planning, contrived, kind of thing that we do to build a better world. It’s much more what God pulls the world toward from the end of time. And so the movement toward the fulfillment of the purpose of life is a movement which happens of its own energy, its own flow of God drawing it, not people making plans and contriving it and building it.

Years ago, back in the eighties--1986, I think it was--when the World Council of Churches met in Vancouver, the Naramata Centre took advantage of the opportunity to have some of these wonderful people, Christian leaders, from all around the world come and do some teaching at the Centre before or after they went to the gathering. I had the privilege of taking a course from a woman named Maria Santiso who was a Biblical scholar translating the Bible into Spanish. She worked with women in Santiago who were reading the Magnificat for the first time in their lives. These were Catholic women who had grown up and been taught that the model for a woman was to marry with the seven swords piercing her heart--a life of suffering--and that she would be struck dead if she ever opened the Bible and read it for herself. Maria Santiso’s was a marvellous story, but what she was teaching was birthing imagery in the Bible.

That’s a whole sermon series, but I won’t go into the detail. The short summary is that we’ve often talked about building the Kingdom of God, and “building” is an

interesting image. When we build something we take a pile of materials, hammer it together, and manufacture something like Bob [Walline] and his Property Committee redoing the corner of the building over there [the old entrance to the sanctuary]. That's "building." She said the Kingdom of God in the Bible, the fulfillment of God's purpose throughout the Bible, is taught much more in birthing imagery than building imagery. Both are ways of talking about creation, but birthing is so different from building. "Birthing" is about receiving something into yourself the way Mary received the Spirit and something was conceived in her. It's a model for all of us. Something is conceived in every one of us when the Spirit comes upon us, grows within our hearts, in our lives, grows of its own accord rather than according to our plan, and comes to birth when it's ready--not a moment before or a moment later. The Kingdom of God comes to birth, is coming to birth, is in that whole gestation, conception, birthing, process in our world. It's just there, it's just happening, not because of our energy at all.

And that's not an optimistic view because it can't be confirmed with any evidence. It's not an optimistic view because you don't have to deny the dark side of life. You can see that happening with a fully honest, eyes-wide-open, view of the truth about the life around us. The only question we have is whether we participate in it or not, whether we live it or not. We try to, but the bridesmaids who brought the oil with them are the ones who are able to keep on living the Christ vision of the purpose of life. The ones who didn't bring any extra oil, so that their lamps burned for awhile and then burned out, are the ones who have given up on that Christ vision of life's purpose and have settled for the pessimism/optimism view of life.

The Parable of the Closed Door--that's what Robert Funk calls it. I've never heard that before; it is always called the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. The Parable of the Closed Door has always been interpreted as a judgement, like judgement day. There are good people and bad people, and we separate them out. But this is about people's own actions. It's not so much a judgement. It's our own choice whether to enter into this Reign of God coming to birth in our lives, to live that according to the way it has been revealed to us in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's our picture of the purpose of life, of the Reign of God, that is coming to birth. And we need only bring enough oil to keep on living that purpose, and keep on living it even in a world that has given up and fallen into optimism and cynicism and despair--to keep on living it no matter how long it takes until the Kingdom comes fully to birth in our midst.

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