

Epiphany: Waking Up Is Hard To Do
United Church of Gainesville
January 7, 2007
Larry Reimer

Matthew 25:1-13

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.' Then all the bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 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.

A few words on scripture:

I want to share a story that always travels with this scripture passage for me. It is a variant text in which instead of running out of oil, the foolish bridesmaids fell asleep and ran out of wicks for their lamps. When midnight arrived and the bridegroom came to greet them, the foolish bridesmaids who had slept all night asked the wise ones who had stayed awake, not for oil but for wicks for their lamps. The wise bridesmaids replied, "Do you not know? There is no wick for the rested."

I had to get that out of the way quickly. In spite of my joke about it, I have always loved today's scripture passage. I found my old taped together high school bible, and even then I wrote in the margin that faith demands long lasting faithfulness. I knew then that you could not hurry faith or love.

Whatever the social custom of bridesmaids holding lamps for the bridegroom was all about, Matthew knew that people would understand an underlying truth – moments of reckoning do not happen when we think they're going to happen. In fact most everything good that we hope for takes longer than we think it would or should, and then comes when we think it shouldn't or wouldn't. Perhaps all truth is inconvenient.

You need to know that this parable was probably a story generated by the early church rather than spoken by Jesus. The people of the early church were confused. They thought Jesus would physically return in their lifetime and overtake the injustice of the earthly kingdom in which

they lived with the love of the kingdom of God. When Jesus did not return, the people of the early church were losing heart and falling asleep at the wheel of faith. Matthew was encouraging them to be ready, stay awake; the kingdom of God was coming.

Matthew in one sense was wrong. The kingdom was not going to come in a moment in life when all good and evil would be decided once and for all. But in another sense the kingdom of God was already among them in subtle and confusing reversals. The clues were there then as they are now. The kingdom happens in moments when the poor are recognized as blessed. The kingdom happens in moments when an ethnic and cultural enemy like a Samaritan turns out to be the one who stops to help when you're beat up on the side of the road. by the side of the road and helps us out. The kingdom happens when we are welcomed home like a lost child who has basically squandered everything.

While Matthew was wrong about Jesus coming from the clouds of heaven to bring the kingdom, he was right in that we have to be awake to recognize the moments of the kingdom happening among us.

There are two great tragedies in this world. The first is the pain and hurt caused by willfully destructive people who close their hearts to goodness and persevere in evil. They are the vicious ones who relish prejudice, inequality, and vilification. They're easy to spot.

The other tragedy is people of good will who give up too soon on what is right and true. I still can't understand why we have not overcome the evils of racism, war, the death penalty, homelessness, you name it. And I have seen too many good and caring people give up on working for justice when their initial efforts failed. I know I suffer the same temptation.

This story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids tells me I must prepare for the night with much more oil than I thought I would need. I need the resources of faith, friends, and church community if I am going to be ready when new calls to wake up come. I have to be prepared to stay awake and watch for times of new truth. And when I can't stay awake, then I need to be ready to wake up when the call comes to me again and again.

It's one thing to be a peacemaker for a day. It's another act of faith to work for peace day after day when wars rage and there seems to be no prince of peace about to show up anywhere. It's one thing to be merciful for an evening. But to be merciful for a lifetime requires extra preparedness to wake up over and over again to a life of compassion.

It's hard to be awake and conscious for new discoveries in life. And when I thought of the title "Waking Up Is Hard to Do" I couldn't resist doing a paraphrase of the old song, "Breaking Up Is Hard To Do" which Amanda will sing.

"Waking Up Is hard to Do"

Music by Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield

Adapted lyrics by Larry Reimer
Amanda Garrigues vocal, Jack Nettles, guitar

Don't let your life just slip by you
Don't fill it up with boring things to do.
If you do then you'll be blue
Cause waking up is hard to do.
 Remember joys that slip right by
 Years that pass you with another sigh
 Think of all life has for you
 Yes, waking up is hard to do.

