

Sacred Spaces – Justice and Righteousness – Matthew 25:1-13  
November 12, 2017

Please pray with me. Holy One, send your Spirit to move in our world and stir the water of our souls that we may desire a word of instruction that awakens us to the joy of your coming reign. Amen.

Our scripture passages may seem wildly different at first glance, but if we examine them more closely we see that Amos and Jesus are really talking about the same thing – what does God expect of us if we expect to take part in the Kingdom of God.

Now Amos, a migrant farm worker from the self-declared righteous nation of Judah, now turned social justice prophet, is one of the true prophets called by God to speak to the people. As you might expect – no one wants to hear what Amos has to say and it is likely he has few friends. Who in the world would want to go out for a beer or a nice dinner and listen to the gloom and doom that Amos is spouting. But – he does have a point just as Jesus does when he tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids.

It is significant that at the end of his life, Jesus chose one of the most emotionally weighted events in the life of any family for this parable. Parents are nearly always very heavily invested in time, energy, resources, creativity, love and hope in the marriage of a son or daughter. Weddings are very fragile events with tears, sometimes anger and resentment, and always the capacity for something to go wrong – the best man gets lost, the flowers don't arrive, or the bride finds a tear in her dress and is late for the wedding. I haven't officiated that many

weddings, but already in two of them the bride was about a half hour late which made everyone, especially the bridegroom a bit edgy.

It helps to understand this parable more easily if we know the wedding customs in Jesus' time. Weddings generally took place at night – thus the torches. The guests would assemble at the home of the bride and were entertained by her parents while waiting for the bridegroom. When the bridegroom approached, the guests, including the bridesmaids, lighted torches and went out to meet him. The entire party then walked in a festive procession to the groom's home where his parents were waiting for the ceremony and the extended banquet that would follow and continue for several days. Jesus, his mother, Mary, and his disciples were guests at such a wedding in Cana where he performed his first miracle by turning water into wine.

Scholars have explained the parable as Jesus being the bridegroom, the bride being Israel and we know Israel is often referred to in the Old Testament especially as the bride of Jesus or God. The bridesmaids and wedding party are the church members – they are us. In Matthew's time the return of Christ was thought to be imminent and people were encouraged to always be alert because no one knew the day or the time when Christ would return and we still don't know.

The wise bridesmaids not only had their lamps with oil in them, but also took flasks of extra oil along just in case. As it turns out the bridegroom was very late and the bridesmaids, fell asleep; as did the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane. But there is more to the story than the fact that they simply fell asleep. They weren't understanding the situation whatsoever. Since they had been invited to

take part in this celebration one can presume they knew the bridegroom and his tendency to stop along the way to dine with sinners, heal a man with leprosy or simply assure people of God's blessing. The wise ones were selfish, presuming that by hoarding their oil they were the winners when if, they had shared the oil the ten lights would have been as strong as the five lights were and there would have been five more celebrants. The foolish ones presumed the oil was the important thing and ran off to find more instead of trying to follow along. Their rejection by the bridegroom is said to be indicative of the final judgment, although we believe that God will welcome everyone to His Kingdom at the end times. Jesus was supposed to have returned several hundred years ago. We don't know when he is coming and the lesson here is that we should always be prepared because we have no idea when he will return and we need to be ready when he does come. And we need to know just what is important in life.

Now, Amos did not give such a sweet, warm speech. He literally bellowed at the people – telling them that the day of the Lord was not going to be the wonderful time they were expecting. Telling them that God was mad. God was not happy with their burnt offerings, their grain offerings and their loud songs and festivals; the festivals being their three annual pilgrimage feasts – Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Harvest which are described in Exodus chapters 23 and 24 and Deuteronomy 16. These are Jewish people following Jewish laws remember. It isn't until later that those who followed Christ slowly gave up their Jewish traditions. Amos reminded them that God wanted justice and righteousness from the people. And that is just what God wants today.

We don't have glitzy festivals and we don't specialize in burnt offerings or any sacrifices, but we no doubt do things that don't particularly please God. I am hard pressed to think of things we do here at Tory Hill that would not please God. Our songs and music are offered in a manner that I feel certain pleases God, but I have been to non-denominational or fundamentalist churches that made me squirm because there was so much loud music and waving of arms and prayers that seemed intended to bring attention to the one praying. Now, I could be wrong about that, I know. Perhaps these people are more spiritual and devout than we are.

As I tried to weave together the parable of the ten bridesmaids and the ravings of Amos and talk about how they connect to our world today, I spent considerable time thinking about the things we do that would please God and I came up with quite a few. As I have said often – we have a caring congregation and I know there are many times when various members of the congregation do errands for others, take meals to folks, offer rides and many other little acts of kindness. Our church family is very generous with regards to the Buxton Toy Box, the Thanksgiving dinner for a needy family, food donations for the Buxton Centre Food Pantry and other charitable offerings. We make it a point to be out in the community working with other organizations, bringing people together as with our Saco River Jazz Ensemble concert and our craft fair in conjunction with the Dorcas Fest.

Do we do as much as God wants? Probably not. Could we do more? Probably, but since I have always believed you collect more flies with honey than

with vinegar – I have a difficult time being a pastor like Amos. I would encourage us to each think about what more we can do in the way of social justice and righteousness in this world – perhaps even not related to church. Little things like recycling, using reusable grocery bags, smiling at a stranger, saying thank you, all will help us be prepared for the coming kingdom of God.

We look at the world and we think God is unpredictable because we see so much carnage and destruction. We wonder how God could let things like the shooting last Sunday at the Baptist church in Sutherland Springs, Texas happen. How he could let all of the other tragedies whether acts of terrorism or simply crimes happen. How he could allow wars to go on. But, what we have to remember every day is that God's love is consistent and in the end, we are loved unconditionally. Amen.