

23rd Sunday after the Pentecost
November 8, 2020
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus told this parable days before he died. The Jesus followers believed that after a time following his death he would return to usher in the kingdom of heaven, which in this case would be the end of time, the eschaton, when God would reign as the sovereign.

In the kingdom of heaven, the oppressed would go free. A world of peace and justice rooted in love would prevail. All people would live flourishing, full, and blessed lives. Jesus was essentially saying, “Though I don’t know when I will return, be ready so that when I do, you can have this life.”

Tuesday’s outcome shows a deep split among us. We don’t see this nation in the same way. Left-right, urban-rural, men-women, whites-people of color. Furthermore, each side is right as much as each side is wrong. That’s what happens when we can’t find common ground or we stop listening to each other or we stop being vulnerable with each other. Collectively, we are the bridesmaids who aren’t ready to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Admittedly, it’s tempting to think that we’re right and the other side is wrong and thus, we can enter the wedding banquet, while the other side stays outside.

That’s the problem I have with this parable. While this applies on an individual level, collectively it doesn’t.

As a nation we can’t be two sets of bridesmaids, one ready and one not. Our Constitution’s Preamble reads: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,

do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” We are supposed to be one nation. We fought a war 160 years ago over this.

As imperfect as the Constitution was at its signing, such as counting slaves as 3/5ths of a person, we have made progress. This year was the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage. and the 55th anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. Implicitly, the Preamble noted that a perfect Union is a work in progress. We won’t be able to continue this progress, however, with the deep divide rending us apart now. Divided as we are, we can’t secure the general welfare, the blessings of liberty, and our prosperity if we believe we are the bridesmaids who are ready and the others are not. As a nation, we can’t enter the kingdom of heaven if we willingly leave the other side out.

This nation faces many problems. We have obvious ones such as systemic racism and climate change. We need affordable healthcare. There’s income inequality and food insecurity. The pandemic has put millions of people out of work, which may soon render many homeless and without health insurance. It has exposed many part-time minimum wage workers without sick leave to greater Covid exposure. Then there are less obvious ones such as an aging population with its own particular health issues.

None of them are easy. All of them will take considerable cooperation and imagination to address, which we can only do if we can bridge the chasm between us.

While the secular world may encourage each side to dig in and hold fast, as the church, we shouldn’t. We’re called to pursue reconciliation. Paul wrote to the deeply divided Corinthian church “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (1 Cor. 1:10b).

This rift has been steadily widening for decades. The last four years have laid it bare for everyone to see. Consequently, bridging this rift will take a long time too. Nevertheless, we're called to begin.

We start with basic compassion and kindness without regard to any side. We should be quiet so we can listen deeply to and speak honestly of pain, fear, and loss. We should be vulnerable and humble and willing to concede that we don't have all the answers. We must trust that true freedom comes not by individualism but by uplifting the common good. We must have faith in Creation's abundance and remember that life is not a zero-sum, transactional game. We must be grateful for the simplest graces. We must be generous with our treasure: money, time, and spiritual gifts. We must trust love as the transforming power. As basic as these are, we need to have patience and persistence because they're harder to execute than we think.

We've been on diverging paths for a few decades. However, when we begin building bridges, we will continue to form a more perfect union, and perhaps even the kingdom of heaven.