

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | NOVEMBER 8, 2020

AMOS 5:18-24 | PSALM 70 | 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18 | MATHEW 25:1-13

Every year, Bill Whitney and I get out our calendars and plan the culmination of our fall stewardship campaign. We pick a Sunday for Bill to talk a little bit (last Sunday), a Sunday to ask people to return pledges by (next Sunday), and a Sunday for me to preach a capital-s Stewardship sermon (this Sunday). This works pretty well except for one obvious flaw: the readings for Stewardship Sermon Sunday often have absolutely nothing to do with stewardship. This usually means I have to make up something out of thin air or explain how a list of dietary laws from Leviticus is actually about stewardship.

Luckily we don't have to throw up some wild bank shot this morning because today's gospel reading actually is about stewardship. It's a parable about being prepared and being ready. In Jesus's parable, a group of bridesmaids stay up awaiting the arrival of the groom. Because weddings always run late (photos take longer than you'd think), the groom is delayed, and they fall asleep. And when the groom's arrival is imminent, the big moment is near, they discover that they don't have any oil for their lamps. And when the groom shows up and the party begins, they are out in the marketplaces looking for oil.

We can probably imagine how the bridesmaids felt. We want to be ready when the big moment when our calling meets the world's need, but when it finally arrives, we fear that we don't have what we need. *It's great the groom is here, but couldn't he come back tomorrow?*

We do this because we begin from a position of scarcity. We focus on what we *don't* have. We tell ourselves that we don't have enough to be useful, to be faithful, or to be helpful. And we tell ourselves that things will be better later when everything is perfect. Instead of trusting that the groom will be understanding and sympathetic and wants us at the banquet with whatever we have to offer, we run around the marketplaces at midnight trying to get a few drops more oil. And we end up missing the party altogether.

As we wrap up our stewardship campaign, it's worth reflecting on where we resort to scarcity thinking in our own congregational life. It was about four years ago this week when you started the call process with me. And it was clear in those conversations that there were some things you wanted to work on. You wanted to work on community partnerships and public presence, and you wanted to make sure the basic pastoral care and liturgical stuff got taken care of. This is all more or less healthy and fine and good. But there was a lot of scarcity thinking around church growth in general and young families with children in particular. There was a narrative many people had internalized that the congregation didn't have "enough" young families in it, and that this was holding the church back from fulfilling its potential. Once we fixed that, the story went, then we could get back being a really faithful congregation.

To be clear, there's nothing wrong with young families. Some of my best friends are in young families. But when you begin from a position of scarcity, when you tell yourself that you don't have what you need to be useful, it's easy to get stuck. Because scarcity never really goes away. It just reattaches to other desires.

Let's stick with that young families example. Some of my colleagues serve congregations where they believed they couldn't really serve their communities unless they had more young families with kids in the pews. So they did the relationship building, they invested the resources, they rearranged the sanctuary so it was kid-friendly, they dealt with the people who thought the kids were too loud, they partnered with their camp ministries, they did the whole thing. It took years. But it worked. They have way more young families with kids participating in their congregational life.

So now they are ready to be an effective and faithful congregation, right? No. Because now they need to get the building renovated before they can really be effective. And that won't be the end of it, either. The churches with renovated buildings are out looking to overhaul their staff. The churches with brand new staff are out looking for their strategic plan. The churches that just finished their strategic plan are out

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(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

looking to restart the community partnerships that went dormant while they were out getting new staff. On and on it goes. The circle of life.

None of those things are inherently bad. The danger is our belief that we don't have what we need to be faithful right now. If you begin from a position of scarcity, you'll never have enough. There will always be something else to fix. And when the banquet starts, you'll be out looking for oil.

The grace of God frees us from sin and death and all that good stuff, but it also frees us from the illusion that we don't have what we need to be faithful to our calling. We can get out of scarcity's death spiral because we believe that we actually do have enough. We already have everything we need to inspire, strengthen, and give hope to a world that is desperately in need of it. The grace of God frees us from the illusion that we can only be faithful later because we know that what matters is not the amount of oil in our lamps but our presence at the banquet.

That belief has really been put to the test this year. In my infinite naivety of early March, I expected that we would have to suspend liturgies for a couple of weeks, and then we would get back to work. *Once we get through this, then we get can back to doing ministry.* But, as Jesus puts it in today's reading, "you know neither the day nor the hour" when the moment arrives. And what initially seemed like pressing pause on our ministry actually turned out to be the context for it.

In fact, what has been most remarkable to me in this time is how people have refused to give into the temptations of scarcity. That far from going on hiatus, we still have an opportunity to engage in ministry, that this is actually the day and the hour when our common life is more important than ever. To use the parable's image, people have chosen to stay at the banquet. People like Bob Thompson and Carol Brighton who have figured out how to organize our holiday giving programs. People like Lilly and Anderson Joseph who participate in Sunday school with other kids across the synod. People like the Thursday Bible study group who show up for each other every single week. People like the Tedeschis and the Magoolaghans who read books and do activity pages with their kids at home because we can't meet in person. People who have been calling our homebound members to let them know we're thinking about them even though we can't see them. People like our endowment committee who are still giving out grants to help people in need. People like our partners at Stigma Free and Cross Roads and the Love Fund who continue to do our common work in new ways at a time when it's needed more than ever. And of course people like all of you who show up to worship online even though its awkward and glitchy because you want other people to know they're not going through this alone. And this is to say nothing of how we have lived out our manifold vocations in the world.

What is most remarkable to me about this year is not what we can't do. What's truly remarkable is what we have done. What's remarkable is how all of you have chosen to stay at the banquet, to recommit yourselves to our common work, and to trust that we don't have to wait for the future to be faithful in our witness.

This isn't just look-on-the-bright-side optimism or what-if-we-looked-at-this-as-an-opportunity ignorance. There are easier times to be church and harder times to be church. There are comfortable times to be church and challenging times to be church. But there's never a bad time to be church. There is always an opportunity for our seemingly meager gifts to satisfy the world's need.

And that's really what stewardship is all about. It's about what we do when we're no longer constrained by scarcity. You know neither the day nor the hour, Jesus says. But we do know that whenever it comes, we're ready.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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