They say that waking up is hard to do
Now I know how much we sleep through.
Take time to open your eyes
Now and then it's good to get a new look at the morning skies.
 I beg of you, please look around
 Life has glories still to be found.
 Come on friends, let's start anew
 Cause waking up is hard to do.

Yes, waking up is hard to do. Remember it as a call to faith.
Which leads me to one more story before I close. The "Once upon a time" of this story is the year 1770 in a village near the Catskill Mountains of New York. Living there is a pleasant man who is kind to his neighbors, good to his friends, and loving of his family. His only problem is that he is not very industrious. Because he is not very industrious he does not make very much money, and because of this his wife nags him day in and day out. I'm not being hard on the women. Other women in the town agree that his wife is indeed a difficult person, and they feel sorry for him.

One day, just to get some peace and quiet, our man goes squirrel hunting up in the mountains. Quite worn out at the end of a typically unproductive day, he sits down to rest. A traveler happens by, a strange person wearing old fashioned Dutch clothes carrying a keg of liquor. The traveler offers him a sip of the keg and our man falls asleep, not for an hour or two, or four, but for twenty years.

When he finally awakens, he returns to his village and nobody recognizes him. They ask him who he voted for, and he replies that he is, has been, and always will be a loyal subject of good king George. He has slept through the entire American Revolution.

The villagers of course think he is a Tory spy and are about to put him in jail. It takes all kinds of intrigue, finding a long lost son and daughter now grown who confirm his identity, but eventually it is all sorted out. Of course our man's name is Rip Van Winkle, and his story has become a symbol for anyone who sleeps through a revolution, or at least a whole era.

Every generation has its potential of falling asleep and missing the revolution that is calling it. I know that for me and many of my generation there is a great temptation to sleep through the technology revolution. It's hard for me to abandon a computer that still works because there's another newer faster computer that I should be using. I just got a digital camera last spring. My kids keep waking me up, buying me what I don't think I need so that I stay awake to the century I live in. I accept that I need to wake up to technology lest I lose my connection to the world of information around me.

What are you and your generation in danger of sleeping through? Are you missing all that was gained by feminism and gender equality? Are you the opposite of my generation, missing the world from the other side of technology, forever plugged in to video games, earphones, and cell phones? Is your generation locked into work, missing joy and vacations? Does your generation have a cause to stand up for? Each of us and each of our ages can fall asleep and miss the revolution of our time.

I close with something I'm not sure of (there's an interesting admission for a preacher). Remember earlier I said that I didn't think that Jesus actually told this story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, but that it was told by Matthew for the early church. It has enough truth to wake me up and catch my attention. I do think that to be faithful, I have to stay awake to the miracles, the calls of faith, the revolutions that happen late into the night, when I easily doze off and run out of oil. Matthew knows that there are turning points in our lives that are terrible things to miss. Any of us who thinks he or she can sing through Frank Sinatra's "My Way" without **more** than a few regrets is still asleep or heartless.

But Matthew says that once we miss the bridegroom at midnight, we're cast out in the dark forever. Here I think Matthew is wrong. I don't think Jesus would ever say that. It's why I keep shaking myself awake each day, no matter how many opportunities I've already slept through. I believe that through Jesus, and through the grace of God, there's always an opportunity for another wake up call. Maybe we'll stop the next war before it begins. Maybe we'll heal this planet before we destroy it. And that's my epiphany for the New Year.

Prayer –

O God I pray for the gift of being awake when you call. I pray that I may keep my faith exercised so that it's in shape, my lamp of endurance trimmed and burning, my hopes high.

Let me be ready God, that in tough times I'm up to the challenge. Keep me from missing the call when someone dear to me asks for my attention. Keep me listening when the bell of justice tolls for me. Keep me on my toes when peace needs a champion to run with its message.

And when I miss out on my calling, heal me, welcome me back, stand me up, turn me around, and face me in the direction of the star that guides me so that I won't be so blind next time. Amen.