



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

November 6, 2011, Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time ***Walter Wink***

RCL: Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13
LM: Wisdom 6:12-16; Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 or 4:13-14;
Matthew 25:1-13

[Note: Walter Wink's reflection for this week focuses exclusively on the Gospel passage]

Palestinian weddings were the most cherished celebrations in an otherwise dreary regimen of exhausting work. Men engaged in footraces, camel or ass races, games of skill, and drinking. Then the bridegroom, after payment of the bride price to his in-laws at his father's house, would lead a nocturnal, torch-lit procession in the company of his friends to claim his bride at her father's house. Female friends of the bride awaited the groom's coming and would go forth to meet him, bearing, according to custom, olive oil lamps held aloft on poles. At this juncture the bride would join the swelling procession, which would journey the distance back to the bridegroom's own home for the wedding feast. The hour of the bridegroom's coming, however, could not be predicted. If the legal proceedings were protracted, he might arrive extremely late at night. On occasions when the groom was delayed for this reason or when the distance to his home was considerable, the wedding feast was celebrated at the bride's home.

It was the task of the unmarried females to illuminate the wedding feast. "Virgins" here are simply unmarried young girls, who were typically married at around 12 years of age. It is plausible that the foolish young maidens could still purchase oil at midnight, since everyone in the village would lie waiting for the groom to come.

This parable has frequently been treated as a Christian allegory of the marriage of Christ and his Church. But the bride never makes an appearance. The meaning, then, must be sought in the ten maidens, not the bride and groom.

The theme of watchfulness, which is introduced in verse 13, is at odds with everything in the parable and is clearly a Matthean insertion (Matt 24:42, 44, 50). The parable doesn't distinguish between those who sleep and those who keep watch; all the bridesmaids sleep. Nor is it selfishness that causes the "wise" bridesmaids to refuse to share with their less foresighted sisters. If they all share, they will all quickly run out of oil, plunging the feast into darkness. And it is precisely their task to illuminate the feast.



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So the foolish ones go off to procure oil, and while they are gone the groom and his retinue arrive. When the “foolish” young girls finally return, they discover the feast has begun. The door is bolted and they can’t get inside. They knock, but the groom refuses to allow them entry at the risk of allowing demons to enter and spoil the marriage.

When is the door closed to us, so that we can’t join the feast? “Oil” in this story is in short supply. In our day it will soon be so for the entire world’s oil supply, and then we will begin talking about conservation, after the door is already shut. We simply assume we can burn our lights the way we do and have light indefinitely.

Six million children die of malnutrition and hunger-related causes every year. That’s 16,400 every day.ⁱ Most of that is preventable. Bread for the World believes that hunger can be wiped out for only a few billion dollars-peanuts compared with the military budgets of the world powers. If we don’t respond, these children will find the door barred in their faces-and in their case, they weren’t “foolish” but innocent. We will be the fools, but it will be too late for those who already face that closed door.

Jesus is not warning about the last judgment here, but against a judgment already taking place every day. In the world’s midnight, Jesus brought the reign of God to humanity. Jesus transformed the world’s midnight from a time of destitution into a time of celebration. Will we be at the wedding feast or locked out by our failure to grasp the meaning of that closed door? Perhaps there will be later feasts I can say yes to and be prepared for, but I have for all time missed the chance for this feast. The times we haven’t responded to God’s invitations to act add up to our un-lived life. It is difficult to die with so much lost opportunity.

Children’s Time

Written by Larry Hollar

It’s entirely possible that the children have never seen a lamp lit with oil, or at least did not recognize that’s what it was or how it works. Many of us nowadays have decorative oil lamps, and while they aren’t like what the bridesmaids in the story would have carried, think about bringing one, already lit, into the sanctuary. Talk about how the oil and wick work, and how the oil gets used up as the lamp burns. Given the age of your children, you may not be able to make the point Walter Wink does about non-renewable resources, such as oil, being used up. Instead, you may be able to talk about the importance of light in our lives, light that takes away the darkness and calms our fears, and the light of life that Jesus brings. We can take none of these for granted, but we can give thanks for each.



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Musical Suggestions

Prepared by Larry Hollar

We Will Serve the Lord (Haas)-GC 869

We Will Serve die Lord (Cooney)-GC 665

Let There Be Light-UMH 440

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning-NCH 369

Christ's Word to Us Is Like a Burning Fire-BP 155

Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year A

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ⁱ U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, *State of Food Insecurity in the World*, 2002.