

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Shall we call her Mary? That woman in the photograph I used in my weekly e-newsletter, that I said I wanted to preach on today - did you notice her? How did you read her facial expression as she was watching the other bridesmaids fill their lamps with oil, while turning their backs toward her? Sometimes when I settled my eyes on her, I saw shame or regret in her furtive looks toward the others. Sometimes, I noticed envy. Other times I saw a hint of disgust. For she will be left behind. She will not have enough oil in her lamp to join in the procession to the wedding feast. And no one will share with her.

I think we should call her Mary, maybe because she has the same blue-colored robe that Mary, the mother of Jesus is often depicted in. But I like to call her Mary because there are so many Marys in our gospel stories and a Mary always seem to be present at the most important moments of Jesus' life, and this story seems to have that same level of importance. If a Mary is always around at these important or liminal times, maybe that means we too can be around at Jesus' important or liminal moments too, not being transported back in time, but being present to the moments Jesus shows up in our lives, here and now. Oh, the many Marys -- Mother Mary, who birthed God into this world, Mary, Martha's sister, who sat at Jesus' feet, soaking up his teachings, Mary who lavishly poured the contents of her alabaster jar upon the feet of Jesus, offering him comfort and adoration, while foreshadowing the anointing of his body soon to be

crucified, and Mary, the Magdalene, who was the first one to see the resurrected Jesus, the first apostle, who ran to tell others the good news of the risen Christ. The name Mary may have been used so frequently in the gospels because it was a common name of the time, or maybe because its frequent use allows us to see it as a generic name, and therefore one we can take upon ourselves, allowing us to see ourselves in each of those situations. Our story today seems to be one of those important moments in Jesus' life, when he's working hard to reveal a truth to his disciples that he really wants to leave with them.

The setting of this parable is incredibly important to understanding the message. For if we don't know that this story is told to Jesus' disciples alone, on the Mount of Olives, in the tension of Holy Week, when Jesus traces his steps back and forth across the Kedron Valley, setting the rhythm of threatening the status quo in Jerusalem and retreating at night into the safety and warmth of his friends' home, and if we don't understand that Jesus knows he will die soon, that in fact he's orchestrating his death, we won't comprehend the urgency of the situation, of Jesus' giving an answer to his disciples who are struggling with the idea of his death, let alone not grasping in any shape or form what this second coming is all about, when it will be here, and what the signs will be when it comes, we can easily think this parable is about rewarding the smug, the self-focused, the selfish, the uncaring, the ones who intentionally divide communities between those who have and those who have not, for these bridesmaids who brought extra oil, but looked out for only themselves, seem to be the ones rewarded. They're the ones who go to the wedding feast. They're the ones on the inside of the closed door.

If we take this parable out of context, it would appear that Jesus is rewriting the beatitudes, the imperatives for faithful living which he started his ministry with, on that hill, overlooking the Sea of Galilee. The rewrite may look something like this:

Instead of blessed are those who are poor in spirit, Jesus would say, "blessed are the overly confident", instead of blessed are those who mourn, Jesus appears to be saying, "blessed are those who cause the tears to run down the cheeks of those scorned by others", instead of blessed are those who are meek, Jesus would be saying, "blessed are those who are haughty", instead of blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, "blessed are those who are comfortable with their privilege", instead of blessed are the peacemakers, Jesus would be saying, "blessed are those who rip families apart". Nothing about this parable seems right – and it isn't.

Matthew, who uniquely tells this particular parable, is addressing the issue of what a false reality of the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. The gospel writer knows the people in the community, several generations after the death of Jesus, are wondering when this is all going to happen, and they're hungry to latch onto any reality of the Kingdom, even if it is false. They're tired of hoping without seeing any sustained movement toward the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, because they're exhausted from combating the forces that tell them power and might rule, and they're afraid none of the story of Jesus is true. The stories told to them of the miracles of Jesus or the love that seemed to pour from him all the time, gathering people from the fringe and drawing them near seem distant and merely a faded memory. They are weary.

They are afraid. They are losing hope, and Matthew's Jesus needs to make it clear to his disciples what the false prophets would raise up as the Kingdom of Heaven, and he wants to make the example so distinct from what he had been talking about that the disciples would readily know it wasn't this. It was not, nor never would be, a closed door for those who didn't come on time, or those who weren't prepared, or those who didn't know yet they were invited to come on in.

