

(Psalms 78:1-7 NRSV)

¹ Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. ² I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings [riddles] from of old, ³ things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. ⁴ We will not hide them from their children; we will [also] tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. ⁵ He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children; ⁶ that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and rise up and tell them to their children, ⁷ so that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments;

(Matthew 25:1-13 NRSV)

¹ "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵ As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶ But at midnight there was a shout, 'Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' ⁷ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' ⁹ 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.' ¹⁰ And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹ Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' ¹² But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.' ¹³ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

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Past Deeds, Present Awareness

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: November 7, 1999

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Texts: Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 25:1-13

When I became the fifteenth senior minister of then North Congregational Church, back in 1983, the title of the position was precise and ancient. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 was the manifesto of the Congregational Church here in America. It was a long document, heavily reliant on references from scripture, and it said that its ministers were to be called pastors and teachers. In accordance with the language of the Cambridge Platform, adopted in our own city 351 years ago, I was called as the fifteenth pastor and teacher of this church.

Now, if you were to read the Cambridge Platform's exact description, you might think it gives pastors and teachers a little more control over your life than you might want. Chapter 6, § 5 suggests that the office of pastor and teacher has distinctive and combined roles:

The office of *Pastor & Teacher*, appears to be distinct. The *Pastors* special work is, to attend to *exhortation*: & therein to Administer a word of *Wisdom*: the *Teacher* is to attend to *Doctrine*, & therein to Administer a word of *Knowledge*: & either of them to administer the *Seales* of that Covenant, unto the dispensation wherof they are alike called: as also to execute the *Censures*, being but a kind of application of the word, the preaching of which, together with the application therof they are alike charged withall.

So, the pastor and teacher is charged, among other things, to censure the members, for censure is simply one application of the word the pastor and teacher is called to preach and dispense. You will be glad to know that, unlike my forbears in this office, I have no urge to send any of you off to Rhode Island. Ah yes, some parts of the Cambridge Platform are but relics of our past, and, for the most part, censure is one of them.

But the part of being the pastor and teacher which means to administer a word of wisdom and a word of knowledge, that seem to me to be a good aspiration both for the minister and the church. What a good idea it is to be administrators of wisdom and knowledge. And administering words of knowledge and wisdom is an especially good aspiration on this All Saints Sunday, this Sunday on which we remember those who have come before us and on whose commitment and wisdom the foundation of the church rests even today. Administering words of knowledge and wisdom are especially good aspirations, also, in light of this morning's scripture

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lessons, which, indeed, contain wisdom and knowledge the church may find useful and good.

Psalms 78 begins, "Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth." And then when you incline your ear, you find that Psalm 78 is really a curriculum for the Confirmation class. It describes what the youth of the church are to be taught, what they should grow up knowing. And, of course, the same teaching goes on always in the life of the church. For as adults we forget, so we need to hear again. And as adults we, also, may learn more deeply over time. So, what Psalm 78 describes is good for the youth, but it's just as good for us, too.

First, Psalm 78 says that we will teach the coming generations both the dark sayings and riddles on the one hand, and the glorious deeds and wonders of God on the other hand. Psalm 78 wants to say, right from the beginning, that the important truths of our religious life are not all simple and wonderful. It admits that there are dark riddles, things we cannot explain, things we don't even like. And it doesn't just admit that they exist, but it suggests that they are important, and they are to be taught to the young and to the rest of the church.

I know of a woman who was very young when her mother died. Well meaning people of the church tried to console her. They told her that her mother was now with God. They told her that her mother was better off now. And they told her that God wanted her mother to be with him, and her mother wanted to be with God. These well meaning folks could not bring themselves to tell the young girl that her mother's death was a tragedy, and that whatever God and heaven were all about, her mother's death was a riddle, a dark unknowable mystery in the great scheme of things. For a very long time, well into her adulthood, this young girl became a woman who felt betrayed by both God and her mother. For God and her mother, she was told, wanted to be together more than they wanted to be with her. Well meaning folk wanted the girl to hear only good and clear things of God. How much better it would have been had they allowed that her mother's death was an awful event, but nonetheless God loved her and loved her mother, and even though the pain was unbearable, God's love would be with her and it would get her through. And how much richer a teaching of the truth of God it would have been.

