

Sermon for Sunday, November 9, 2008
The Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27)
By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson **Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25**
Psalm **Psalm 78:1-7**
Second Lesson **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**
Gospel **Matthew 25:1-13**

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear the story of the ten bridesmaids.

For those of us who've been studying the parables in these past few weeks, this parable is very familiar to us—it's a parable about—what?—"preparedness." Jesus told this parable—Jesus told this short story—in order to prepare his hearers for the kingdom of God. There is a common theme here, and Jesus exploits his audience's knowledge of the wedding customs of their day to make a critical point—that, as followers of Christ, we must always be ready, we must always be prepared, for God to enter our lives and change them irrevocably.

For me, preparation always unites with perception. In the Gospel lesson we just heard, five of the bridesmaids in today's story perceive the arrival of the bridegroom as something that's far off—as something that they can literally sleep on. Their perceptions of their roles—their perceptions of their very being—is skewed and altered by the fact that they choose slumber over readiness, something that they come to regret later on in the parable.

In a lot of ways—in most ways, really—this past week's election (like all other elections) was all about perceptions. How did we perceive the candidates? How did we perceive our world? How did we perceive each other? How did we perceive ourselves?

It sure would be nice if our perceptions could be 100% accurate all of the time—I truly believe that the world would be in great shape if that happened. Yet, our perceptions are always informed by our needs, our desires, our wants, our fears, our hungers—ultimately, our perceptions are shaped by *ourselves*.

Political candidates deal with perceptions all of the time, as we've certainly seen in this last election. They either embrace the perceptions that they're labeled with if they fit into the image that they're trying to create (he or she is a "uniter" not a "divider") or they reject the perceptions outright if they go against the image they're trying to create (he or she will "raise taxes" or will "deepen the economic crisis").

Sometimes, if we're lucky, our perceptions hit a truth deep within us that resonates in our souls. During those lucky and scared moments, we encounter the living God walking with us, helping us along, deepening our understanding not only of ourselves, but of others and of the Divine.

Those are the times when we awaken from our slumber, fully aware of God among us.

At other times, our perceptions lead us astray—they take us from the sacred to the profane, where love is replaced by hate, where understanding is replaced by blame or accusations, where hope is replaced by despair, where life is replaced not by sleep—but by death.

Those are the times when we *continue* to sleep, keeping us away from the knowledge of God and what's in store for each and every one of us.

When I was in seminary, there were priests who visited my school that were both broken and beaten—they felt betrayed by their congregations and they felt betrayed by God—but, most of all, they felt betrayed by themselves. They were bitter over what they were encountering, and you could hear it in their voices—they had come to the perception that God no longer existed in their lives and that their ministries were, at the best, a total and complete sham—that they, themselves, were a total and complete sham.

Of course we, as naïve seminary students, believed that we would *never* allow ourselves to be deluded by such perceptions. Our arrogance precluded the possibility that, as we moved in linear fashion along the path and the career that God called us to (or, so we thought), our own perceived self-knowledge and our perceived knowledge of the Divine would save us. We were all well-versed in the savors of process theology, eschatology, feminist theology, clinical psychology, sociology, hermeneutics, group dynamics, crisis management, and medical ethics.

Armed with all that knowledge, we perceived that we could save the world. If we couldn't save it, well, by God, at least we could cast a little of our own divine light on it.

Sometimes, our perceptions are—and continue to be—dead wrong.

As a priest, I have come to the realization that I knew nothing and that I continue to know nothing. And that's what scares me the most. At times, that's what makes *me* bitter. At times, that's what makes *me* feel broken. At times, that's what makes *me* feel betrayed.

Remember that comic strip *Pogo*? At least, I think it was *Pogo*—anyway, I'll never forget the words that I read one Sunday a long time ago—one of the characters was talking to another, and he said, "I have met the enemy, and he is us."

Boy, does that about sum it up, or what?

Do you know why I became a priest? Initially, it had nothing to do with "God's calling" in my life—it had to do with my relationship with my father; here's a short story that I wrote a few years ago that describes what I mean; it's entitled "Smoke and Mirrors":

The son opens his bedroom door just a bit and peers out. He sees his father on the couch in the living room. Same as it always is at this time of the morning. His father is prostrate, clad only in white underwear, an unfiltered Camel hanging from his lips as he reads the morning newspaper. The air is thick with cigarette smoke. All is as it should be.

In reality, the son has two fathers. The first one is on the couch now, the one who mutters only monosyllables, the one who is deeply angry but never explains why.

The second father is the one who comes home after spending three or four hours at the American Legion every night. He is full of alcohol and stories. The stories are always about California and an ex-wife named Joyce and the two children he desperately misses but never sees and a horse named Snafu, but this father tells these stories to the son, who listens and asks the right questions even though he already knows the answers. The stories are always the same, but the son doesn't mind. He plays along and knows his part perfectly.

The son prefers the latter of these fathers. The father on the couch, dressed in nothing but white underwear in the early morning smoke, is someone to be feared. The son's mother spends her entire married life attempting to mollify this father, and the practices of repressing emotions and making people happy certainly rub off on the son. He hones his listening skills. He practices his people-pleasing skills. He continues to teach himself how not to make waves. The son eventually becomes an Episcopal priest. His father's cigarette smoke is replaced by the smoke of incense, and his father's highballs are replaced by altar wine.

