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11.8.26
"Keep Awake?"

I have a tendency to approach Jesus' parable first by considering the last sentence, "Keep awake, therefore," even though I question whether it really is a fitting way to express the fullness of the parable.

In part, I know better because I know what it's like to go without enough sleep. I get cranky sometimes, or I experience the mental fog where I'm still half-convinced that I'm actually asleep. I also know that there have been plenty of studies showing that when we're overly tired, our reaction times slow and our decision-making is flawed. So surely Jesus isn't telling us to walk around tired, slow to react, and making bad decisions.

Is it, then, about the Boy Scout motto: be prepared? That's certainly one way of reading the contrast between the five wise and the five foolish bridesmaids. All ten bridesmaids arrive for the wedding with their lamps, all ten receive the news that the groom has been delayed, all ten fall asleep… But when they wake to the news that the groom is at last approaching, five bridesmaids brought extra oil, and five did not. So while five of the bridesmaids are able to greet the groom, the other five are stuck searching for somewhere to buy oil in the middle of the night.

While I want to question the wise bridesmaids for not sharing their extra oil, I do have a new appreciation for what it means to need enough oil to keep their lamps lit. Yesterday, I joined the altar guild during their working day, the twice annual polishing. I joined in the work after meeting everyone, and I was able to polish a few of the candle followers. While some churches use wax candles, I learned that we use oil. Along with polishing, I refilled the oil in a few of the candles, and I learned, too, that the candles on the altar hold only enough oil for two services on Sunday mornings. Without the plan that I heard of who would change the candles and when, we wouldn't have enough oil to keep the candles lit this morning.

But where does that leave us in understanding the parable?

If we go back to the previous chapter, it's very clear that Jesus is talking to the disciples about the end. The scene begins with Jesus and the disciples looking towards the temple, and Jesus responding to the disciples' admiring comments about the temple by promising that the temple will be torn down

and then rebuilt. The disciples are fascinated, asking when this will happen, and Jesus, as is typical, doesn't give them a straight answer. Instead, he talks more about the end, a time of deep division and struggle, and he tells this parable, and two others.

"Keep awake," Jesus says.

There is another kind of sleep that we sometimes fall into: Before I came to St. Martin's, I served two churches in New York State that sat just over thirty minutes apart. In the years that I served there, I made the drive between the two churches at least three times each week, and I got to know the route very well. Leaving the village where I lived, I got on the freeway, then took a small highway into the city where the other church is. And along the way, the freeway branches in two, so I would get in the far right lane to be sure that I stayed on the right route, because going to the right would take me west, where I needed to go, but staying straight would take me north to Rochester. And the more I made the drive, the more I found that there were times when I would get to the church and realize that I couldn't remember getting into the new right-hand lane and staying on the correct freeway, but somehow I had still made it. I was wide awake, but it was as if I had been sleepwalking, too focused on the mechanics of driving or the music playing in my car or the green of the trees, unable to track the route I had taken.

All of us wait for Jesus' return. The earliest followers expected that the end, and Christ's promised return, would come quickly. Still, though it has been about two thousand years, we are still waiting. Each year, during the Advent season we look for the birth of Jesus but also the promised return, and each time we have Eucharist, we repeat some version of three statements about Jesus: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

So, when I have exhausted every other possible meaning for the parable, I am left with this: what are we to do now, while we wait for Christ's return?

For that, I look ahead to the third parable that Jesus tells in this chapter, the one I always think of, and refer to, as Matthew 25. In it, Jesus says that the Son of Man will come and gather all the nations, separating them into two groups. He will tell one group that they have already met him, already helped him, and when they insist that they have never even seen them before, he tells them that each time they offered food to someone who was hungry, clothing to someone who was naked, or visited someone who was sick or in prison, they fed and clothed and visited Christ.

The reverse is also true: each time someone offers us food when we hunger, clothing when we are in need, a visit when we are sick or in prison, we have also met Christ.

In the end, this parable calls us not to resist falling asleep or to somehow be prepared for everything, which is a losing battle of its own, but to resist sleepwalking and instead follow the example that Jesus lays out in the third parable: meet Christ in those around us, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison, and welcoming Christ in those who help us.

When we do this, we follow the example of Jesus, who spoke blessings for the merciful in the sermon on the mount and whose own ministry was a series of small mercies. In looking for Christ in one another, we are staying awake.