

Sermon – Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25: 1-13

A few years ago researchers from around the world under the coordination of the University of Cambridge, published a study in Nature magazine that confirmed that Australian Aborigines form the oldest continuing culture in the world. Their culture can be dated back some 58,000 years with a direct DNA link to the first humans that walked out of Africa. By contrast white Australia dates back a mere two hundred fifty years.

For a society and culture to form, no less exist for so long, sustainable societal systems must develop. It has emerged that the Australian Aboriginal people developed a system of counting based on words for one and two only, or first and second. The Gumulgal people from the north of the country developed the word *urapon* for one and *ukasar* for two. They used these two words in different sequences to count past two. This system of counting is called a binary.

Over time society has become more and more sophisticated. The industrial and technological revolutions have had a profound influence on modern society and culture. Even with these changes human beings still seek to simplify what we can. When computers were being developed in the 1950s the coders settled for a binary numbering system based on 0, 1 so as to simplify coding that otherwise would have been very complex using the decimal system. Over 60,000 years of human evolution, a binary numbering system remains at the root of our civilization.

Not too long ago gender was considered a binary of male and female. That was it. In society today we are discussing the issue of gender fluidity examining more deeply that this binary choice may be misleading, boxing in people whose gender identity does not fit this stark binary. Even though these binaries exist in society we need to be careful about how they are applied because a significant justice issue has now risen around recognizing a gender spectrum and honoring those that choose not to be identified as either male or female.

However, I say all of this because so much of our religious and faith tradition has been set up in this way. You are either a believer or not, you are saved or you are not, you are in or you are out, you are wise or you are foolish.

The parable style of speech used by Jesus to teach his disciples sometimes used a binary to illustrate what was right and what was wrong, what was acceptable and what was not. We have the parable of the weeds and the wheat, the two sons and the vineyard, the wise and foolish men who built houses on sand and rock and today's parable about the ten bridesmaids. The use of a binary choice simplifies the illustration Jesus is trying to make in his oral tradition.

We arrive at today's gospel reading as our lectionary year draws to a close. We have been reading largely from the gospel according to Matthew this year and in his telling of the

good news it is at this stage in Jesus life that he speaks to his disciples about his coming demise and the promise that his death is not to be the end but rather the beginning of new life for them.

One of Jesus' greatest concerns was that people act on his call to follow him. He put a lot of energy into teaching people that they have a choice to follow and that there are very real consequences if they don't.

Today's gospel reading paints a vivid picture of what this choice means. The parable of the ten bridesmaids sets up a binary. We hear that five of the bridesmaids were wise and five were foolish. The ten have a common mission as they gather to welcome the bridegroom and escort him into the wedding banquet. This was the tradition in Jesus day. A fairly straightforward task you'd think.

Like life, things get a little complicated. First of all it is nighttime so they need to carry lights with them in the form of oil lamps. Half of the women take an additional flask of oil in case they need to top up their lamps. The other half, the so-called foolish, seem more impetuous and spontaneous and head off without thinking to take additional oil.

I'm sure you have known people who when they travel sit down before the trip and plan it out in extraordinary detail. They plan for every day, where to stay, what to see, where to eat and so forth. Then you might know others that would rather only plan for the first day and then be satisfied to go with the flow and take what comes over the remaining time.

Our bridesmaids really fall into this binary. In the case of the travelers, we probably would not say one was right and one was wrong, but rather recognize there are different ways of travelling and experiencing the world. In the case of this parable though there are real consequences for being laissez-faire and not being prepared when the bridegroom comes.

As the bridesmaids head out to meet the groom all seems right. The complication arises when the groom is delayed long enough that they all grow tired and fall asleep. When one wakes and announces that the groom is approaching they all wake up and grab their lamps so that they can see what they are doing and make their way. It is at that moment of expectation that the five not-so-wise bridesmaids realize that they don't have enough oil left in their lamps.

The five in this predicament do what you or I would do and they ask their neighbor, one of the other five women for some oil. It is at this moment the parable turns. You would expect the women with additional oil to share what they had left even though they thought it might not be enough for all. But heh, how many lamps do you actually need to show the way? Surely not all ten! Rather than assist, the women with oil refuse to share thus condemning the other women and forcing them to return to home to buy more. Is this tough love?

The parable continues as the women separate. Soon thereafter the bridegroom arrives and is escorted into the banquet by the five remaining women, the wise women if you will. When the others return they find it is too late and they are locked out of the banquet, forever unable to share in the wedding feast.

Which group would you identify with today? Are you prepared and ready if Jesus comes this morning? Are you prepared if your life ends today? Jesus tells us that none of us know when our time will end and when his return will occur. Only God knows. So we must be ready and not delay for there are consequences to our decision.

The parable today presents us with a binary choice. We can either be wise or foolish. We can either be ready or we can be unprepared and distracted, which will leave us on the wrong side of the door to the banquet of the lamb. We can't really be half in or half out.

When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior we commit to a different way of living in the world. Our world is full of violence and alienation of the other and we say no to that sought of world. By turning to Jesus we say yes to lifting up our brothers and sisters when they are down, we say yes to common worship and the development of our knowledge of Jesus and our spiritual life. We don't need to have all the answers to our many questions about faith before we say yes. Saying yes opens up the path to finding the answers.

What are we to make though of the actions of the wise women who refuse to share their oil? I guess they could be worried that in sharing they too will run out of oil and not be able to do what they are there to do. They make a tough call. Jesus is clearly making the point that if you are not prepared, you can't rely on others to bail you out at the critical time.

As Christians this side of the second coming our love for our neighbor is paramount and our willingness to share our resources critical. Our love for the other will help to show them the way to Jesus. I believe Jesus calls us to make every effort to help restore people to a full relationship with God as God intended.

When the trumpet sounds and the vision of Jesus arrives it will be too late to help anyone. If you have procrastinated and put off saying yes to Jesus then say yes today. Don't waste any more time. Say yes, and see how the journey of life opens up for you. Importantly for all of us is to encourage those that have been pushed away from the faith to come back and say yes to Jesus, to say yes to restoration. Our priority has to be to reach out to the lost and show them what a life of faith looks like.

The sad thing is that many who we might call "the foolish" think they are not ready and feel utterly unprepared for, and unworthy of, Jesus' love. Society, families, and the church may have contributed to peoples' feelings of alienation, unworthiness or disinterest. We need to help to change this.

The parable tells us that the wise women didn't stop the others from leaving even though they knew the bridegroom was close by. Let us not send the other away. Let us welcome them, share our resources and walk together toward the great feast that awaits us.

Amen