

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

November 8, 2002

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday Before Veterans Day

Sunday Before the 400th Anniversary

Of The Landing At Plymouth (November 11, 1620)



*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity,
sexual orientation or socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that
all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities
and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.*

Order of Worship

PRELUDE

La Cathédrale Engloutie
Leon Burke III, piano

Claude Debussy

TOLLING THE BELL

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Marilyn Davis, *Announcer*

Stewardship Moment

Phil Shoulberg, *Stewardship Committee*

Stewardship Anthem

I Will Sing of Your Love, Love, Love

C. Grundy

Originally commissioned by the 2018 Missouri Mid-South Conference Annual Gathering which focused on “The Three Great Loves: A Just World for All,” this song has become a favorite across the United Church of Christ. For us it will be used weekly during our Invitation to Generosity 2021, as members and friends of First Church commit together to our great purposes – Love of Neighbor, Love of Children, and Love of Creation.

I will sing of your love, love, love,
Of your steadfast love for as long as I live.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing of a love so wide
That it welcomes the neighbor and will not divide.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing, “Let the children come
Do not hinder them,” for you love everyone.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing of the trees so tall,
Of the oceans so deep, and your love for them all.
And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

Your love is stronger than the mountains,
It’s no wonder that I’m answering your call.
Whenever someone needs a neighbor
We’ll be working on a just world for all.

LIGHTING THE CANDLES

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**)

Psalm 78:1-4 (NRSV, ad.)

Marilyn Davis

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching,
incline your ears to the word of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable,
I will utter shadowy sayings from long ago...

**things we have heard and known
that our ancestors have told us.**

We will not hide them from our children;
we will tell them to the coming generation –
**the glorious deeds of our God, and the holy might,
and the wonders that God has done!**

HYMN OF THE DAY

O God, Our Help in Ages Past

Isaac Watts

O God, our help in ages past,

Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home:

Under the shelter of your throne
Your saints have dwelt secure.
Sufficient is your arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Still be our God while troubles last
And our eternal home!

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Responsive – One; **Many**) Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

We bless you, God,

For those who serve our country, in conflict and in restoration.

We bless you, God,

For those who leave family and home for tasks in places unfamiliar and surroundings strange.

We bless you, God,

Even for those who may have differed with our government's purposes at war.

We bless you, God,

Who teach us mercy by loving us all.

We bless you, God,

Our help always and our protector.

We bless you, God,

Our heritage and our hope.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Tribute to Veterans

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

THE WORD SHARED

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

From the Prophets

Joshua 24:14-18

NRSV, ad.

[As they prepared to settle permanently in the land of Canaan, Joshua gathered the people and said,]¹⁴ “Revere Yahweh, and serve God in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. ¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake Yahweh to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is Yahweh our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and Yahweh drove out before us all the peoples who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve Yahweh, for Yahweh is our God.”

From the Gospels

Matthew 25:1-13

NRSV, ad.

[Jesus said,] “The commonwealth of heaven will be like this: Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

“As the bridegroom was delayed, all of the bridesmaids became drowsy and slept. But

at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out for the welcome.'

"Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom arrived, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us!' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

"Stay ready, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Response.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

People: Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed
Performed by Leon Burke III

Spiritual

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning...
For this world's almost done.

Sisters, don't grow weary,
Brothers, don't grow weary,
Children, don't grow weary,
For this world's almost done.

It's our faith that makes us happy...

We are climbing Jacob's ladder...

Every round goes higher, higher...

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning...

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

"A Very Different Kind of Wedding"

Rev. Denoon

There are a few occasions in Jesus' ministry when weddings are referred to. Probably the most famous is the Wedding at Cana, in John 2. The evangelist claims that Jesus performed his first miracle then, turning (at his mother's behest) 180 gallons of water into a very potent wine, in order to save the host from embarrassment when the household's own supply of wine ran out before the celebration was ended.

You might also be aware of the parable Jesus offers in chapter 22 of Matthew, in which he describes a wedding of a groom who appears not to be very popular. Jesus imagines the groom's father inviting friends who all provide excuses. The host then extends invitations to people on the street.

One *reference to a wedding* in Luke is when Jesus tells his disciples to always take the humblest seat when they're invited to a wedding, so that they can be invited to sit in a more prominent place.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when Jesus is challenged by opponents about why John the Baptist fasted as much as he did but Jesus seemed always to be feasting, Jesus replies, "You cannot make wedding guests fast when the bridegroom is with them, can you?" (Luke 5:34; cf. Mark 2:19 and Matthew 9:15)

And now, here, fittingly we find Jesus imagining a party – and specifically a wedding – waiting to happen... one of the honored participants delayed, the bridegroom himself.

