

Palisades Presbyterian Church
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 6, 2005

Scripture Reading Psalm 78:1-7
Gospel Reading Matthew 25:1-13

Hymns: # 89 Hosanna, Lord Hosanna
#322 Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me
#127 Come, O Spirit
#591 Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow
#144 Alleluia! Sing to Jesus

Tending the Shepherds
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Everybody loves a wedding. Recently we had an event at school; a talent night. The students got up and did fine individual and group performances on everything from rap to classical. When it was over, the folks managing the music started playing the *Electric Slide*, one of those group numbers that everybody dances together – like the *Alley Cat*, *Tarantella*, *Havan a Gilah*, or the *Makarena*!

I was taking some pictures, ready to pack up, when almost simultaneously with the beginning of the music a rush of kids ran to the stage, gathered themselves together, and in an instant, it seemed, were all dancing, laughing, and having a great old time. The entire auditorium, instead of leaving, stopped and watched as the DJ, now getting into it, kept it going with *Cotton-Eyed Joe*, and more.

My principal, who was close at hand, turned to me and said, “It doesn’t get any better than this,” I responded with, “Everybody loves a wedding or a Bar(h) Mitzvah,” having catered a few of both in my lifetime.

It seems the first century Palestinians loved them equally, as well! In fact, in Jewish tradition of the times, weddings were one of the few events where basic religious duties, such as reading the Torah or the daily work of scribes were suspended. It was that big of a celebration.

So, it’s not strange to find a wedding parable in the gospels and to have it still carry meaning for us today.

This morning’s gospel is known as the parable of the wedding. It speaks to the anticipation of Matthew and others, waiting for the second coming of Christ.

You can tell in some of the writings of Matthew, Paul, and others that there is some concern about why Jesus has not yet returned following his crucifixion and resurrection. Often a literal group in their understanding of Jesus, it is likely that the apostles and disciples of Jesus expected his appearance shortly after he died. Following the events of Jesus' appearance on the Road to Emmaus and in the Upper Room to the apostles following his execution – it gets sort of quiet. Waiting, waiting...nothing seems to be happening. Where is Jesus? Where has he gone? Why hasn't he returned?

Over the centuries, there has been a series of complex explanations to these early and present expectations, from a more "Jesus is risen and with us in a spiritual approach," to the seeking of the resurrection of Jesus in the Spirit that surrounds us with one another and the work we are called to do in his name. Many of us believe that Jesus indeed walks with us today in surprising and subtle ways.

Matthew's gospel, though, is ultimately about preparedness – they are still expecting, but they are starting to realize that maybe they got something wrong. So, the next questions they most likely begin to consider are along the lines:

“Will we be ready when the time comes?
How do we get ready?
What makes us ready?
And more.. you know them I am sure.

Matthew's solution is to store up extra oil – read that as pray, meditate, do good works, study, and be vigilant – so that when Jesus (the bridegroom) does come, we will not be caught short in the spiritual readiness department.

Now, there is a lot to be said for living like this. Living our days one at a time, always aware of the now, actively preparing ourselves with prayer and meditation, continuing to pray throughout the day, all while waiting for the will of God to show Godself in our daily lives. Honestly, that's what gets me through a lot of troublesome times, maybe that's true for you, too. Trying to see all interactions with others and the things around us in terms of our belief in God takes practice. It takes one another in community to build upon our mutual faith and forbearance. We need one another to slow down – or, if you are like me, you'll just speed through your days as if they were a race of some kind. There are more days than I care to admit when I do things without giving them much thought, more caught up in the doing than the being.

I'm working on that; every day.

Preparedness in Matthew's time and ours is really a daily business. The Now, as author Eckhart Tolle says, is all we have. IT is this moment, one to the next, we are always in the Now, and that NOW is all we have – filled with the magnificent energy of being. It is the present, the moment, the NOW that we have in tending to one another, all of us shepherds, stewards for whom we love and what it is we care about. From my experience – it is this Palisades Presbyterian Church. I saw it again yesterday.

Last night, Lanie showed us a film, *Questioning Faith*, that brought together a community of about 30 of us. Prior to the film, we gathered about an amazing pot-luck dinner. Pot-luck should always be so good!

Following dinner, we watched the film and then spent some time in conversation about what we had seen. Macky Alston, Lanie's brother and the director/producer of the film, took us through a journey of his, reflected by the title *Questioning Faith*, in which he tried to find clues for his own faith and belief in God, after losing a fellow seminarian and close friend to AIDS. He presented this journey by documenting others and their response to suffering and how it affected their belief in a God. It is through his interaction with others that we watch him find his place.

In some ways, Macky's seeking in the film is much like many of ours, I think. Who among us has not felt the need to comfort someone in a time of difficulty? Who among us has not been the comforted one on occasion? Who of us has not questioned God during especially difficult times? Maybe like Macky, we have discovered that it is in the presence of one another that we find most healing. Just being there. And, so, too I think it is of the Spirit in the Matthew's gospel that tells us that preparedness is being present to the moment, to the needs of the moment, and not losing sight of one another – for in one another, I believe is the God we seek and we find.

It is in the caring for another and others that God seems to be most present. Maybe it is because during those times we are giving of ourselves and that the true joy of living is in being of service to others.

So, on this stewardship Sunday, I am thinking about this sort of an embrace for and of one other. Clearly, you know such things well and you have passed it on to me. In the last several weeks, I have found myself traveling with you throughout my days, my prayers, and my training as a minister. It's been delightful, if a little taxing on my waistline!

So, talking with you about giving seems a bit redundant, however now and then we focus on financially supporting our church, contributing to preparedness in a generous and prudent way so that our celebration of faith and works together can

continue. These pledges that we ask you to make as soon as you are able – are the symbolic wedding gifts that express our commitment

to this way of life
in this place that
flowing well beyond our doors
into the hearts and lives of one another and others.

Tending to our community and others, stewardship is always about making personal choices. It is about being faithful disciples, being managing and being grateful for all that God has given us and our ability to give in return. It is the great and cosmic economy of generosity, wherein nothing is ever lost, just returned to us in different ways. It is about our commitment to the financial needs of our ministry and the steadfast invitation to the Spirit to guide, protect, and multiply our efforts.

The message on this Sunday in the midst of our stewardship campaign is as much a recognition of all you have done and continue to do, as it is a request to share as generously as you can for the year ahead, while we get ready for the bride and the bridegroom, the friend and the stranger, the lost and the seeking, and one another's needs.

Each of us is truly a shepherd, a caretaker, an active participant in the mission of this church and the lives we share in the name of the One who has called us here, and whose teachings we have chosen to follow.

So, as we approach the table this morning and remember the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus as he shared that last meal with his disciples, let us remember that we are not anchored here, but called beyond to love and care for one another. In whatever pledge we make, let that be our first pledge. If we do that, if we love and care for one another first - we can't help but see this table and others like it as a celebration in anticipation of all that is to come.

Amen.