Of course, the son's view of God will mirror his view of the prostrate father on the couch. It seems that God never goes to the American Legion after a long day in heaven. God will speak only monosyllables to the son and

will be angry most of the time. The son will spend most of his priesthood trying to appease a God that barely acknowledges his existence, a God who is to be feared above all else, a God who demands the perpetual uneasiness and anxiety of the son. Maybe, just maybe, if the son continues to empty himself for this God through others, happiness and connection will be found at the end of the day. If not happiness and connection, then a very good conversation.

The son opens his bedroom door fully and completely. He walks down the short and narrow hall into the smoke filled room, smiling.

“Hi, Daddy!” he says.

Many of you question why a program such as *The Artist’s Way* has become so important to me; it’s a fair question, and one that I haven’t really answered for you up to now.

I’ll try and make it simple—*The Artist’s Way* has taught me (and others, I might add) that maybe—just maybe—you can cut through all of your skewed perceptions and personal B.S. and maybe—just maybe—you can come away with a perception about yourself and your world that’s totally and utterly accurate. With a story like “Smoke and Mirrors,” that happened to me.

Just over a week and a half ago, several parishioners went to Bishop Brookhart with their own perceptions of me and my ministry. What they said, what they didn’t say, what their perceptions were and what their perceptions are right now are nothing compared to the hurt they all felt and were attempting to respond to.

If you haven’t figured it out by now, we are a hurting community. There’s not a person gathered here this morning that doesn’t have some mental, emotional, physical and/or spiritual pain that they couldn’t share with the rest of us right now. Sometimes this hurt is mirrored in a deep and abiding anger. Sometimes it manifests itself in negativity. Sometimes it’s reflected in withdrawal, apathy, and doubt about the existence of God and our importance to God.

And I’m a part of that hurting community.

As your priest, there have been times when I haven’t known what to do with your hurt. As your priest, there have been times when I refused to recognize your hurt and, instead, chose to respond to your anger with my own anger. As your priest, there have been times when I’ve felt like a complete and utter sham when I stood behind our altar.

I haven’t been able to deal with your hurt, simply because I had no idea how to deal with my hurt.

I'm going to be utterly honest with you—or, at least, I'm going to be utterly honest about my current perception of our community—we are at the crossroads. If we're to move forward into God's divine plan for us—both as individuals and as a community of faith—we're going to have to find a way to alter our perception and make sure that those perceptions are in the image of God. If we can't do that, if we won't do that, if we make excuses and continue to point fingers of blame at one another, then the only thing left open to all of us are memories of how Incarnation was in the past, and/or how unfulfilled dreams about how it could've been in the future.

This is unacceptable to me—and my perception is that it's unacceptable to you as well. It's certainly unacceptable to God.

Now, let me be honest about another thing—at this particular point in their own pastorate here at Incarnation, several of my predecessors starting thinking about leaving you. They were dealing with their own hurt, their own pain, their own sense of hopelessness and helplessness. While I can't—and won't—speak to the specifics of their pain, I can speak to their need to feel better, because I've often felt that need myself.

About a month ago, I received an e-mail from a parishioner who, according to this particular person, was expressing the concerns of other parishioners. In that e-mail, this person asked me point blank if I was in the process of looking for another parish. I'll tell you what I told that person: y'all are not that lucky. When I leave you to go on vacation, or when I leave you to take a “mental health” weekend, it's because I want to come back with better and more accurate perceptions of you and me. Period.

I'm not going anywhere. I'm not looking for another parish. Why should I? All of you have become too important to me.

In case you haven't figured another thing out by now, I am not a perfect priest. Sorry to disappoint you, but I'll continue to disappoint you. I guarantee it. There will be times when I won't listen, when I won't respond the way you want me to, when I won't be there for you. I'm apologizing to all of you in advance.

At the same time, I hate to tell you this but—you're not a perfect congregation. Sorry to disappoint myself, but you'll continue to disappoint me. I guarantee it. There will be times when you won't listen, when you won't respond the way I want you to, when you won't be there for me. I'm accepting your apology in advance.

But here's the thing: there isn't—and never was—perfect people in God's world. Peter denied Christ three times. Thomas doubted the existence of the Risen Lord. Martha complained about Mary. Five bridesmaids fell asleep at the wheel. All of

the disciples were so full of fear and anxiety that they huddled together in an attic room, wondering what was to become of them.

These were the very people that God chose to build God's church on—what was God thinking?

We are no different from those people—and, just like those people, God has chosen us to build God's church on—what was God thinking?

God was thinking that it all begins—and continues—by all of us risking vulnerability, to admit that we're not perfect and never will be, to try and honor one another, to commit to holding each other up, and by asking for forgiveness when we're unable to do all—or even one—of those things. That's what God is thinking.

What are we all thinking? Or are all of us asleep, just like those bridesmaids that we heard about in today's Gospel lesson, only dreaming of a better community while our lamps grow dim and extinguish themselves with false perceptions and feeble intentions?

Let us all wake up. Let us all become better prepared by hinging our perceptions not on our own human frailties or the frailties of others, but on the indomitable strength of God, along with what God perceives for all of us. Only in this way can we light the way for God to enter our lives and the lives of others. Amen.

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