There are times when I listen to the news, and all I hear about are mass shootings each week, the last one in a church of all places, and I can't help but wonder if that could happen here at St. Andrew's someday, and I don't know what to do with that fear. Or I hear about devastating hurricanes and raging forest fires and I wonder what has happened to our earth, if we've done irreparable damage. Or I hear the news plastered with stories of the immoral behavior of our elected officials, or there's a push toward war when all other options have not yet been explored, or division among families due to their political points of view, and I'm afraid, and I'm not sure what to do with that fear. I am tempted to lose hope and I begin to wonder if anything I am doing really has any impact in bringing in the Kingdom of Heaven. Maybe you feel that way too. I sometimes get weary of waiting, of endlessly waiting for some sustained movement toward the Kingdom of Heaven and I get frustrated with all the obstacles that seem always strewn in its path. I wonder "Why can't we all just get along?" A simple yet profound question. Why is this so hard? And I can understand why some church-goers feel foolish for believing it will ever happen, that the Kingdom will ever be near enough to touch, to taste, to revel in, and they drift away from church, from community, from hope.

We began our recent Diocesan convention by asking participants to name their hearts' desires or share the deepest dilemma they are dealing with – One response was: "What does 'make all things new' mean? How long will it take?" It's the same question the hearers of Matthew's gospel were wrestling with. It was stunning to me the number of people responding to that opening question at the convention spoke about fear, concern over divisions due to differences of race, economic status, or opinions, a sense of hopelessness, and concern about survival from a natural disaster as what is most on their hearts – probably 1/3 of the people gathered that evening. If we contrast with these generalized fears, some real-life fears many of us or our neighbors have - how will they afford health care, what happens if I lose my job, will I have the strength to endure the darkness of the night, or the dark place of my soul which I meet each day - we understand how sometimes it can be easier to grasp onto a false reality than to wait for and to live into the true one of Jesus.

So, the question raised by our parable is: "how do we live in hope of the light Christ brings, when the rest of the world seems so dark?"

Part of that answer is found in our parable when we look at the characters and find there is no bride mentioned. There is no bride at the wedding feast. The custom was for the bridegroom to go to the bride's home on their wedding day, settle with the bride's father on the dowry, and then she and the bridegroom would process with the bridesmaids to the wedding feast, where the celebration would begin. Although the door to the wedding banquet was closed and the

tables were laden with a feast, there was no union between the bridegroom and the bride, for she was not there. There was no celebration, there was no joy. The uncaring, smug, self-centered bridesmaids, who were unwilling to share their oil with those in need, afraid that if they did, they wouldn't have enough for themselves, found themselves in a place that felt empty, and stilted, and without joy.

If we use the common allegory of Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride, our story tells us that the bride, or the church, did not show up, because we know the church does not exist where there is not love; the church does not exist where there is not sharing of resources; the church does not exist where there is division. Oh, there might be church buildings filled with people who do not love, but the living and moving and breathing Body of Christ does not show up where there is not generosity, where there is not trust, where there is not love.

There was another party going on in town that night. One where the rejected, the tired, the weary, the lonely, the ones who mourn, the poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers were gathered, where the healing love of Jesus flowed through and around them, where they anointed each other, maybe not with expensive oil, but with tears of joy, for Jesus was with them.

The church shows up, our church shows up when we readily offer ourselves and our resources to each other, when we ask the question, "What do you need?" or "How can I support you in the cold dark night, where fear and trembling settle in upon your soul and weigh you down like a heavy down comforter, almost making it difficult to breath?" The church shows up, our church shows up, when we acknowledge our vulnerability before God and each other, or when we acknowledge that we can't be prepared for everything, and instead chose to trust that it is Jesus who opens the door, invites us in, and prepares the feast.

The false prophets may say to us, "You just need to work harder!" or "Claim what you've earned as your own!" or "Figure out for yourself what you can give away, don't let God lead you, for you will end up with not enough!"

Mary, our woman in blue, scorned, rejected, dismissed, whose eyes, perhaps filled with contempt, or flooded with tears, but also turned to see the truth of Jesus. We can too. We can figure out how to wade through the dark times we often find ourselves in. We can trust Jesus is present with us as we make tiny steps toward the fulfillment of the Kingdom, and trust that they count. We can find strength knowing that there are people here who will be with us and love us and share with us and care about us. We can come to the feast, the banquet, the table laden with more than we could ever ask for or imagine, the altar. In the darkest of times, light will shine, and the Kingdom of Heaven will be born anew in our hearts, when our eyes are turned to see the truth of Jesus. Amen.