

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2017,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A journalist was assigned to the Jerusalem bureau of his newspaper. He gets an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. After several weeks he realizes that whenever he looks at the wall he sees an old Jewish man praying vigorously. The journalist wondered whether there was a publishable story here. He goes down to the wall, introduces himself and says: "You come every day to the wall. What are you praying for?" The old man replies: "What am I praying for? In the morning I pray for world peace, then I pray for the brotherhood of man. I go home, have a glass of tea, and I come back to the wall to pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth." The journalist is taken by the old man's sincerity and persistence. "You mean you have been coming to the wall to pray every day for these things?" The old man nods. "How long have you been coming to the wall to pray for these things?" The old man becomes reflective and then replies: "How long? Maybe twenty, twenty-five years." The amazed journalist finally asks: "How does it feel to come and pray every day for over 20 years for these things?" "How does it feel?" the old man replies. "It feels like I'm talking to a wall."ⁱ

Given the amount of parables (104 in *The Gospel of Matthew*) that Jesus uses to try to explain the workings of the kingdom of heaven to his disciples alone, one can't help but wonder if this is how Jesus felt, as though he were talking to a wall. Despite explanation after explanation, no one seems to catch on to what is really important in the message that he has come to bring to a waiting and desperate people regarding how life can be changed for the better and what actions they must take to see that it happens. In this morning's gospel reading, known by theologians and biblical scholars as the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, Jesus gives yet one more example of what is necessary to enter the kingdom, this time focusing on preparedness. In his essay "The Politics of Representation," the biblical scholar Raj Bharat Patta writes that he sees "this parable as keeping us awake and waiting in hope on God, for none of us knows the day nor the hour of the Son of Man's return. It is a wakeup call to any of us who have fallen into the deep slumber of falsehood, seduced by the false saviors of modernity. Today, secularism, the market, globalization, the state, etc., have been sedating communities with their false hopes and even obstructing an encounter with the divine. This parable, along with the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats that follows shortly after it, invites us to recognize that the divine in Christ has been visiting us daily at odd hours in different forms: in the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, etc. We have been busy going around to trim our lanterns and meeting market dealers, missing opportunities to meet and eat with the divine. This parable is challenging us to stay awake to recognize God who in Christ is coming to us in unexpected people, inviting to meet and dine with them."ⁱⁱ He sees women as the most marginalized among us, as they were in Jesus' day, and he makes a plea that we begin to recognize how much women have contributed to our understanding of the beloved community of God and our place within it. Yet I think the gospel imagines a much broader viewpoint and is really asking us not only will we be prepared to meet God or see God in our daily lives, but it asks of us what must we do to be a wise virgin vs. a foolish one (that is, of course, imagining that most

of us identify with the foolish group). Because God (I believe) is always seeking to have an encounter with us, what must we do or who must we be in order for us to both to make it happen and to make the most of it?

I understand the dilemma of the man at the wailing wall. There are only so many ways one can ask the question of who we are and how we identify as the people of God. That we should be a community of prayer and at prayer is evident, and that our spoken prayers should lead to appropriate actions is surely true. I would add some other prerequisites, a few evident, a few more obscure. First I would say that we need to be a biblically literate church. This is necessary so that we can stand up to the bullies who use Scripture to defend utterly indefensible points of view on human sexuality, women's rights, racism, and gun control, to name a few. After this past Sunday's church shooting, I'm not convinced that sending thoughts and prayers is the most we can offer the bereaved. *They* were a people at prayer, for God's sake, and look what happened! Thoughts and prayers must seem like an empty response. When will we take a stand towards stricter gun control? I read that the Attorney General of the State of Texas is calling instead that parishioners come to church armed, as if more carnage could in any way be merited. Granted, Scripture says nothing about guns or the use of weapons, but it does speak to us of peace, healing, spiritual health, comfort, gathering as a community. What should or could be BBCC's response to the deadly shots that rang out on Sunday morn? I'd be interested in your thoughts. One thing for sure is that we need to pause and give thanks it did not happen here, in this space, while full well knowing that given today's gun climate, it surely could...And if we are going to pray for that Texas church and its members, let us pray that they find answers that will ameliorate the pain and suffering. It will be very difficult to face God for any of the bereaved, or to understand God's purpose in what transpired. And we must not lose this opportunity to ponder bloodshed in many parts of the world. The greatest obstacle to peace at the moment is human ignorance and greed, and the bible has plenty to say about both. O Lord, lead us not into the temptation towards them!