Believe it or not, there's actually a lot of controversy around this story. Despite what I've told you about it in previous sermons, scholars and historians have no idea what a Jewish wedding in the first century would have been like. AND we have all sorts of questions about the circumstances of this wedding:

What's up with the late-arriving bridegroom?

Where is the bride?

What's up with the bridesmaids, literally "virgins"?

What's the significance of them all falling asleep?

Why are there ten of them, five conservers and five (dare I say) liberals?

Does the lamp oil represent anything?

Who goes out at midnight to buy lamp oil, expecting to find any?

Why won't the other party-goers and wedding couple let those five back in?

In the final analysis... WE HAVE NO IDEA!

We have no idea precisely what weddings would have been like back then, in Palestine. We have no idea exactly what the answers to these questions are. And perhaps most troubling of all, we only have Matthew's word to go on that Jesus actually told this parable. This is the only place it shows up in the Bible, and it's at the trailing end of a series of sayings which have come to be known as "Matthew's Little Apocalypse," so it is entirely possible that Jesus didn't say this but that it's something that the author of this gospel wrote to *sound like something that Jesus would have said*.

Did Jesus even speak this parable?

We have no idea.

So, let me talk about what I do know about this, and you can tell me when I'm done whether you agree with me or you think I'm completely off-base.

This is not the kind of wedding, Jewish or otherwise, that anyone experiences nowadays. We're not even sure if this is the kind of wedding anybody experienced back in Jesus' day. What we know for sure, is that this is a very different kind of wedding.

But what is the same about this wedding, as with all weddings in just about every culture on the planet, is that literally *everybody in their lifetime goes to weddings*. Plus, absolutely every host of every wedding has worked and consulted and invited and spent, in order to make sure that their wedding (or the wedding they're hosting) is fun and romantic and exciting and memorable.

And for the guests, a wedding is always full of anticipation and hope and togetherness. You're studying everyone else. If you're young (I mean, really young), you're all dressed up and you're dancing. If you're a little older, maybe in your teens or twenties (or older and you're single), you're maybe thinking that the romance of the moment is contagious. Middle-agers and older adults will be marveling at the young, trying to corral the very young, to protect the not-as-young-but-still-young. You're being family or you're being friends. And everybody's beautiful and excited... and maybe a little tipsy... or giddy.

What Jesus knew when he would go to a wedding or just talk about one, was that the experience was universal. *Everybody goes to them*. He seems to have thought about weddings the way he thought about planting and making bread and losing stuff and animal husbandry and war. There would be no one who wouldn't know something about the settings for his parables.

So, he'd say, "This is what the realm of heaven is like" or "When God reigns, it is as if," and off he'd go with another parable. There is no way you can NOT know where God is or *what it will be like* once God is fully in charge... ***because that's the way it is now!***

So, even if we cannot figure out exactly what's happening in the Parable of the Foolish Bridesmaids, what we can definitely figure out is that everybody back in Jesus' day, just like nowadays, everybody back then went to weddings, too. And those weddings had the same expectations about them as we have now. No matter the wedding, there are all of the emotions I mentioned, and except in rare cases all of that mix of emotion makes people want to be there – anticipation, hope, togetherness, fun, romance, wonder, beauty, excitement, giddiness... all of those!

Well, there's something, huh!

So, look: If nothing else, there is (for certain!) a desire on the part of all ten of those lamp bearing virgins to be faithful and watchful so that they don't miss a thing. And just in case you're tempted to distance yourself from them, you have to pay attention to the fact that Jesus makes every identifier about them the same, except one.

All of them are women. That's saying something, even though not all of us are women, nor was everyone listening to this story the first time. In our own church, there are women, cis-gender women I mean. But there are also men, cis-gender men, among us, and even if we don't have so many transgender or non-binary people, those identifiers for us still do not prevent us from *identifying with them*.

What we recognize about these ten is that they are all the same. They have the same gender, and furthermore, in the Greek the word we have translated as "bridesmaids" is actually "virgins." I don't want to

speculate too much about *why they're virgins*. That kind of discussion could make us all rather uncomfortable in a setting of worship. We don't usually like to mix sexuality with spirituality. Or rather, we do; just not at church...

But a virgin is someone who hasn't come to (oh, this is such a delicate topic!) realize themselves in a way that indicates fullness and maturity. They are inexperienced, but though inexperienced, their potential is there – complete and ready.

