

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 27
Year A

Awakening to God's Presence

[RCL] Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Archbishop William Temple said, "The source of humility is the habit of realizing the presence of God."

We may as well face it, none of us likes to wait. Modern culture demands immediacy. Whatever we want, we want it now. If that's not enough, we want the newest and the best, we want the latest and greatest, and we want it all right now.

Yet, recent research on economic success suggests that delayed gratification may lead to more sustainable innovation and success. The study is based on parking habits: Do you park head-in to a parking space, or do you back in, making it easier to pull out when you leave? Brain research has long concluded that hard work and persistent effort helps to "grow the brain." That is, we can make ourselves smarter and more successful through hard work. It is called neuroplasticity – the brain's capacity to always, throughout life, make new connections, new neural pathways, to make us smarter and more aware.

So someone researched national parking habits in countries around the world, correlated with economic innovation and success, and concluded that since backing in to a parking space tends to take more work and persistence, countries in which that is the predominant parking method tend to be more productive and successful.

What does all this have to do with bridesmaids, Jesus and keeping awake? Anthony De Mello, a Jesuit priest, psychologist and retreat leader made a career out of teaching us that the main task of the spiritual life is to wake up. Despite our over-stimulation with electronic devices, addictions to the Internet and social media, and our endless quest for the newest, the best and the most, we tend to make our way through life sleepwalking. We remain somehow unaware of the spiritual dimension of our lives. Like all of the bridesmaids, we let that part of our life wait. There will be time for that later, we say to ourselves.

Or worse still, we see the life of the spirit as something we need to acquire or earn. We buy and consume books, DVDs, we watch TV shows, read blogs and whatever we can get our hands on. But none of these activities quench our desire and need for an awareness of our spiritual self. In the midst of all this working on our spiritual life, we are still distracting ourselves from experiencing it. De Mello and Jesus both knew this and call us to wake up! And once awake to stay awake!

Since we know that we can grow our brains to develop new habits and awareness, what will be the spiritual equivalent of filling our lamps with oil and trimming our wicks?

Let's first address wick trimming, since lamps and candles burn slower when we regularly trim the wick. It is similar with fruit trees – they produce more fruit when we do the work of pruning. Just as it is easier to get out of our parking spaces head first, Jesus is always extolling the value of doing the upfront work so that we can reap the dividends more easily when the fruit comes in. So trimming and pruning our lives, reducing the amount of distractions, would seem to be the No. 1 lesson for those of us who aspire to be bridesmaids for Christ when he comes. The paradox is that doing less can also help us to awaken to the presence of the Spirit in every breath we take. Doing less can help us to wake up and stay awake for the presence of Christ here and now.

As to filling our lamps with oil, doing less points us in the right direction. For it turns out that another way to encourage and promote neuroplasticity is to do nothing – not just less, but nothing. All religious traditions have some form of mindfulness meditation, centering prayer and contemplation as a religious or spiritual practice. Sadly, it is rarely found in church, where we tend to relentlessly work our way through the liturgy without pause so we can get to the end. And then what? Go to coffee hour, “the 8th sacrament”? Or go watch the ball game?

Contemplative prayer or mindfulness meditation helps us to create an empty space within. This has two immediate benefits.

It gives God and the Spirit a point of entry into our otherwise busy and sleepwalking lives. Once we prepare a place within for the God to dwell within us, we become more aware and awake to the fact that God has been and is always with us. We recognize that the work of spiritual growth is, in fact, no work at all.

Also, as it turns out, letting the brain rest promotes neuroplasticity. When we emerge from our prayer or meditation, we are made new, re-wired and more aware of not only who we are but whose we are. The German theologian Meister Eckhart is quoted as saying, “God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk.”

So what are we waiting for? Are we to spend our time like the bridesmaids, waiting for Christ to come? Or are we to heed our Lord's final imperative in the story: Keep awake!

These parables are tricky. We tend to treat them as doctrinal treatises or allegories, assigning parts to each character in the story. But what if Jesus meant to simply shock us with details such as closing the door on the foolish ones only to deliver the real message: Keep awake! One suspects Jesus really did not want us spending hours of Bible study dithering over questions such as “How could Jesus do that? Why would he close the door on anyone?” when we already know the answer is that he closed the door on no one. Not prostitute, not

tax collector, not sinner. His door is always open. The disciples to whom this little tale is told know that and have witnessed it every day. And like them, we ought to be those who recognize that what seems like his coming again is simply our awakening to the very real Good News of Jesus, that he is with us always to the end of the age. No waiting required. He is here. Forever and always. We might even say forever and all ways.

What is Jesus calling us to do? Wake up and keep awake!

The time and effort put into doing less and doing nothing will awaken us to the clever truth buried deep within this tale of lamps and oil and bridesmaids: He is here. His door is open to all at all times of day and night.

When we wake up to this truth all things are made new – including most importantly we ourselves.

Written by the Reverend Kirk Alan Kubicek. Ordained in the Diocese of Chicago in 1983, I served as a parish priest in the dioceses of Chicago, Connecticut and Maryland. After nearly 18 years as rector of St. Peter's in Ellicott City, MD, I spent six years as Chaplain and teacher at St. Timothy's School for Girls, an Episcopal and international boarding and day-school in Stevenson, MD. In the mid-1980's I was trained to work as a Stewardship Consultant through the Office of Stewardship at the Episcopal Church Center. I also helped to lead retreats for the Ministry of Money, a ministry of the Church of the Saviour, Washington, DC. Recently retired from full-time parish ministry, I do Interim and Supply work throughout the Diocese of Maryland. I also continue a lifetime as a drummer in various rock and jazz bands, currently playing with On The Bus, a Grateful Dead tribute band centered in the greater DC Metro region. I also use guitar and write music to supplement worship and the preaching event. Some of these songs can be seen on Youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/user/SoundsDivine1>. My sermons are archived at www.perechief.blogspot.com, and I have been writing for Sermons that Work for as long as I can remember! Feel free to contact me at kkub@aol.com.

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