

Kerry Mansir
Christ Church Gardiner
November 8, 2020

Let's hear again the last words of today's Gospel reading: "Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

This isn't one of my favorite parables. I want to know more about those poor bridesmaids left knocking on the door. What made them foolish? And why won't the other bridesmaids share their oil? And then, of course, I can't help worrying about which side of the door I would be on.

But let's take a step back for a minute. Let's zoom out and think about the context of this parable. This is one in a series of stories that Jesus shares to talk to his disciples about the kingdom of God. We'll get others in the coming weeks. It's part of what is called the eschatological discourse—stories about the end times. This is, after all, what the disciples expect of the Messiah—an ending to the world that they live in as the occupied people of Rome and the ushering in of a new kingdom. And Jesus is to be Lord of this new kingdom.

But while this may be the hope of the disciples, they are still fearful. And they have plenty of reason to be. Jesus has spent most of the past week having theological debates with Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes, and chief priests on the Temple premises. And Jesus has managed to enrage most of them, and the disciples rightfully fear for his life. It feels like a crisis is coming. And this eschatological parable that Jesus tells them is meant to remind them to pay attention, keep on their guard.

Now we know that these stories don't just reflect the context of Jesus and his disciples. We also have to look at the context of the writer and his audience. Because Jesus didn't write the Gospels. Other people wrote them, and they had particular motivations. Matthew was writing to a community that was also fearful and worried that a crisis was coming. They were followers of Jesus, but most of them were still Jewish. And all of Judaism was in crisis as the Temple had been destroyed by the army of the Roman Empire. The Temple was fundamental to their understanding of themselves as Jews. So its destruction sent them into a spiritual crisis. Matthew's community had that crisis to contend with as well as the one within their own community as they asked—why hadn't Jesus come yet? Why was he waiting so long to usher in the Kingdom of God?

These eschatological parables that sound terrifying to me, may actually have sounded reassuring to them. Reassuring, but also cautionary. They wouldn't know when, but Jesus would return, and they had better be ready. Or they might get left behind.

So this parable, as difficult as it is, spoke to the crisis being felt by both those first disciples of Jesus and the community that emerged after his crucifixion.

We are in the midst of our own spiritual crisis here in America. What might God be saying to us in the midst of it?

You may remember that a little thing happened last week. We had an election. And finally, yesterday, a winner was declared. Many people in the nation are elated by the result of the election. Some are devastated. But no matter how one feels about the election, fear, anger, and hate have been eating at us for far too long, making it difficult to even have conversations with people on the other side of the political divide.

The election may be over, but *our work, our responsibility*, as Christians, that's far from over. Because as Christians, our call is to reconciliation. And we know that the people in our country, in our communities, even in our very own families, are not reconciled.

I needed to hear a reassuring voice on Friday, a voice that would both challenge me to this work of reconciliation but also assure me that God is with us in that work. So I replayed an interview of Ruby Sales that moves me to tears every time I hear it. * You probably know who Ruby Sales is, and I have preached about her before. She's a civil rights activist and theologian who was thrust into the national spotlight in 1965 when a white supremacist shot at her outside of a convenience store. She was saved from his bullet by Episcopal seminarian, Jonathan Daniels, who pushed her aside, and was himself, shot and killed.

Despite having every reason in the world to give up on the good of humanity, Ruby Sales persists in believing that all of us are both worthy of redemption and able to be redeemed. In that interview, she talks about the spiritual crisis of America, particularly white America. Our crisis, she says is a crisis of meaning. And spiritual crises need theological answers because only theology can help us to understand what will make us whole, and we cannot care about the other until we, ourselves, are whole.

In the interview, Ruby reminisces about a song from her childhood in which she sang the words, "I love everyone in my heart." And because of her theological understanding of what those words mean, her understanding of who God is and therefore who she is, even someone's hate will not change her love for them. The depth of that love is even more astounding when we put it up against the world that she grew up in of the apartheid South with its segregation, its violence, and often, its killing, of black people.

This statement: "I love everyone in my heart," has to be the starting point for us as Christians. Even when it's difficult. Because it pushes back against the demonization of the other that's all around us. Demonization means giving up on people, and it's happening on both sides of the political divide.

As people of faith, what we can offer our country right now is a theology of agape—deep and abiding love for the other, no matter who the other is. And a theology of hope, not a meaningless kind of hope where we just cross our fingers and hope that things will get better. No, an active hope that proclaims that our God is a liberating God and that nobody is beyond the power of God's redemption. And also an active hope that means we work to make the world look more like God's dream for all of us.

In order to move forward as a nation, we must do the hard work of addressing the hurt and the fear and the anger that we feel all around us. Reconciliation isn't possible without bringing that pain into the light.

In that interview, Ruby Sales talked about asking people where it hurts. That's the question that gets at the root of someone's pain and opens them up for the

possibility of healing. Surely Jesus is calling us to do that work as he calls us to follow in his ways. What healing might we bring about just by asking, “Where does it hurt?”

As I think about seeking reconciliation in our country... When I try to discern how God is calling us as people of faith to do that work... I find myself reading today’s parable about the kingdom of God in a new way. We often look for ourselves in these parables. And we must be careful to not always assume that we’re the ones who will get the reward...or the ones on the right side of God. When we consider the possibility that we could be the bridesmaids who had to run to the store to get more oil for their lamps and then get shut out of the kingdom...I think that changes things. Maybe this parable is useful in showing us that we all need some humility as we move through the world and as we reach out to others.

I don’t want to be left knocking at the door like those five foolish bridesmaids in the parable. And I don’t want anyone else to be left behind either. I want a kingdom of God for all of us. So how can we work together for reconciliation? Who needs to be asked, “Where does it hurt?” in you life? How can we bring everyone along as we seek the Kingdom of God—the embodiment of love and mercy and justice? That’s our work: yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Amen.

- <https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/>