They also each have the same role in the wedding, attendants for the bride who tonight is... getting... experienced.

And in this case, they each have a lamp.

Now, the temptation at this point is to allegorize everything – the virginhood, the lamps, the oil for the lamps... And, as I've said in other sermons, at the point a parable becomes an allegory, it isn't a parable anymore.

So, let's just stick with the circumstances. Ten rather identical people are waiting for a party to start and fall asleep. Then, the party starts and half of them aren't ready for it.

Here's my suggestion: I perceive here with these ten that there is a palpable desire on the part of all of them to be "in the room where it happened" (the wedding, I mean). At least on the surface, this seems to be so. Every last one of them wants to be there when the wedding couple arrive. Scholars who have written about the context that Jesus sets in this parable say either that these women are waiting for the couple to arrive and for the ceremony to begin, or else they're waiting for them to return from consummating their marriage.

You've been to those weddings where the ceremony is over, and it's time to transition to the reception? But the photographer has decided there's a whole host of after-ceremony photos that just *have to be* shot in the sanctuary with all the family and attendants? Even though you're excited, you know you don't want to get to the reception too early, so you wait in the car, and you fall asleep waiting. Even if you haven't done this, you can imagine how it could happen.

Universality is a central condition in Jesus' parables, remember.

And there is the distinct disappointment we all feel when we miss out on something exciting and festive, for whatever the reason. So, we're waiting for the call. Cell phone rings: *It's starting*. We rouse from our stupor and collect ourselves, and off we go.

Some of you will say that your own experience of this has been the last four years of the American Presidency. Some will say that their experience of these four years has been like the benefits of a wedding – the giddiness, even silliness, of a moment that's as serious still as they come.

Some will say that the world felt like a locked door and a host saying, "I don't know them," when you know your name is on that list.

My question, for Jesus and for you, is whether the parable really means that the Realm of Heaven *has* to be this way, or if this is just the way it is now? Must there always be the haves and the have-nots, those who are "in" and those who are "out"?

And don't we imagine better for ourselves and for our world, whether this one or the next!

Jesus' admonition at the end of the parable seems to be that he doesn't think it should have to be this way. However, he also points out that it is the responsibility of the individual to ensure that circumstances don't remain this way, that some are in while some are out and, even particularly, that we are out when we prefer to be in. The lesson to be affirmed here is exactly what Matthew says that Jesus says, "*Stay ready.*"

Be prepared, Scouts! (I attended a Scouting Court of Honor, this past Monday evening, so I felt like I had to say that.)

Stay ready, so that you're not left out and so that, if your heart can be thus open, no one else is left out either. Because, in addition to the universality of the setting for this parable (a wedding and all the emotions and conditions that go with it) is the universality of that sensation of disappointment or resentment when we're left out and set aside, and the feeling of what we want to do to others because of our rejection.

Listen. Here's a nod to 1620.

We stand in a tradition of Pilgrims and Puritans who wanted to give their religion a reboot and to try again with the establishment of society, all fresh and in a new place, where everyone counted. The Mayflower Compact, that document they signed aboard ship even before they disembarked for Plymouth Rock, had the signatures of women on it as well as of men. So, our spiritual ancestors had a sense of the radical nature of what they proposed for themselves and all those indigenous people around them.

Sadly, even for as radically egalitarian and hospitable as they may have been to begin with, they fell into familiar patterns of sexism and xenophobia and conflict almost from the moment the weather became warm again. Our refugees became colonizers.

The world can't afford that. None of us can afford that. And despite how this parable has been interpreted by myself and others, I cannot imagine a God who wants that.

History teaches us the lessons that prove Jesus' admonition to be correct: *Keep ready*. Stock up on lamp oil. Don't sleep too deeply. There can be almost interminable gaps between the times that feel really good, so don't lose hope.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Share Our Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

Prayer of Our Savior (Unison)

Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Marilyn Davis

Invitation

Prayer of Dedication (Unison)

God of safe harbor and beloved community, we praise you for the four hundred years our spiritual tradition has existed on these shores. We thank you for all we have learned along the way, through trial and error, sin and forgiveness, and all of it by your grace. Using our gifts, let that same grace be extended to all the world; in Christ's name we pray. Amen.

POSTLUDE

Day of Triumph (Hail to the Heroes)
Leon Burke III, organ

Vladimir Rebikov
arr. George Blake

BENEDICTION

"The Lord's Free People" (Bradford)

Rev. Denoon

RAISING THE COVENANT (Unison)

Covenant of 1977

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

DISMISSAL

Marilyn Davis



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