

NOVEMBER 12TH, 2017: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Wisdom 6:12-16 I Thessalonians 4:13-18 Matthew 25:1-13

Obviously today's Wisdom pericope can only be understood by those who appreciate poetry.

I often remind my students that the Bible isn't a book; it's a library, a collection of books, composed by various authors over more than 1,200 years, frequently written in different genres. If we don't know the type of literature with which we're dealing, we can't interpret the sacred author correctly. That's why we have to fall back on Scripture scholars for help. Unless we actually lived during the biblical period, many of the genres the authors employed will be "foreign" to us. Though I presume almost no one alive today will confuse the Cartoon Network with the History Channel, we're not that skilled in ancient genres.

Like all poets, the Wisdom author personifies "things" we don't literally encounter as persons. In this case, he/she turns a movement into beautiful woman. "Resplendent and unfading is wisdom, and she is readily perceived by those who love her, and found by those who seek her." Biblical wisdom is the quest to surface Yahweh's patterns of behavior in our everyday lives. If we're convinced God's present in everyone we meet and everything we stumble upon, then we must be able to learn something about God from each of those encounters. We simply have to be open to surfacing what God's trying to tell us. In other words, a lifetime quest "to keep vigil for her."

The gospel Jesus' use of parables is a different genre than the poetry used in some Wisdom literature, yet it does emphasize the day by day situations we all experience. A parable isn't just a story with a lesson. It tricks listeners into admitting what they reject on one level, they're already accepting on another level. This is especially true when Jesus talks about God's kingdom. For instance, though we have problems with the slow pace in which God effectively works in our everyday lives, no one complains about seeds in the field taking a very long time to grow. If we accept slowness on one level, we also have to accept it on a different level.

Today's parable zeros in on always being prepared for God breaking into our lives. Waiting for a bridegroom to return home from his in-laws' house to consummate his marriage with his new wife is something everyone in Jesus' day and age takes for granted. Those who don't bring extra oil for their lamps will eventually find themselves "out in the dark." (By the way, candles, as we know them, weren't invented until more than a century after Jesus' birth. Using them instead of oil lamps in Scripture would be a classic anachronism.) What holds true for expectant wedding guests also holds true for being prepared to surface the risen Jesus. We "know neither the day nor the hour." If we're not prepared for his/her breaking into our everyday experiences, we'll never know it happens.

Of course, we can't forget the main thing Jesus' first disciples were expecting never happened, at least not in the way they were expecting. It would seem Paul's recently evangelized converts in Thessalonica were under the impression no one would die before Jesus returned in the Second Coming. But these exemplary Christians eventually discovered not only was Jesus' Parousia delayed, but also Christians began to die.

Will these unfortunate individuals miss out on the goodies they're expecting to receive when Jesus returns, or will they just be at the end of the line when they're being distributed? "Neither," Paul says. They'll be the first to go with the risen Jesus.

Waiting helps us see reality from different perspectives . . . as long as we have enough oil for our lamps.

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NOVEMBER 19TH, 2017: THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 I Thessalonians 5:1-6 Matthew 25:14-30

Perhaps the key to understanding today's liturgical readings is in our I Thessalonian's passage. In this earliest Christian writing we possess, Paul is dealing with something most first and second-generation followers of Jesus simply took for granted: his immediate second coming. They didn't believe carrying on Jesus' ministry would last a life-time. They presumed the risen Jesus would return very quickly and take them with him to share in his eternal life. At most, they'd have to spend just a few years biding their time before his Parousia would break out among them

By the time Paul writes I Thessalonians, around 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians are getting anxious. As we heard last week, they were beginning to worry about those who had died. Would they completely miss out on Jesus' promises, or at least be put at the end of the line when the "goodies" were being passed out? Having addressed that problem, the Apostle is now concerned with how they're occupying their time in the "interval."

Some Thessalonians seem to be forgetting about carrying on Jesus' ministry, spending their days conjuring up possible "times and seasons" predicting Jesus' arrival. (I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't have a lottery going!) Others are so disappointed in this delayed Parousia that it's no longer a factor in their everyday lives. Paul chides both in today's pericope, pointedly telling each to "stay alert and sober." Though he's still holding out hope for Jesus' imminent return, no one can pinpoint the exact time. Meanwhile, there's work to be done.

As a good Jew, Paul certainly would have held up the "worthy wife" from Proverbs as an example for all to follow. Whether Jesus' coming is tomorrow or more than 2,100 years down the road, we should ingeniously be occupying our days, especially if our occupations help others.

But by the time Matthew writes his gospel – at least 25 years after I Thessalonians – Jesus' Parousia is being relegated further and further into the background. Though the evangelist still seems to believe the event will happen in his lifetime, he's zeroing in more and more on what Christians should be doing right here and now. This conviction appears to be at least partially behind Jesus' story of the talents. No one is to take whatever God has given him or her and bury it.

Though "talents" originally were coins or monetary units, because of their use in this parable the term eventually began to stand for any abilities a person naturally possesses. In today's passage the first two servants "trade" with what the master gives them and double their money. But the third, playing it safe, buries his talent.

We've heard this story often enough to know the master's attitude toward all three long before Jesus finishes the parable. But it's what he says afterward that creates problems for some of us. This Galilean carpenter certainly doesn't buy into Robin Hood's "take from the rich, give to the poor" school of thought. On the contrary. "To everyone who has," he says, "more will be given . . . but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

Matthew's community seems to have interpreted this surprising statement as referring to the faith with which each person is blessed. Those who use their faith to help others will continue to gain more faith. On the other hand, those who refuse to risk by giving themselves to others will eventually lose even whatever security they have.

Only faith which is used for the sake of others will grow into more and deeper faith – no matter when and if Jesus' Parousia happens.