

**Sermon: The Time is Always Right**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

12 November 2017

Based on **Amos 5:18-24, Matthew 25:1-13**

We're just a few weeks away from Advent, so in a church sense, with today's reading from Matthew, we're getting ready to get ready. The lectionary skips over a chapter or so to get to this parable about the bridesmaids, which is the first of three that deal with judgement.

At the beginning of chapter 24, the disciples ask Jesus, 'What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' He then warns them about false messiahs; natural disasters like earthquakes and famines; and persecutions. But, he said, 'the end is not yet.' The one who endures will be saved, and *that* is the good news of the kingdom proclaimed throughout the world, and *then* the end will come.

The end will be unexpected, and it will arrive swiftly. '*Then* the kingdom of heaven will be like this,' a parable about watchfulness and judgement.

We in the modern era are all waiting for Jesus to come again – we missed it the first time and wouldn't want to miss it again. But the disciples have Jesus walking with them every day. What prompted them to ask about the end of the age? Everything seemed fine when they first arrived in Jerusalem.

Then Jesus went into the Temple and all of a sudden, he's being challenged and tested; that's when the disciples first realize that things are getting serious. On the way out of the Temple, Jesus looked around and said, 'You see all of this? It's all going to come down.' And the disciples began wondering when that might be. Now, when Matthew wrote his Gospel, he already knew that the Romans had destroyed the Temple in the year 70, so Jesus' prediction is kind of a slam dunk, in the same way that I predict the Chicago Cubs will win the 2016 World Series.

After the Resurrection, after Jesus ascended to heaven, there was speculation about his promised return. 'We know he just left, *but* – when's he coming back?'

In the same way that Jews today wait expectantly for Elijah's return, so too do Christians await Jesus' second coming. But in the first century, everyone expected Jesus to return soon, in their lifetimes. And it didn't happen. These passages from Matthew are a response to those diminished expectations.

Now, Amos' Day of the Lord – not to be confused with the Lord's Day – was a 'day of God's appearing,' or a *theophany*. They happen every now and then in the Bible, and this mention in Amos is the first written record of 'the day of the Lord,' about 800 years before Jesus, and that's what the early Christ followers were expecting.

Read the entire book of Amos and you will soon realize that God is not happy either with those foreign powers taking advantage of their weaker neighbors; or with Judah, the southern kingdom, or with Israel, in the north, where Amos preached. Today's passage is directed at Israel, whose capital at the time was Samaria.

The Israelites of Amos' time expected vindication against their enemies on the Day of the Lord, but for Amos, the Lord will bring judgement to Israel as well. It will be a dark day, and not a good one, much like the closed-door judgement in Matthew.

So, we have two readings that emphasize God's expected arrival, except in one God is really, really angry, and in the other, God drops a very important hint: *keep watch*.

Matthew tells us it was midnight for the sheer symbolism of it. According to Jewish time-keeping, then and now, 'midnight' is halfway between yesterday and 'not yet.' On the cusp between those extremes – midnight – the delayed bridegroom will appear. He's late not because he's lazy or delinquent – he was *delayed*. It's not his fault; something held him up. Also of interest in this passage, in terms of story-telling, is the line, 'you had better go to the dealers and buy some [oil] for yourselves' – at midnight. That's another clue that we're not talking about human time here; remember, '*then the kingdom of heaven will be like this.*'

As for being foolish, in and around the first century, fools ranked with unbelievers, enemies of God, and heretics. It could be that these five bridesmaids were destined to be excluded from the banquet. Or maybe these five are, perhaps, not taking this situation as seriously as they ought to. Technically, they've been invited to a party. You'd think they would be a little more with it, right? In any case, they're not prepared. So good luck finding oil when all the shops are closed.

Let's take a minute to recall our favorite Bible verses. Verse 24 in the Amos reading happens to be one of mine, so much so that I have it on a pin that I wear on my jacket: 'Let justice *roll down* like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.' Earlier in the chapter, ironically, God had just told Israel, 'you who turn justice into wormwood and hurl righteousness to the ground,' – seek the Lord!

God *wants* justice; God *wants* righteousness, for everybody, and not just every now and then, unlike a dry streambed that only flows during the Spring rains, but always. It should be what we want too. These are qualities that ought to be part of any society's covenant, and kept consistently and regularly. We can choose. By *letting* justice roll down and righteousness flow, we are choosing to make it happen.

In Amos' time, Israel had imposed taxes on the poor; bribery and corruption was common; religious practices had become empty rituals. Amos wrote that, 'at such a time the prudent man keeps silent, for it is an evil time' (Amos 5:13).

He wrote that about 2800 years ago and it must be true that some things never change. It's also proof that Amos was not a prudent man.

Today, the floodgates against long-kept silences have opened. Secret deals are exposed almost daily, according to the headlines. People seem to be getting away with less and less illegal behavior than ever. Judgements, at least in the court of public opinion, have been rendered. The day of the Lord seems to have arrived for some. For the rest of us, it's still a few minutes before midnight.

To paraphrase Barbara Brown Taylor, we are called to 'serve a God who never stops calling people to do *more* justice and love *more* mercy,' and simultaneously to serve our neighbors who, 'nine times out of ten are just looking for a safe place to rest.' We know that things are not as they should be, and yet we care for the way they are.<sup>1</sup>

Can we endure Jesus' absence? It might be a long time, Matthew says. We have to be ready and watchful. But, from prophets like Amos and Micah, through whom God has told us what is required of us, we know what to do in the meantime. When we orient ourselves to what God expects – justice, righteousness – when we look at every situation from God's point of view, we can begin to see the world differently, and that leads to self-knowledge, re-evaluation, and transformation, or, put another way, repentance.

Writing in 1912, John McFadyen wrote, that if we think of justice as being fair play between people, then, ‘Let justice, in that sense, run through society, unimpeded by avarice or selfishness or cruelty, let it roll on without let or hindrance like the waves of the sea; let it roll on unintermittently, all the year round, whatever be the political weather; let it roll on “like a perennial stream,” which even in the fiercest heat of summer never dries up.’<sup>2</sup>

Religion and the religious life is just not a matter of rites and ceremonies, but it must express itself in our social life, where true service to God means helping the needy, feeding the hungry, and fairness and integrity in all our dealings with our neighbors. These are things we know how to do, and we do them, and we do them fairly well. From up here, I think we have plenty of oil in our collective lamps. And while we wait, the time is always right to do God’s will.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperOne, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> John E. McFadyen, *A Cry for Justice* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1912).