

Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time/Baptism-New Members Sunday

November 9, 2014

Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 25:1-13;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Are You Ready?"

Well, how do you like those readings for today? We have Amos, talking about the *"Day of the Lord"*, a day of judgment, when it was assumed, God would come and wreak vengeance on all Israel's enemies and establish a new kingdom or realm where God ruled with an everlasting peace. Then in Matthew, we have Jesus, telling parables about the Parousia, (Greek for *"arrival"* or *"coming"*), about the return of the *Son of Humanity*, his return. Both events are what we call *"eschatological"* or *"apocalyptic"*, having to do with the end times, the closing age or eon.

Concern about end times is not something that was thought about only in ancient days. All throughout history, there have been people who have become enamored with the expectation of the end of the world, or the closing of time and history. There are many stories of people who sold all they had and gathered on hill tops, awaiting the return of Christ or some other god, only to be disappointed, disillusioned, and left to figure out how to live their lives again.

Even today, it seems there is a fascination about the end times. Not too long ago we had the *"Left Behind"* series of books and there have been countless movies about the final battle, often with aliens or some sort of non-human creatures or machines.

Well, let me first say that I am not a millennialist. That is, I am not eagerly waiting for or anticipating the return of Christ and the establishment of a thousand-year period of peace and joy and blessing for the whole world or cosmos. I mean, if it happens, great! But I am not living with the hope or expectation that such a thing is going to happen anytime soon or even in my lifetime. It's not the focus of my faith.

And so, I really can get into this Amos passage. Amos, a shepherd who is called by God to prophesy to the people of Israel who have gone astray. They worship at the ancient hill-top shrines, are prosperous and live in luxury, and yet are exploiting the poor and helpless and thinking that *they* are God's favorites.

I just love his imagery when he speaks about the *"Day of the Lord"*, a day that apparently, some were hoping for, because they believed themselves to be the chosen of God, and thus the inheritors of the hoped for kingdom that God was to come and establish by destroying their adversaries.

However, Amos tells them they'd better think twice about this. That this *"Day of the Lord"* that they've been anticipating, isn't going to be what they think. It is not going to be some rosy, pie-in-the-sky, happy time. *"Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?"* He describes it as *"if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or ran into the house and rested his hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake."* It is one bad and dangerous thing after another. Some of us have had times like that. Times when it seems nothing good can happen. When one time of pain or suffering is followed by another time of loss or despair.

The interesting thing here, is that these people seem to be doing all the things that good, religious folks are supposed to do and yet God condemns them for it. *"I despise your festivals (holy days), and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies (like our weekly gatherings for worship?)."* God condemns them for their offerings and sacrifices and even their singing and music! Why? Because they are unjust and they live lives of self interest, deceit, and corruption.

And Amos shouts his condemnation of the unjust system in which he lives, just as did Martin Luther King, Jr. on the mall in Washington, D.C. in 1963, *"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like*

an ever-flowing stream!" What matters, is not the attention we garner as "religious" or "pious" people or of any of our religious practices, if indeed they are hollow, with no effect upon our real lives. But what does matter is what I call the attitude or the position/posture of your heart, how you see or think about others, how you treat them, how you live. That's what matters. And good worship, good religious practice is that which helps to form, and cultivate the heart that is loving and pleasing to God. That's why we are here.

In Matthew, we get this great parable about the 10 bridesmaids, 5 foolish and 5 wise. This is the second of four parables that Jesus teaches to his disciples here in the last week of his life. He tells them, as he has been all along, about the kingdom of Heaven, but here he does it with apocalyptic undertones.

The story is about these bridesmaids, some who came prepared with extra lamp oil and some who did not. It is a story that is often interpreted as a warning of the need for us to always be ready, to be prepared for the Parousia, the return of Christ. But I think that kind of eschatological focus misses the point. It is about being ready, but the question is not about what we are to be ready for, but how we are to be ready.

When we hear this parable, we may wonder why the wise bridesmaids can't share their oil. The answer seems to be that there wouldn't be enough. But that just seems especially uncaring. However, when we put this parable alongside the other 3 parables in this section, we begin to see a common thread. There is this emphasis on individual or personal responsibility. The oil that provides the light for our lives is *not* something that one *can* share with another. It has to do with the position of our hearts. And you can help me and give me all kinds of assistance. You can be a listening ear and can get me the help I might need, but if my heart is rotten and filled with all kinds of malice toward others and hatred and meanness, there is nothing you can give me, nothing you can do to change that. That is up to me.

The last of the 4 parables that Jesus tells his disciples in this section, is the parable of the Great Judgment (25:31-46). Here he tells of how the Son of Humanity will return in his glory to judge the nations as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. And he says to one group, "*Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.*" And then they answer him, "*Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?*" And he answers them, "*As you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.*"

Then he turns to the other group and says basically the same thing, except that they did *not* care for the least among them, and therefore did not care for *him*. And they are condemned to the "*eternal fire.*"

Of course, the catcher in all of this, is that those who were actually doing the work of the realm of God, did not *know* they were doing it. And those who thought that God was on their side, just like those in Amos' day who thought they were all set because of all their religious practices and their prosperity, they all received condemnation because they were unjust and didn't care for the poor and needy among them.

What we do here in the Church, is not to make ourselves into the *elect* people of God. It is not to win ourselves a ticket to heaven. But rather, it is to be, and to help one another become, disciples of Christ, followers of his way, to live as he would live, to see him in one another and to love one another as he has loved us and as we would love him. This is our task.

So, as we welcome these new members and friends into our ranks here at First Church, as we celebrate their presence with us, let us do so with the love and compassion and acceptance that each of us wishes for. And let us all together, move forward with hearts positioned to burn with the oil of the light of Christ, that we might be children of light, children of God's love in our world. *So that justice might roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.* Amen.