This woman, for a very long time, was alienated from God and the church. Psalm 78 hopes that if the church gives true teaching, including the riddles and the glories, then from generation to generation it will be passed on, children growing up and telling it to their children, "[S]o that they should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments."

So, on this All Saints Sunday we are given a word of teaching about teaching. We are told to teach the things we have learned from of old, all of them, that they might instruct from the generations, so that they may find their hope in God.

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Matthew points us in the other direction. Matthew points us to the present and the future.

The story of the bridesmaids is perhaps a little obscure. What are they doing waiting for the bridegroom? Well, the story comes clear when you understand the tradition of the time. In Jesus' time the bridesmaids escorted the groom to the wedding. That's very different from the way we do it now, at least it is here. Here the groom is attended by the best man. The groom, the best man and the ushers (all the men) arrive at the church early, often together. The bride is attended to by the maid of honor and the bridesmaids. They come together, usually just before the wedding. None of them see the groom until they come into the church. But in Jesus' day, the bridesmaids waited to meet the bridegroom, and then they escorted him to the wedding. I think perhaps brides today should consider this. Brides might feel a little more secure if their intended were in the hands of their girlfriends rather than the groom's buddies, who are reminding him constantly that his last moment of true freedom is fast vanishing before his eyes, and that this is his last chance to escape.

Anyway, now the story makes a little more sense. The bridesmaids are to wait for the bridegroom and escort him to the service. In our story the bridegroom is delayed. Perhaps his buddies got to him after all. But, whatever the reason, the bridegroom is delayed and the bridesmaids have the responsibility to wait for him, and then to escort him. Five of the bridesmaids were prepared for this contingency. They brought extra oil. Five were not so well prepared. They brought lamps with just the oil that was already in them.

Interestingly, all of them fall asleep waiting. But when the bridegroom finally arrives, they are all awakened by an announcement of his arrival. They jump up, but only five have enough oil to keep their lamps going. The moral of the story, then, seems curious. The punch line says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Since all the bridesmaids fell asleep, the punch line doesn't quite seem to fit.

That is actually quite heartening, I think. The point seems to be that we know neither the day nor the hour when God's presence may break into our lives. The five bridesmaids who brought only the oil in their lamps believe that God will come predictably and in their time. When God doesn't come in their time, their lamps go out, and they are utterly unprepared. The five bridesmaids who brought extra oil expect God to come, but they turn control over the arrival over to God. They don't know what day or hour. They even fall asleep, like their friends. But, in the end, they knew God could come when they least expected it. And so they were ready when God did come.

In Matthew's story, we learn about being ready for and open to the unknown. It is a stance of awareness and preparedness. True, we may doze. But the idea is,

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nonetheless, to be ready for God's presence to come when we least expect it, to rouse ourselves, and to trim the lamps for which we have plenty of fuel. It is a story of perseverance and openness, even when our knowledge is quite incomplete.

Together these two scriptures, Psalm 78 and the story from Matthew, give us very useful teachings. First we are taught how important it is to learn the stories and truths of old, how important it is to pass down from generation to generation the precepts, the stories, the things that are in our scriptures and traditions, the things that are known and which we can know. But then, like the five wise bridesmaids, we are taught to be prepared for the unexpected. The five foolish bridesmaids knew the tradition, and had everything gone as it was supposed to, they wouldn't have needed extra oil. But the story teaches us that no matter how much we know, no matter how much has been passed properly from generation to generation, God's presence in our lives also comes at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. If we are bound to only what we know from the past, as important as it is, we risk being the bridesmaids caught without enough oil.

On this All Saints Sunday, as we think of those in our past whom we recognize as extraordinary people, it seems to me that they have been people who have managed to hold both perspectives together. They have been people who have known and respected the teachings and the traditions, and they have been people who knew that each day God's presence would come in a new way, too.

May these Saints inspire us. May the stories and even the riddles of old guide us. And may ever unfolding presence of God be lighted before us by the abundant oil our attention, perseverance and awareness. Amen.