Secondly, to encounter God may mean that we need to abandon tradition. It may be of interest to note that the word itself comes from the Latin root *tradere*, to trade, or to hand over (i.e. betray). Hence, the Latin Vulgate version of the bible says that Jesus was "*tradere-d*," leading us to understand that long-held positions or traditions can betray us and keep us from moving forward to an encounter with the Divine. Perhaps it's time to consider some new ways of doing things instead of holding on to the mantra, "but we've always done it this way." That's why I like the fact that Aimee is always pushing us to learn new hymns. Not only do they offer a different perspective of God and the created order, but they keep worship from becoming ordinary, stale, out of touch. (Yeah, Aimee!) Perhaps you have some idea of how worship might be diversified, different, improved, updated, more meaningful. How do you image God? Is that reflected in our Sunday worship? Let Bonnie and the worship committee know your ideas. They will help us to grow as a congregation and as a church within a constantly changing community.

Thirdly, we are told that we must be "born again" in order to enter the kingdom. I believe that no two words are more scary than those, especially for those who are afraid of change. There are many ways to understand this phrase, but for me it's pretty simple. We are asked, above all,

to see things/to understand the world, as God does as exemplified by Christ. For most of us, that would mean a new vision of fairness, living according to new rules of justice, admitting that racism and sexism exist and that we must personally attempt to do something to change that, and that we need to give time, talent and treasure through our houses of worship. Then we will be truly born again, born anew, and born renewed.

For most of us, it will mean both a change of heart and a focus on kingdom good works. The Green Chalice work that Glenn has begun on our behalf is a great start (Yeah Glenn!). We can go from mean to green by merely adopting a few new ways of sharing, using, and disposing of the gifts we have been given on an Earth and in a Universe of which we were meant to be good stewards. It's hard to imagine a better way to honor Christ as our savior than to save the world, one small step at a time, if that is what it takes. So now that we have a deeper understanding of how we are to prepare for meeting God, let us spend a few moments on when the event is supposed to happen. What is certain is that the time and date are unclear, as is evidenced in the parable, since no one knew when the bridegroom was coming. (Where the bride is in this story is puzzling, but that's a sermon for another occasion.) I've read commentary after commentary that see this as an eschatological warning (an eternal watch for the end times [and not our personal end but the end of the world as we know it]), but since Jesus seems to intimate in other gospel portions that the kingdom of heaven is within and is not a future, but a present event, I believe we are talking about making a total life change not for some unforeseeable time to come but for the here and now, lest there not be a recognizable future come what may. In fact, there are many who believe it is too late in life to make any changes, which is why they have not aspired to do so. If we've already done irreparable damage (they reason), why bother? For me it comes down to that age old preponderance called quality of life, something I had to learn about the hard way when one of our dogs was sick. We could have kept her going, which would have satisfied our needs and desires, but what about her pain and suffering? Our discussion focused on quality of life, and it is appropriate in speaking about how we live our lives as well and speaks to our motivation as Christians. I'd venture to say that what distinguishes us from other believers in God is our commitment through baptism to do good works that bring to fruition the holy realm of God. I want to make the world a better place for me, for my family, for you, for those I know, for the billions I don't know. I can only do my small portion of what is needed, but that is okay. Perhaps my doing will inspire someone else's doing. I should not be hiding my light under a bushel, as the old biblical saying goes. And there is no doubt that making someone else's life better makes ours better as well. The key is commitment, the intentionality I have spoken to in my previous sermons. Filling those Home Depot buckets that Bonnie has brought to us to aid in the hurricane clean-up would be a great start for instance. It'd be wonderful if they were all taken home this morning. (Yeah Bonnie!) Then we would be living into the light of the gospel for today, and we can feel good about that, and inspired to do more, every day, every week, every year, till we lay down our mortal bodies to eternal rest. Then we will hear, no doubt, "Good, you faithful servants. Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me!" (Yeah BBCC!) Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/illustrations/sermon-illustration-noal-atkinson-humor-prayergeneral-77277>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-representation-matthew-25-1-13-raj-bharat-patta/>