

Sunday, Sunday, November 8, 2020

Sermon: How to Experience God After the Election

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Yesterday we discovered that the United States has voted in a new President and Vice President-elect. Emotions run high after an election. What do we do with them? And how do we discover God in this moment in our lives and in our culture? Join us for worship as we sing, pray, and reflect on these questions.

This morning I got quite a few messages from many of you and I want to start off this sermon with one from our dear friends LeighAnne and Rich Baker. LeighAnne and Rich have been sending me emails frequently. Emails that are meant to lift up and inspire and they always hit the mark. I am so thankful for LeighAnne and Rich but this morning I wanted to talk about this specific email that I got from them. They frequently talk about the birds in their backyard and how they relate to one another. This morning I got a message from them that said this – it's amazing how the birds seem to be able to share the feeders in our backyard. The little ones are there first early in the morning and then the big guys come in for a bite. Then the little ones come back and so it goes most of the day. We are praying that we can learn to share as those birds have learned to share.

I am tempted to say that's the sermon for today because that is what this is all about. God has given us so much and what are we to do with what God has given us? Share it. We're meant to share with one another and so this is why I have difficulties with our parable this morning (Matthew 25). Our parable that says there are 10 bridesmaids and they're split up. They're divided. Five of them are foolish and five of them are wise. The wise ones bring out at night oil for their lamps and the foolish ones don't bring oil for their lamps. They're all expecting the bridegroom to come earlier than the bridegroom does. And so the ones who are labeled as foolish ask the ones that have enough oil if they can share their oil with them. And the wise ones say no. The wise ones say no, we won't have enough oil if we share with you. Isn't it strange though about light, that you can be with another person who has a lamp and that lamp is enough for you both? And what if there are four or five more people who have light and a lamp together and they just turn on that lamp. That light multiplies and there's enough for 5, 10, 15, possibly 20 more people if you just trust that there is enough.

This parable if we read it just on its own, goes against so much of what Jesus has taught us in the gospels. You remember one of my favorite stories in the gospels, in all four of them, is about Jesus teaching to a crowd and the crowd doesn't have food. So does Jesus say to the crowd - you foolish people why didn't you bring your own food, go back to your settings and then bring food so that you can eat? No! That's not what Jesus says. Jesus says – oh, we've got a problem, how are we going to solve it? How about we trust that there is enough for everyone. How about we trust that maybe this boy who has some fish and some loaves, if we pray over it, somehow there will be a miracle. And there will be enough fish and enough loaves for everyone. That is the gospel story. That there are enough if we just share. And the way that

many people read it is you need to prepare yourself, and if you don't prepare yourself you're going to be locked out of the Kingdom of Heaven. Why? Because you didn't do enough work.

The best interpretations of this story go along that route but I still don't like them. Why? Because there have been times in my life when I have been really foolish. There have been times in my life where I haven't brought enough oil and I'm sure that there have been times in your life where you haven't brought enough oil either. And guess what happened? Sure enough, there was someone there who said I've got a little extra. Hopefully, there was someone there that said - you need some oil? You need a little extra faith? Guess what, I have enough for all of us. That's why we come here Sunday after Sunday because you might have some oil and I might be in need of some oil. I might need you to share that oil and yes, it's great to do the preparation. It's great to pray. During the week, it's great to read the Bible. It's great to be in a community where people support and love one another, but you know, even when you do all of that, your oil can run out and it's not your fault. God does not shut the door on you. At the end of the parable, Jesus says that the bridegroom says to those foolish bridesmaids - I never knew you. And he shuts the door on them. That's how this parable ends.

Jesus tells another parable that I'm sure you might be familiar with. It's a parable about a father and his two sons. One of his sons acts extremely foolish. He asks his dad for his full inheritance. He says to his dad - I wish you were dead. His dad says - okay you can have your inheritance. And what does that son do? He foolishly squanders all of that money on parties, on women, on all kinds of things, and he wastes it. He ends up having a job that is the worst kind of job that a Jewish person during this time could ever have which is feeding pigs. This son comes to his senses and he says - you know what, if I went back to my home maybe my dad would treat me as a servant, maybe if I'm lucky my dad will treat me not as his son but as his servant. And so the son goes back home. The foolish son goes back home and he knocks on his dad's door and you know what his dad says? Does he shut the door on his son and say - I never knew you? No! That would be a horrible ending! That's not how it ends. Before the sun even gets to his dad's door, this father is running out to his foolish son and says - I love you, I am so glad you are here, and I'm gonna throw you the biggest party that I've ever thrown because I love you and the door is never shut. That's what God is like. If you have been foolish that's okay, God loves you and the door is never shut.

