

A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY
Prayer (Teach Us to Look for You)
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, January 13, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

Matthew 25 New International Version (NIV)
The Parable of the Ten Virgins

25 “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish and five were wise. **3** The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. **4** The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. **5** The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

6 “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’
7 “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. **8** The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

9 “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

10 “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

11 “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

12 “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

13 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

So, I have issues with this parable for a number of reasons. First, I am not a fan of its polygamist conceit. Next, I disagree theologically: this is a parable meant to encourage us to be ready for the second coming of Christ - I believe Jesus has already been here, and that the animating spirit of Love and the connection to the Holy which he had in such full measure has remained as present to us as it did to him. The evidence of history does not suggest Jesus asked us to be ready for his personal return - it instead suggests, and I agree, that the kin-dom of God is always at hand...it is nearer than our very breath, and if we will do the work - that personal work, to prepare our hearts, and that communal work, to create peace and justice, then we will live in the possibility of the kin-dom. And so lastly, I look and see that those Biblical scholars I most trust say this is not a parable that comes to us from Jesus, but rather is a writing of the (admittedly very) early church.

Having done that terribly UU thing, and offered up all my critiques first, what I do think is that, like so many of the religious stories and teachings from the world’s great traditions, this parable offers us a valuable reminder: we do not know the hour when change will come. We cannot often know when the world will change around us.

We often talk about the need to be, as individuals, equipped to deal with change. And it is absolutely true: we need to be prepared in our hearts to deal with that one constant - change.

I believe we grow spiritually when we engage in the art of discerning *possibility*. To determine what is possible, we have to be engaged in an active practice of being ready, as a spiritual community, to encounter each other in the depth of our diversity: our educational, experiential, cultural, financial, sexual, ethnic, age and other diversity. If we are doing that deeply, then our norms will change with some regularity, because we are engaged in an intentional practice of learning and adapting to new ideas and understandings, in the work of living Beloved Community.

But today I really want to talk about something else. I want to talk about the Berlin Wall coming down. I want to talk about marriage equality becoming the law of the land. I want to talk about Nov. 11, 1918, the day World War I ended, or July 2, 1964 - the day the Civil Rights Act was passed. Or days like Dec. 12, 2015, when 195 nations came together to come to an historic agreement about dealing with climate change - one which many observers both doubted was possible, based on history, and one which, if we can find our way back to international leadership and commitment, could change many things, going forward.

We do not know the hour that Love will arrive. Often, this is our experience - we work and work toward some distant goal, and all our wise leaders remind us constantly that we may not live to see the fruits of our labors. It is wisdom to build our capacity to be steady and faithful in our efforts, whether or not we personally see change. And we are well accustomed, as human beings, to being aware that there come days like Dec. 7th, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was bombed; or Sept. 11, 2001 - days that change us, in painful and potentially ruinous ways.

What is easy to lose sight of is the possibility that *Love* may arrive in any moment. You know, most people, as Anne Frank reminded us so long ago, “are really good at heart.” Most long for, and even work to, in their own various small and large ways, create the possibility of a better world. We pay so much attention to all that is troubled, or broken, in this life. It is a powerful art to pay heed to the many things that are going well, or are beautiful, or that are becoming possible.

At the end of a year in which the news has often been particularly hard, it can be easy to lose sight of this much greater truth: that good things are afoot. I am not sure anyone said it better than Gandalf, when Frodo complained that he wished the ring had never come to him, that none of their struggle were necessary. Gandalf replies: “So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us. There are other forces at work in this world Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the Ring. In which case, you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdAN0o3oqB8>

We do not know the hour Love will come. One day, our identity may be reviled and endangered, and then, filled to the brim with frustration at the status quo, we explode and insist on change - like June 29, 1969, the night of the Stonewall riot, which kicked off 6 days of protests and shifted the course of LGBTQIA rights in this country. Or like the response to the death of Laquan McDonald in Chicago. This one devastating loss triggered serious police reform in a city long considered to be among the most resistant to change. Chicago has implemented new trainings in de-escalation and changed its use of force policy, now uses body cameras and has new video release policies for transparency. Change came quickly.

If you look for it, Love really is all around us. Millennials, it turns out, despite being the most fiscally challenged generation since the Depression, do more good deeds than any generation

previous. And while the government is shut down, “hundreds of Muslim men volunteering with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association have been picking up trash in parks and public spaces across the nation – from the Everglades in Florida to the National Mall in Washington DC.”¹

There’s a saying now: *stay woke*. It means, once enough people are aware and concerned and engaged on an issue, it takes time, energy and effort, but it is hard to return to a place of ignorance or blindness to that issue. Instead, we become attentive to the possibility of a better way. And while what often comes next is a lot of work that may even feel hopeless for long periods of time, we must remember: we do not know the hour that Love may arrive. There are forces at work in this world besides the will of evil.

In 1969, the Cuyahoga River caught fire in Cleveland. It was so polluted that it had, in fact, caught fire 12 times before, in smaller areas. There were no fish. Today, the Cuyahoga is one of 14 American Heritage Rivers. It supports 44 different species. It usually meets recreational water standards.

Recently, all around the country, women and people of color decided to step forward in possibility. In numbers higher than at any point in our history, they won local and national races. Even while there is still a long way to go, and much lost ground to regain, there is a strong possibility that the American populace has awakened to the power of democracy and the necessity for each of us to be engaged. And that opens all manner of doors to possibility. My beloved colleague Meg Barnhouse talks about the possibility of our life together as a church community in a piece she called, “Brick by Brick.” In it, she says,

One man who looks to be in his seventies is the leader. His skin is the color of bittersweet chocolate; his beard is gray. Slender and tall, he moves from one group of bricklayers to the next, reaching and bending, looking like a heron in a marsh. When he pauses, he stands very straight. I see him teach the others how to do the work. ...He looks like he loves what he’s doing. I wonder how he can love building walls, day after day, handling bricks, teaching the art of laying bricks. Is it the teaching he loves? Seeing how his students learn, what their styles are, how their work shows their character? Does he love the wall itself? Does he know about when it’ll be done? Does he look forward to seeing it finished? Or does he love the process, the feel of the bricks in his hands, the squish of the mortar, the challenge of making the symmetry of pillars and arches, the geometry of it? ...I want to be like that, and I am, I guess. In my job as a minister, the bricks are stories. I hear stories of family and work, stories of loss and reconciliation, stories of rejection and disaster, illness and healing, birthing and dying. I tell stories every Sunday and in between, teaching, challenging, confessing, inviting people to learn and laugh and think.

Brick by brick, story by story, we build a church, seeing the patterns, the symmetry, the plain joy of setting one story on the other, sustained by the strong and beautiful structures they make. We will never be finished.

¹ From the Good News Network: <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/heres-how-families-and-groups-are-pitching-in-to-maintain-national-parks-during-government-shutdown/>

It's okay.

Whether you think about it as the possibilities inherent in what we are building together, story by story, as Meg describes, or if you hearken back to the parable of the ten virgins, these are all tales of a world of possibility. We do not know the hour Love may arrive, so let us make our hearts ready. Change is coming - and a better world is just as possible as anything else. Let us be faithful about the care we need to take so our lamp oil is plentiful, and stand by the door, ready for Love, in the face of all fear.

Amen, ashe, blessed be.