



Sunday November 8, 2020
Matthew 25:1-13

Pastor Chris Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

A member of our congregation has the gifted ability of repairing old clocks. And guess who happens to have an old clock in need of repair. The clock in question is old enough to remember World War II. The clock belonged to the woman who took care of me as a baby. Her name was Sigrid and she lived next door to my parents in the apartment complex when I was born. As a young child I can remember visiting Grandma Sigrid's apartment and hearing the clock chime each quarter hour regardless of where I happened to be in the house. This adopted grandmother outlived all her family and her only daughter while I was in my mid-twenties and my parents became her guardians. Even after she moved out of her apartment and into an assisted living community, the mantle clock went with her – even though there was no mantle present to place the clock. It was a treasured old friend to Sigrid – reminding her of the passing of time with each chime every fifteen minutes. When Grandma Sigrid died, the mantle clock moved to my parent's house for a time. And then the clock found a place in our house. On the mantle for a time – until we decided hearing the quarter hour – all night long – was a little more than we could handle. After a few months I went to wind the clock with the old brass key and set the pendulum to swing. And on the first quarter hour – the clock chimed but not like it used to. It turned out that after not using the chimes for a time – one of the chimes became stuck. So I brought it to church in order to have our gifted member take a look. On the way to church – after one bump in the street too many – the pendulum began to swing, and the clock began to tick/tock – which I did not notice until out of the blue at a stoplight – the chimes went off. And in a flash of memory, I remembered the title of the poem by the Rev. John Donne. Forgive the entirely masculine language. *“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know, for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”*

From Matthew: *“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’”*

Now you understand the power of the chimes of the mantle clock from the backseat. It does feel as if we have been living in the drowsy sleep of these long pandemic days. Yes, we have muddled through. Some have walked, some have run, some have had food delivered. Some have gone back to work – some work from home. Some of us have never left the house. I was reflecting on where we have come from. At the end of February we had an incredible leadership event here at Ascension. Almost 60 leaders gathered for a Saturday morning together of reflection and vision casting. It was full of life and energy and excitement. And then March 14th brought to a close everything we were doing, had planned, were hopeful to accomplish. Fast forward to Nov. 8th. We are worshipping together again – in my wildest dreams – I would never have imagined I would have had to stay that to all of you during my lifetime. Who would believe, we would neglect physically worshipping together for a time. And there are some who are ready to “get back to the ways things were.” And others who wonder if we will ever “get back to the way things were.” Honestly, I am in the first category. The sooner the better – my oil lamp is full – or at least I like to pretend it is full. And selfishly – I want to gather together – sing songs of praise to our God – and forget this pandemic ever happened.

And then I am reminded of those chimes in the back seat. For whom the bell tolls. No one is an island, entire of themselves – every one of us is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Funny how those words so easily translate into the words of our Savior:

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

“On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

As if to say, we cannot do this life without each other. Though we like to pretend that we can. And sometimes, we act as if we are able to do it all by ourselves. Though I hardly ever see anyone truly happy for their lone ranger, go it alone, do it all by themselves attitude. So where does that leave us this day. Some of us have oil lamps filled and are ready to run. Some of us are on the last precious drops of oil. None of us were prepared for this moment and yet God has seen us through this moment – this far by faith. And my friends we have far to go. An election (as of this recording) is incomplete. And even when the results are in, we will have a long way to go – as the body of Christ alive in the world to bring our nation together. It is up to us, who stake our claim in our identity as disciples of Jesus, to take the first steps. A reminder of earlier days in this county, when Abraham Lincoln spoke these words:

If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it. We are now far into the fifth year, since a policy was initiated, with the avowed object, and confident promise, of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy, that agitation has not only, not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion, it will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed. "A house divided against itself cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Lincoln borrowed those words directly from Jesus, “If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand.” If we are only able to lift up winners and put down losers – we diminish this nation. And, frankly, we betray the body of Christ and our calling as Christians. What did Jesus say, If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

I am hungry for a way forward. In our nation; in our politics; in this pandemic; and at Ascension. And yet, I am reminded that I am not an island unto myself and neither are any of you. We walk this road together so that we all may greet the promised bridegroom – the savior of the world. Dear friends - what is next?

Well, let me offer you some words of hope this day – some good news to carry with you – so that your oil lamp may shine brighter in a world overshadowed by virus and greed and selfish want. Let me offer you the opportunity to chase away such shadows with the hope that comes from the very heart of our God in the face of our Savior Jesus.

- I pray that God will enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see the hope this call holds for you—the promised glories that God’s holy ones will inherit. (Ephesians 1:18)
- May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)
- Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for the One who has promised is faithful. (Hebrews 10:23)
- I alone know my purpose for you, says the Lord, my purpose for your prosperity and my purpose not to harm you, my purpose to give you hope with a future in it. (Jeremiah 29:11)

- In hope we were saved. (Romans 8:24)

Did you catch that last one? Now will be saved. Not shall be saved. But – In hope we were saved. God's promise of eternal life is already yours. Now what to do with our left-over time before the bell tolls – before the oil in our lamps runs out. Let me offer a suggestion.

Invite, greet, listen, welcome, engage, pray, laugh, love, give, appreciate, celebrate and live your life in these days with the joyful expectation that God has set a place for you at the table in the Kingdom. Hallelujah!

Thanks be to God! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.