

Sermon – “What is Ours to Give”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 25:1-13

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During Advent, the church watches to notice where God’s seeds of justice and peace are sprouting up. Wherever and whenever that happens, God’s promises are on the move toward newness. Our first scripture reading in Isaiah 2:1-5, is a vision, an act of imagination that looks beyond present dismay in Jerusalem through the eyes of God, to see what will be that is not yet. The promise is certain; however, the poet does not know when the vision will grow into fruition. Listen, now, for God’s word. (Read Isaiah 2:1-5.)

Today’s gospel reading, Matthew 25:1-13, follows Jesus’ teaching on the advent of the end times. Jesus’ is clear that the hour of the Son of Man’s coming is unknown and any claim to special insight about that timing exposes human arrogance and pretense. Because the time is unknown, believers are expected not to be speculators guessing about the future, but rather to be ready and to keep watch. The parable we read together today about the wise and foolish bridesmaids is an important reminder of this as we wait for the fulfillment of God’s reign during this Season of Advent. Listen, now, for God’s word. (Read Matthew 25:1-13).

The title of the sermon: What Is Ours to Give

The text: *“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.’” Matthew 25:9*

Let us pray:

Holy and Loving God, during this season of waiting and giving, give us the spirit of generosity and the wisdom to know what is ours to give. And now, may the words of my mouth and the mediations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Two years ago, my husband Peter, our son Paul and I found ourselves in the heart of the Amazon River Valley in South America on a two-week medical mission. We joined a team of 11 North Americans and 10 Colombians on an unforgettable eight hour journey down this exotic and wild river to three remote villages. So remote, this was the first time Medical Ministry International had ventured here.

In the villages of Santa Teresa, San Sebastian and Islandia, our medical team of one doctor, Peter, one nurse practitioner, two nurses, one young man entering the University of Missouri Medical School, one dentist, his assistant, and four interpreters, we examined 645 patients, prescribed 976 medicines and performed 133 dental procedures during seven days of clinic.

We lived in very close quarters with our medical team. Tents were raised in small, makeshift buildings. With fewer resources and the primitive living situation in this remote part of the world, the rules and boundaries were less defined in some refreshing ways.

One way in particular was the generosity in the sharing among team members. I was amazed at the resourcefulness in the group, particularly the women. Of the five women on the team from North America, the two nurses from North Carolina, Kris and Joy, were especially prepared and

resourceful. I can't tell you how many times I would ask for something obscure like a bandaid, a piece of tape, a certain kind of antibiotic, a pair of tweezers or dry shampoo, and to my surprise and utter delight, one of them would reach into her VERY large suitcase and produce what was needed in the moment. Their generosity was infectious creating a closely bonded team. When I borrowed something, I remember being very intentional about returning it because I knew how precious each item was to all of us.

This generosity and creativity in adapting to the limited resources we had, played a role in saving a young woman's life one night. She arrived in our clinic around 8:30 p.m. in the darkness. Peter and I were about to climb into our tent, when Jack, the young man now in his third year of medical school at MIZZOU, ran into the room exclaiming that someone was bleeding and Dr. Peter was needed. We got our boots on with flashlights in hand and walked across the wet field to discover a young, 19-year-old, unconscious woman who was in shock after having had a miscarriage. Four men had carried her in a makeshift stretcher through the jungle for two hours to reach our medical team.

The miracle about that night was that we seemed to have exactly what we needed. No more, no less. Someone had brought two IV setups and saline solution. The first IV didn't work, but thankfully the second was successfully inserted by the nurse practitioner. With Peter's direction, an oral rehydration solution was created from water, salt, and sugar to sustain the young woman through the night. With the necessary fluids she gained consciousness. I was standing in the background watching in amazement and praying when someone expressed a need for a nail clipper to open a water bag since no scissors could be found. I was ecstatic that I had one in my bag, and gladly provided it. Another woman from the village, a midwife, stayed with the young woman through the night in a makeshift hospital room we had created in the open pavilion, utilizing protective mosquito nets which someone freely shared.

The next morning, the young woman sat among us, eating her breakfast, when her husband arrived with their nine-month-old son, who was in need of his mother and the nourishment she provided him. She nursed him while she ate her breakfast, happy to embrace the child that was hers, with tears running down her cheek for the child she was expecting and lost the night before.

By the end of our time together in the Amazon, I remember writing in my journal that I could feel a sermon rising within me on the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, having been surrounded and embraced by so many women who said yes instead of no, and who gave generously of what was theirs to give.

This sermon on the parable of the wise young women who said "no" is dedicated to the most generous among us; to those who don't like to say no and who are always going the second mile for others, because this parable is not about what is ours to give; this is a parable reminding us of those things which cannot be given.

As part of his final teachings and aware of his pending death, Jesus is concerned about how well he has prepared his followers to live in his absence. And so he tells a parable that anticipates his return and the importance of living with integrity and tending to the light of faith within until that unknown moment. Jesus knew there would be times when his followers would need to say yes and no, and he prayed for their discernment in these matters.

Our initial response to the young women who say no to their friends in need of oil is that this doesn't sound very Christian. Their actions appear, at first glance, to be selfish rather than wise. They should have given to their unprepared friends.

And yet, at a closer reading we come to understand that the wisdom of these young women was not that they kept the oil for themselves, but that they discerned what could and could not be given. They recognized their limitations in giving their friends what their friends could only get for themselves. However good our intentions, there are limitations in what is ours to give.

Some of us have a difficult time accepting this and learning to say "no!" By getting lost in other people's lives, sometimes we inadvertently neglect taking care of ourselves. Henri Nouwen, in his book *Intimacy*, comments about *the priest who had given away so much of himself, he created an inexhaustible need to be constantly with others in order to feel that he was a whole person*. This is not what God intended.

Brothers and Sisters, this is a parable about what is inside each one of us, how well we tend to that which sustains our Spirit, and how prepared we are to meet our Maker. Because we are each responsible for ourselves, some things cannot be obtained from other people.

We can receive life from our parents but we cannot return their lives to them. We can share life with our spouses and friends, but we cannot change who they are. We can give life to our children, but we cannot live their lives for them. When we try to, we deprive them of the opportunity to live their own life. We can love and support each other, pray for one another, give generously, and even offer advice, but we must learn our limitations in terms of what is ours to give.

We must respect one another's boundaries and honor the responsibility to live our own lives. This means: We make our own choices and we live with the choices we make; we face our own fears, we reach our own goals and milestones, we walk down our own paths every step of the way. And most importantly, when we come to the end of this earthly journey, we stand before the Creator God and account for our own lives. The wise maidens realized this and made no apologies for being ready. May God give us the same courage and wisdom.

This Advent, as we rejoice in the God who visited us in the Christ child and tend to the light within, may we celebrate what is ours to give, may we give generously in ways that are meaningful and may we remember what can and cannot be given. Amen.