

The Gospel for today is not comforting; really it's a little bit messy. If we didn't follow a lectionary a speaker on Stewardship would probably not make this their first choice:

Virgins wise and foolish

People not sharing (the oil)

A closed door (not sounding like good news)

And a denial "I don't know you"

If we've learned anything from Brad in adult ed it is that we need to look at this sculpture in the context of the times

First, do we all know what an oil lamp is? I brought one, this one is probably a hundred years old, not nearly as old as the ones in the story, but is it as close as we can get. It has a wick and oil (light the wick)

The young ladies job was to light the way to the wedding feast with small lamps. There was no electricity. They got into position and waited.

Something delayed the wedding party and they fell asleep. They awakened when someone loudly announced the arrival of the wedding party but of course time had passed and there was not enough oil. Some brought extra oil and were prepared. Others did not and asked for help and were refused, told to basically go to the store

Kids, this would be like going camping with a Coleman lantern half full and not bring the can of fuel. If you went to the next campsite you might be lucky if they brought plenty but maybe not, Maybe you'd be told to go to the store.

Once the bridesmaids were back the party had started and they were refused entry

I suppose we can read this as an allegory where every person or event represents something:

Bridegroom – Jesus

Brides maids – us (wise and foolish)

The delay – the unexpected in life

Arrival of the wedding party – Jesus coming

Running out of oil – lack of faith

Closed door – Judgment day, (in which not everyone makes it)

If I were yield to my Baptist roots and we had more time – that Judgment day allegory would take us right into stewardship and the consequences of a lack of meaningful stewardship.

Allegories can seem a little forced to me and in this case we might be left asking what the Bride meant. Or we could get caught up in what caused the

delay and what that meant.

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Maybe it is about being prepared. About taking a long view. In the case of the parable the long view was limited in context to a long wedding day. In the context of stewardship this might mean that we need to understand the whole picture, of how we do our part to avoid the church running out of oil. If you don't like the allegory or the be prepared boy scout interpretation then you could look in the other gospels. But this is one parable that is not repeated.

I think it's about making choices. To follow Jesus is a deliberate choice. Choices have consequences

We know that choices can draw us closer or further from each other, our church or God. The foolish bridesmaids made a bad choice to not bring enough oil to the party and they missed the feast. Stewardship, whether of our money or the environment, or our time is a matter of choice. The consequences of poor financial stewardship in this church could imperil the church, ask anyone on the finance committee or Vestry. But more importantly the real damage would be to our relationship with God. It is that relationship which is at play.

But there is one more element to the issue of stewardship at Grace Church. And that element is fear. A fear surrounding money, specifically the fear over the scarcity of money. To help us understand the role of this fear in Stewardship we can get help from Charles Dickens and the most Rev. Katherine Jefferts Schori...our Bishop. Not such an odd couple, both are Anglican, liberal, and very focused on the suffering of the less fortunate.

Dickens lived and wrote in a time of great financial instability. There was abuse of Credit, Financial scandals, Panic in the markets abuse of workers and major bank failures. When he was a boy Dickens father was sent to a debtors prison, he wrote later about it nearly breaking his heart. Dickens reacted to the financial instability and scarcity of his times through writing novels, parables really, that helped his readers live their lives in times of great uncertainty. Go to the Missouri rep and see the Christmas Carole, and

watch it not just in the context of the mid 19th century but in our times and think what it says about stewardship.

You may not know that he led his life with dedication to improving the lives of the poor. He supported free community hospitals, started “Ragged Schools” which were public schools for children living in poverty, wrote a translation of the New Testament for children and founded a home for prostitutes. He was also against the death penalty, a position that our Diocese took only a few weeks ago. Clearly in his writing and his life Charles Dickens believed in the power of stewardship, really the necessity in times of instability in our society.

And what can we learn from Bishop Schori? A lot I’d say. At the Emmaus celebration in Independence she spoke eloquently on the subject of scarcity. She described some of us living in a prison of fear about their financial future. Does that describe any of us? Whether the fear is the loss of a job, a college education in peril or investments meant for retirement disappearing in alarmingly large chunks. She reminded us that people throughout the world have been living for generations with insufficiencies of daily life, food, shelter education, employment even physical safety in areas at war. And she talked about a paralysis that comes with this fear. She encouraged us to let go of the fear through the simple act of sharing, adding that sharing would change the climate of worry and fear. Read the entire sermon there is a link on our web site.

So what am I asking you to do?

Overcome the fear that we all feel. Do not allow the paralysis to set in.
Share.

It really is nothing different from what we've done before.

If you haven't pledged before, start now. Last year we had 15 new pledges

If you pledged before, increase your pledge. 35 of 61 families did that last year.

Regardless of what you did last year, commit to moving toward a pledge.

Ten percent.

When asked if that is before or after taxes the answer is "yes".

This year may seem like an exception. Certainly the instability in the financial markets might be the worst in our lifetimes, but I think Dickens might take issue with the uniqueness of our situation. If it is not an exception it is a test. Can we see this stewardship campaign not as a fundraiser for a not-for-profit but really as an opportunity for us to grow spiritually through the faithful management of all that God has given us? It is a test I'm confident we can pass.

Let me read the last paragraph of her sermon to us in Independence in the context of financial Stewardship:

"Letting go of fear takes only a small shift in awareness. Dick and I were riding up the elevator in our hotel this morning, when a fellow got on. He saw another guy the back with a box and he said, "oh, donuts!

Mmmmmmmmm. But I can't steal one, because there's a person of the cloth here." So I piped up and said, "But he could share." Indeed, sharing would change the climate of worry and fear. Welcome to the Banquet,

prepared from the foundation of the world, for those who will live in
community, in the eternal presence of God. Welcome to the Banquet!

By Richard Moore