

## SPG#187, Pentecost 26A, Proper 27

November 9, 2008

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

The closer to Advent we get, in the readings, the more we will be encouraged to wrestle with being alert and aware and watchful. The more we will hear that the spiritual life in Christ, while born and sustained in love and service, is also about being ready and prepared. And even when we are not near Advent, we will hear implicit encouragement in the scripture to go the second mile in being alert and sensitive to ourselves, to our neighbor, and to God.

In many churches across our land you will find these words inscribed in wood or metal, “This do in remembrance of me.” These are the words from Jesus that we use in the Eucharist. And we find them because humans tend to forget when it comes to the spiritual life. Humans tend to make less of the faith rather than more of the faith. With that fact as a given, there are many challenges in scripture to grow in the faith, to consider being more alert and watchful, to consider being more ready and prepared.

First century followers of Jesus lived in anticipation that he could return at any time.

There was a sense of urgency, a sense of living on the edge. Today’s gospel ends with,

**Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**

I have discerned in my own study, that if one factors out the references to being ready for the return of Jesus, there is still an urgency, for our consideration, that is conveyed in the stories, teachings, and accounts of the New Testament. And so any teaching that is about being alert and watchful is going to be conveyed with that same sense of urgency.

There probably are as many levels of urgency in the faith as there are Christians. And thus you will find some church members, lay and clergy, who operate on more of an easy come easy go basis. If there is work to be done, programs to organize, then prayers are offered. And there is a sincere hope that this work and these programs will come to pass. Sometimes the work is accomplished, and sometimes it is not. Sometimes programs are organized and sometimes not. When the work is not accomplished, the feeling is that it probably was not destined to happen because none of the faithful were energized to make it happen. And because prayers were offered and hopes were had, and God did not make it happen, then it probably was not supposed to happen.

By contrast, you will find other Christians who hope and pray for this work to be accomplished and this program to be organized. But because they are more in touch with this urgency that is throughout the New Testament, they then, in addition, take steps to ensure that the work is accomplished or the program organized.

And so, on the one hand, you find people sincerely hoping and praying for the work of the church to be accomplished. And if it is, it is wonderful. But if it is not, it is disappointing, but there will be other opportunities. And on the other hand, you find people who in their hoping and praying feel that the work of the church must be accomplished. And it is part of their work to make sure that the work is accomplished.

In addition, along the same lines of thinking, you will find people who are in touch with this urgency, but at the same time, feel like that no one else is, and to a certain degree, no one else could be. So they work feverishly in the church as lone rangers. They tend to be martyrs, and they tend to not communicate because in their individualized urgency, they do not see the point of it.

In my discernment of urgency in the New Testament, I perceive it always as urgency in the community and not exclusively urgency for the individual. And as much as we need those who are urgent to be urgent, we also need them to understand why others are less that way.

Now, as an aside, should we expect an infant to know about the urgency of the faith? Certainly not. Nor should we expect that everyone in the faith community has the same capability or inclination to be utterly focused on the work of the church.

But this urgency is part of the picture of the New Testament. It is something for us a community of faith to wrestle with. It is something for us to consider.

Further, and also implicit across the New Testament, within the encouraging to wrestle with urgency, is also the encouraging to wrestle with being smart and wise in the faith. The phrase from Matthew 10 that says we should be wise as serpents and innocent as doves comes to mind.

Today's gospel is written with these models of urgency and smartness in mind. In the story of the ten bridesmaids Jesus says that five of them were wise, and five of them were foolish.

As all ten are waiting for the bridegroom, the five wise ones bring extra oil with the lamps they have brought, while the foolish ones bring no extra oil. When the bridegroom comes, the foolish ones realize that they will run out of oil and ask the wise ones to share. The wise ones say no because they themselves will run short if they share.

The foolish ones then are advised to go buy the oil they need. While they are gone, the five wise ones went into the wedding banquet with the bridegroom. When the foolish ones arrive, the door is already shut, and they cannot gain admittance. So then Jesus says, **Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.**

Matthew speaks in graphic black and white terms to make a point. And my perception of his point is this. It is not important that we all be the same in urgency and smartness in the faith. It is important that those of us, who are in a position to, should consider the ideals of being urgent and being smart. And so the overall tone in this passage, in my estimation, is not one of condemnation and judgment, but one of provoking. Matthew is trying to get us to think. He wants us to ask ourselves if faith is uppermost in our lives or down on the list. He wants us to ask ourselves if we are energized or bored. He wants us to ask ourselves if we are utilizing all our tools of intelligence or not. He wants us to ask ourselves if we are alert enough, if we are watchful enough, if we are ready.

I would say that we should be urgent in our consideration of the use of our intelligence. And we should be smart in our consideration of being urgent. And in all our deliberations and considerations, may God inspire us in our hearts and in our minds. Amen.