Here's one more way to show you how this works. This parable is in Matthew 25. In Matthew 26, just the next chapter, Jesus is arrested. He's put on trial. He's hung on the cross. And what does his closest disciple, Peter, do? He says to Jesus at the end of the parable - I do not know you, and he shuts the door. What does Peter say about Jesus? Some people come to Peter and say - hey, you're one of his disciples aren't you? And Peter says exactly as the bridegroom says in the parable - I do not know the man. At the end of the parable, Jesus' bridegroom rejects the foolish bridesmaids. Peter here rejects Jesus in the exact same way. If we interpret the bridegroom as Jesus, you're just going to get into this cycle of rejecting one another and it's never going to end. But Jesus comes back after he's killed on the cross, after he's betrayed by Peter, Jesus comes back in the resurrection. And what does he say to Peter? Does he say to Peter - you foolish man, I shut the door on you? No! Jesus says the exact opposite of what we would expect. Jesus comes to Peter and he uses Peter's name, he says - Peter, I know you rejected me, I know you shut the door on me, but I don't shut the door on you. He says to Peter - I still have a mission for you. He says - Peter, feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Then he says a third time - Peter, feed my sheep.

You see, if you're like me you are often like the foolish bridesmaids who don't bring enough oil. And if you're like me, oftentimes you need someone to share that oil with you. And if you're like me, you've had moments in your life where you have denied God, even Jesus, and I want you to know that God is the one who runs to you like the father does in that parable. God is the one who comes to you like Jesus came to Peter in the resurrection stories and says - I know that you messed up and I don't hold it against you. God is the one who opens the door wide and says - I still have a mission for you. That's who God is. So what do I make of this parable? It's on a very human level. We are the ones who shut the door on one another. We are the ones who blame one another for being foolish. We are the ones who blame one another for not working hard enough, for not bringing enough oil, for not doing our due diligence, that's on us. And yes, it is always good to take responsibility for our lives and it is never God-like to shut the door on one another.

Now, what does this have to do with the election? I know many of us are struggling. I'm struggling with this too, with how to be in a relationship with family members, loved ones, who may have voted in a way that disappoints us. Many of us are struggling with how many people could have voted a certain way in our country. I want you to hear this. There may be times in our lives when we need to shut the door on someone in our life. When someone in our life has hurt us so much that we need to create a hard boundary with that person. If you are in that spot, there's nothing wrong with that. Jesus says to us that there may be times when we have to shake the dust off of our feet when we have been hurt so much by someone and we may need to move on. That's in the realm of possibility for us and what's also in the realm of possibility for us is to move in a direction, not towards hatred, not mimicking the hate that people give us, but trying to enter into a spirit of love. Sometimes that means stepping away from a relationship for a while and sometimes that means entering into a relationship and giving a spirit of justice and peace and love into that relationship. I don't know how that's going to look for you, but both of those options are on the table.

I mentioned earlier that I was going to talk a little bit about Bernie. Our dear sister, Bernie, suggested a great book that I'm also reading called *His Truth is Marching On* by John Meacham. It's about John Lewis and the power of hope. This is a wonderful book. Bernie, I'm reading it. I would say I'm working through it, but it's not a 'work,' it's a joy. I want to lift up one quote from this book that comes from John Lewis and it's this "Hate is too heavy a burden to bear. If you start hating people, you have to decide who you are going to hate tomorrow, who you are going to hate next week. Just love everybody." On one occasion, John Lewis says - I heard Dr. King say "Just love the hell out of everybody. It's a better way. It's the best way."

So friends, as we continue living our lives together may you know that you are eternally loved. May you know that when you're running out of oil that someone here is going to share their oil with you. And may you know that as we continue to fight for a more just and loving world, that just like God called John Lewis away from hatred, God calls us away from hatred, too. As we work for a more just world, God calls us into the realm of love and mercy and justice as we fight for justice. Amen