Making Ready - ***Matthew 25: 1-13, Amos 5: 18-24, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18***

Our own personal reactions to certain current events no doubt point to some basic human tendencies. Between the extended crises of this deadly virus, and the chaotic rifts of our economic and political divisions, we are passing through a time of high anxiety. None of us likes to be thrown into uncertainty, especially repeated uncertainty. And we may as well face it, none of us likes to wait. Our culture, and our points in time, demand immediacy. We are highly conditioned to rapid response. As we used to say in the technology world, "I need it now, or yesterday!"

Yet, a great deal of research on realized-progress suggests that delayed gratification may lead to more sustainable innovation and success. One study is based on **parking habits**: Do you park head-in to a parking space, or do you back in, making it easier to pull out when you leave? Brain research has long concluded that hard work and persistent effort helps to **"grow the brain."** That is, we can make ourselves smarter and more successful through hard work. It is called **neuroplasticity** – the brain's capacity to always, throughout life, make new connections, **new neural pathways, which make us <u>smarter and more aware</u>**.

So someone researched national parking habits in countries around the world, correlated with economic innovation and success, and concluded that since backing in to a parking space tends to take more work and persistence, **countries in which backing-in is the predominant parking method tend to be <u>more productive and successful</u>** (good to know, us Mainers- perhaps <u>here</u>, for a different reason- snow).

What does all this have to do with bridesmaids, Jesus, and keeping awake? Anthony De Mello, a Jesuit priest, psychologist and retreat leader made a career out of teaching us that the main task of the spiritual life is to **wake up**. Despite our over-stimulation with electronic devices, addictions to the Internet and social media, and our endless quest for the newest, the best and the most, we tend to make our way through life sleepwalking. We remain **somehow unaware** of the spiritual dimension of our lives. Like all of the bridesmaids, we let that part of our life wait. There will be time for that later, we say to ourselves.

Or worse still, we see the life of the spirit as something we need to acquire or earn. We read books, blogs, watch films and TV shows, and whatever we can get our hands and minds on. But none of these activities quench our desire and need for an awareness of our spiritual self. In the midst of all this working on our spiritual life, we are **still distracting ourselves from experiencing it**. De Mello and Jesus both knew this and call us to wake up! And once awake to stay awake! Since we know that we can grow our brains to develop new habits and awareness, what will be the spiritual equivalent of filling our lamps with oil and trimming our wicks?

Let's first address wick trimming, since lamps and candles burn slower when we regularly trim the wick. It is similar with fruit trees – they produce more fruit when we do the work of pruning. Just as it is easier to get out of our parking spaces head first, Jesus is always extolling the value of doing the upfront work so that we can reap the dividends more easily when the fruit comes in. So trimming and pruning our lives, reducing the amount of distractions, would seem to be the No. 1 lesson for those of us who would be as the bridesmaids for Christ when he comes.

As to filling our lamps with oil, again the message of **with what** we fill ourselves is clear. But a catch in both of these examples pulls us a bit away from the literal content. For in addition to the "doing" of religious practice, there is a needed focus on HOW we do it. All religious traditions have some form of mindful meditation, centering prayer and contemplation as a religious or spiritual practice. Sadly, it is rarely found in church, where we tend to relentlessly work our way through the liturgy without pause so we can get to the end. And then what? Go to **coffee hour, "the 8th sacrament" ?** (Sadly lacking just now…) !
Or do we just hurry home? (Or these days to whatever is waiting in the next room at home).

Contemplative (quiet) prayer helps us to create an empty space within. This has two immediate benefits: It gives God and the Spirit a point of entry into our otherwise busy and sleepwalking lives. Once we prepare a place within for the God to dwell within us, we become more aware and awake to the fact that God has been and is always with us. We recognize that the work of spiritual growth is, in fact, no work at all.

Also, as it turns out, **letting the brain rest promotes neuroplasticity**. When we emerge from our prayer or meditation, we are truly refreshed, re-wired and more aware of not only who we are but whose we are. A German theologian has put this way: **"God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk."**

So what are we waiting for? Are we to spend our time like the bridesmaids, waiting for Christ to come? Or are we to heed our Lord's final imperative in the story: Keep awake! [1.]

There is one more part to the active side of this making ready. We have to ask, over and over, what do we Christians do to really make ready? Ready for the reality of the challenges of our life together? During our online diocesan convention this year, we were treated to a talented choir joining voices through a multitude of little Zoom windows. The music was uplifting, but so was the experience of seeing so many Episcopalian neighbors gathered in such a new and inspiring way. It should prod our attention to see how many and new ways we can find to share faith and help each other. Laugh, encourage, work together PAST the anxieties of threats and uncertainties!

The parables of Jesus are sometimes tricky. We tend to treat them as moral lessons, assigning parts to each character in the story. But what if Jesus meant to simply shock us with details such as closing the door on the foolish ones **only to deliver the real message**: **Keep awake, and be ready!** One suspects Jesus really did not want us spending hours of Bible study agonizing over questions such as "How could Jesus do that? Why would he close the door on anyone?" when we already know // **the answer is that he closed the door on no one**. Not prostitute, not violent Roman soldier, not thief or murderer, not ANY KIND of sinner. His door is always open. The disciples to whom this little tale is told know that and have witnessed it every day. And like them, we ought to be those who recognize that what seems like his coming again is simply our awakening to the very real Good News of Jesus: that He is with us always to the end of all ages. He is here. Forever and always. And he has good answers for us…

What is Jesus calling us to do? Wake up and keep awake! Elasticize our brains and find a fresh strength. The time and effort put into doing less to do more will awaken us to the truth buried deep within this tale of lamps and oil and bridesmaids: The door of Christ is open. When do we come back from our walk and find Him? How do we quietly open ourselves to His guidance? When we do, we are made new, and <u>we are</u>, in fact, READY.

[1.] Some excerpts from ***Awakening to God's Presence,*** *TEC Sermons that Work, 11/9/14;* The Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek, chaplain and teacher at St. Timothy's School for girls, the Diocese of Maryland