

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 14, Year C
August 11, 2019

Luke 12:32-40

The very first sermon I preached was on our Gospel reading today. I had worked on the sermon diligently with three years of seminary learning compressed into fifteen minutes. After hours of work that week, I spent more time working on the delivery. My method was to go to my garage and practice preaching aloud to my car for an hour. The car doesn't mind but my wife might.

On the Sunday morning of the delivery, I woke up even earlier than usual and headed to my favorite coffee house to read over the inspired words. I arrived at church with plenty of time to spare. After arriving, I found that my well-honed text was missing. No matter how much I prayed the sermon did not appear. Thankfully, I had just enough time to race back to the coffee house where I was met with laughter. Gathered around a table was a group of people reading a sermon about how important it is always *to be prepared*.

This morning's gospel is about being prepared. It sounds strange but is quite beautiful. It has a brief introduction and then a parable in the form of a poem. It talks about being dressed for action, having your lamps lit, and a wedding banquet. Jesus is talking about preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven, God's world, come into our own – what heaven come to earth looks like.

The people were worried about all sorts of things – their world was falling apart – so Jesus told them not to be afraid. And then he told them *how*... to focus or reorient their lives by serving others. That is what God is like. He did so by telling a story, a parable, the middle section of our Gospel reading. The followers of Jesus, *us*, are the servants in the story and God is the Master.

In the context of the parable, to be a servant does not mean servile or powerless. It is not meant to be demeaning but liberating. To serve someone, when it is your own free will to do so, is an act of agency and empowerment. To serve can also be an act of love. In fact, as the story shows, that is precisely what God does... God chooses to serve because of love.

The master of the house goes to a wedding banquet. The servants are all left in the house in the dark, in more ways than one. In our translation, the servants are told to be dressed for action and to have their lamps lit. In the culture of the Middle East at that time, both men and women wore loose fitting robes that almost touched the ground. It was perfect for a desert climate. To work or travel meant you had to tie a belt around your waist to be ready. It is the same idea as this clergy robe I am wearing. Otherwise, one could trip and fall or at least be unable to do much. The King James version says to "gird up your loins" meaning to tie up the belt and robe like shorts so you are dressed for action, whatever that may be. Workers did that – not bosses.

Most likely, everyone here grew up with electricity. Finding a light switch in the middle of the night is hard enough. Imagine trying to light an oil lamp in the dark, a slow and awkward process. Have your lamps lit and keep them burning means to be ready at all times – to see what is right in front of you. The Master is gone to the wedding banquet during the night so they should be ready and keep watch for his return. Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.

The Gospel says they are to be like those *waiting* for their master to *return* from a banquet. A lot is lost in translation. Instead of “waiting,” a better word is “expecting.” “Waiting” is passive while “expecting” is active, dynamic, and exciting even. You *wait* for a bus. You *expect* a child.

The word “return” also misses the mark. To say the master will “return” means the party is over and all the guests go home. That is what is supposed to happen. A better translation for “return” is to “withdraw” or “slip out.” The Master *slipped out* of the party before it was over. Why leave early? The servants are to be like those *expecting* their master to *slip out* of the wedding banquet and show up at any moment. They were ready to serve him when he arrived home.

When the master returned, he did the unthinkable. He fastened *his* belt and had them sit down and served them. He brought the feast to them. This is the upstairs serving the downstairs, the master waited on the servants. This is a revolutionary idea about who God is and who we are called to be as followers of God. In that action, the servants became guests and even friends.

The master tied up his robe to work, girded up his loins, to feed the servants in a feast. You might rightly ask, where did the food come? The story doesn’t say directly but we can read between the lines. He didn’t rattle some pots and pans in the kitchen. There was no Giant Eagle on the route home. The obvious answer is the master took food from the wedding feast and then slipped out to share it with his friends. From God’s own table do we feast... which is exactly what we are doing in the Eucharist.

Jesus is not suggesting that if we do these things, be ready all the time, we will be blessed. The implication of the story is that we are already blessed. Followers of Jesus don’t do something to earn a reward. We act and serve as an expression of who we already are. We are blessed because we have become God’s friends and coworkers through God’s own acts of self-giving love. If the very nature of God is to choose to serve, then we are called to serve.

Being prepared means to be ready for the presence of God – for your own sake and so others can experience heaven through you. When we are focused on serving others rather than ourselves, our own fear and anxiety diminish. When you are dressed for action and have your lamps lit... when you are ready for it and looking for what is right in front of you... there are countless opportunities to choose a powerful act of serving in love... for a stranger to become a neighbor and a neighbor to become a friend.