



The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost  
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Sunday, November 8, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A young mother is having trouble getting her two sons to behave, so she takes them to the church and asks the priest to have a talk with them. While she waits in the hall, the two boys sit down in the priest's office, on the other side of his giant desk.

The priest thinks he might get the boys to straighten up by reminding them that God is everywhere and sees everything they do, so he starts with a question: "boys, where is God?" The two kids just sit there staring at him. "Boys," he says again, "just tell me where God is." But they still don't answer. Finally, in exasperation, he says a third time, "boys, you'll be able to leave and go play soon enough, I just want you to tell me where God is."

Suddenly they both jump up, run from the office and rush up to their mom outside, and the older boy shouts, "mom, we gotta get out of here – God's missing and they think we took him!"

This question of where God is, and when will God show up to take action in our lives, lies behind today's story from the gospel. Jesus paints an image of God's work in the world as something we are waiting to see come to fruition. Like the women in the story we wait impatiently at times, and at other times becoming distracted, and yet it seems that God does not arrive.

We might see this dynamic in many places in our lives. Sometimes it might be our health, as we pray and wait for healing or transformation in some frightening health problem we face. Sometimes it might be our personal relationships, as we pray that God might help us find reconciliation and healing with those we love, but from whom we are feeling estranged. Sometimes it might be bigger than us: as we long to see a world with more perfect racial or economic justice, or we long to see a world that better reflects God's will for humanity, and we seem to wait and wait and wait, but it does not arrive.

Of course, we know we have our own part to play in all these circumstances. As the women in the story are called to keep their lamps filled with oil and stay awake, so we are called to not merely wait on God to take action but to also participate in what God is doing through our words and work and prayers.

The challenge of such situations is that we are not always as effective as we want to be. The women in the story fall asleep and run out of oil, don't they? We may find that while we wait on God's healing and try to take care of our health, setbacks can often come when we least expect. While we seek out reconciliation in estranged relationships we sometimes discover that our desire for connection is one-sided and the relationships stay broken.

To bring it down to an even more immediate example, we might think of this week's election. In such a close contest, with so many varied outcomes, we probably each found something to be happy about and something to be frustrated and discouraged about. We have each worked and voted in such a way that we hope will increase justice in the world or help create a world that better reflects God's will for humanity. Yet we may not feel that we have been as effective as we wanted to be.

In such circumstances, where we may feel that our effectiveness has fallen short of our calling, today's gospel story calls us to see the bigger picture. God is faithful, God is faithful to us and faithful to his purpose and plan to create a world of justice and love. And God calls us to live in faithfulness.

In one of his daily emails this week, Richard Rohr, talked about this dynamic and he quoted the spiritual writer Parker Palmer.

Palmer puts it this way:

. . . we cannot settle for mere "effectiveness" as the ultimate measure of our failure or success. Yes, we want to be effective in pursuit of important goals. . . . [But] we must judge ourselves by a higher standard than effectiveness, the standard called faithfulness. Are we faithful to the community on which we depend, to doing what we can in response to its pressing needs? Are we faithful to the better angels of our nature and to what they call forth from us? . . . Are we faithful to the call of courage that summons us to witness to the common good, even against great odds?

If you have been faithful to your community and its needs, if you have been faithful to the better angels of your nature, and if you have been faithful to witness to the common good, even against great odds, then you

have been faithful to who God calls you to be. And if, in some way, you feel that you have not been faithful – like the women in the story who fell asleep – then you know that God will always be faithful to you, to embrace you, and to open a way forward for you to begin living the more faithful life you would like to live. Only, don't wait too long to make the turn towards faithfulness – as our gospel story warns us, there does come a point where God arrives and our decisions result in their natural outcomes.

The good news of Christ, that is summarized in Jesus teaching, is that it is not our job to fix the world. It is our job to be faithful to God and participate with God as he fixes the world, and it is our job to always be mindful that it is God's faithfulness to us that makes our faithfulness possible. Our goal in life is, therefore, to live by faith and know that God's purposes will be fulfilled in God's good timing.

Amen.