

“Here and Now”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
November 6, 2011/ All Saints Sunday

"Then the kingdom 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 them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 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 came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matthew 25:1-13)

Today, we remember. We remember our loved ones who have gone before us - our mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, friends and neighbors. On this day, as days shorten and fall colors start fading and falling, we remember the transiency of human existence. We remember its frailty; we remember its beauty.

My mother died when she was just a few years older than what I am now. That was some 18 years ago. But I still feel the pain. None of us, her family members or friends, had a chance to say how much we loved her. None of us were prepared. Most of us are preoccupied with the future. We want to be prepared for what comes next in life. And yet, sometimes, we are unprepared for something to take longer than we had anticipated; at other times, a premature ending takes us by surprise. Today, I remember my mother with pain and sorrow still fresh in my memory. And yet, I do not grieve as those without hope. Christ Jesus has won victory over sin and death! For all the saints, Christ is the rock, the fortress, the might, the captain in a well-fought fight! For all the saints, who from their labors rest, but also for you and me, gathered here to sing this great hymn of victory, “For All the Saints”!

Yes, this is a great day for us, the church, my friends. Today, we celebrate the Feast of All Saints. With much love and gratitude and in great hope, we remember those who have shaped our lives in special ways. We remember those who have made the love of God real in our world. And we remember the common destiny and hope we share with them. Yes, living or dead, we are a part of something much greater than our own lives. We are all children of God, united in the hope of eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Redeemer and Savior. Thanks be to God!

The Gospel lesson put before on such a day seems, I should say, rather challenging. It was a wedding night. Ten bridesmaids were waiting for the bridegroom whose arrival was, somehow, quite delayed. Well into the midnight, after hours and hours of waiting, they all fell asleep. When, finally, they heard the bridegroom arriving, five of them had their lamps still burning with enough oil to feed them, but the other five ran out of the oil. Their lamps were going out. They tried to borrow some oil from the ones who were prepared, but it did not work. They were forced to go out to get their own oil. When they came back, it was too late. Everyone was inside with the bridegroom, feasting, with the door securely locked. They knocked on the door, shouting, "*Lord, open to us. Let us in.*" And from behind the closed door, the Lord answered, "*I do not know you.*"

A chilling story, is it not? A door slammed in your face and permanently locked. Where is grace? Where is love? Where is compassion? On a different note, what do you make of those wise bridesmaids who did not want to share what they had? They may be wise, but also selfish, don't you think? This parable hinges on not sharing what you have. Some of you may even wonder why this story is included in the Bible and why it is being read today.

Well, this is not a day for a long sermon. I know that I have only a couple more minutes to conclude. So, let me be straightforward. For me, this is a sobering wake-up call. Good for you if you feel disturbed. You know, in our lives, there are certain things we just cannot borrow from anyone else. There are some reserves that no one else can build up for you. You cannot borrow someone else's peace of mind. You cannot borrow someone else's joy. You cannot borrow someone else's hope, courage, generosity. You cannot borrow someone else's life. You see? Faith is not faith unless it is yours. You have to find it yourself. You have to nurture it yourself. You have to build it up yourself.

I do not think that this story is about taking care of ourselves selfishly, so that one day we can make it to heaven. No, that is not what wisdom is about. This is a story about the oil we carry with us here and now. This is a story about heaven here and now, how we are to start living it, as we wait for that day when Christ will come to us in the full glory of his promised reign.

Concluding the story, Jesus says, "*Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*" The early Christians waited for Jesus' imminent return. Their mission was to wait expectantly and live faithfully. It is our mission still. We must keep awake. We must keep active and watchful. Each day, each hour, each moment, we must live our lives joyfully, courageously, truthfully, and generously, ready to embrace the grace of the present, willing to take up the challenges of the time.

A rabbi taught his disciples, "*Repent one day before your death.*" One of them asked, "*How will we know when that day is?*" I guess this is part of our human nature. We want to be prepared, but we do not want to prepare any sooner than necessary. Well, the rabbi replied, "*All the more reasons to repent today, lest you die tomorrow.*"

This is the time, my friends, and this is the place. Here and now, God calls us to wait expectantly and live faithfully. Here is now, God calls us to trim our lamps and fill our oil reservoir, that we may shine with the light of God's glory and grace. Yes, my friends, here and now, the Spirit stands ready to anoint us and fill us, and make us the holy people we are called to be! Here and now! Amen!