The Wise Version of Yourself

A Sermon on Matthew 25:1-13 by the Rev. Philip Major

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This might come as a surprise to you, but we are just two weeks away from the end of our church year. The first Sunday of our new church year will be the first Sunday of Advent, on November 29th. During these last three weeks of the church year we are reading three stories from chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. The first story is a parable. The meaning of the word 'parable' is related to the shape we call a parabola. A parabola is an arch, like the gateway arch in St. Louis. As with an arch, a parable allows for a wide range of viewpoints. A parable often yields many different truths or ideas.

Every parable provides for a wide range of insights, but a literal reading of the parable is often takes us away from the truths they convey. Parables about seeds are not intended to give advice for gardeners. Parables about bridesmaids are not intended to give advice about what one should do on the day before a wedding. Parables about oil lamps are not intended to give advice about how much lamp oil to keep in reserve.

One of the challenges for people who live in the 21st century is that we often expect that words written on a page are to be understood literally, like a contract or directions for operating a microwave oven. But this doesn't work when it comes to reading many of the books in the Bible. We need to take the Bible seriously, but not always in a literal way.

If we read today's parable in a more literal way it appears a little upside down, because it would seem to argue that it's good to not be generous and to share our resources. But this isn't a parable about whether or not we should share our resources. This is a parable about accomplishing our purpose. This is a parable about the relationship between faithfulness and wisdom.

When you are reading this parable, it might be helpful to remember the actions of wise and foolish people you have known. I was a public school teacher for a long time, so I imagine the differences between students who acted wisely and those who acted foolishly. But the story transfers to any realm of life. Imagine the differences between five wise nurses and five foolish nurses, or five wise plumbers and five foolish plumbers.

In most cases, the foolish ones were not trying to do the wrong thing, but they made some serious mistakes. In my situation, as a teacher, most of the mistakes the foolish students made were a variation on a single idea: they gave up. They gave up on themselves. They gave up on being prepared for life. They gave up on working hard. They gave up on telling the truth. They gave up on playing by the rules. They gave up on listening to others. They were careless about whether other people were getting hurt. They gave up on their dreams.

The wise students in my classes were far from perfect, but they did a lot of things that helped them and the people around them. Most of the wise things they did were a variation on a single idea: they didn't give up. The wise students worked with diligence and perseverance. They told the truth. They tried to play by the rules. They acted in trustworthy ways. They listened to others. They took care of other people. They stayed focused on their dreams.

The kingdom of heaven will be like this. The kingdom of heaven is about people being the wise versions of themselves. The kingdom of heaven is full of people who are not giving up on themselves or on the people around them. Today's parable is about the meaning of faithfulness. Being faithful means not giving up hope during difficult times.

This year we have been reminded of the importance of people not giving up on themselves or on the people in their communities during difficult times. In July we celebrated the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. In his first draft of the Declaration, Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." For Jefferson and other signers of the Declaration, it took seven years to throw

off the bonds of tyranny and claim the power to vote, the power to serve as leaders in the government, and other powers given to them as citizens. Seven years is a long time to fight a war, but the people of the thirteen colonies did not give up. Eventually they prevailed in their struggle for the right of self-government.

But some people were excluded from Jefferson's vision of America. Their struggle would be longer and more complicated. Many of the people who fought in the Revolutionary war were men and women who did not own property. They were not wealthy. They were struggling to feed their families. After seven years the war was over, and their side had won. But those who were not wealthy did not have the right to vote and other rights given to men who owned property.

From the start, there were people who argued for a larger version of the American dream. In 1776 Benjamin Franklin convinced the leaders of Pennsylvania to eliminate the property requirement for voting in their State Constitution. But the struggle to realize the American dream would be longer for people in other states. North Carolina was the last state to remove the property requirement for white men, eighty years later, in 1856.

From the start at least a few people had an even larger version of the American dream. When they read the words "all men are created equal" some women imagined that the ideas of equality and being endowed by God with certain rights also applied to them. The struggle for women to have the right of universal suffrage lasted until 1920 when the 19th amendment was passed. 144 years is a long time to fight for the right to vote. But Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Matilda Gage and the other women did not give up. Eventually they prevailed in their struggle to be treated as equal creatures of God with specific, sacred rights.

But after the 19th amendment to the Constitution was passed, there were <u>still</u> many Americans who were excluded from the American dream. Native Americans were deprived of the right to vote and other rights by just about every scheme you can imagine until forty or fifty years ago. Asian Americans and Spanish speaking Americans were deprived of their rights through many evil schemes, including the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

The 15th Amendment was passed in 1870 with the aim of preventing states from denying the right to vote on grounds of race, but anyone with basic knowledge of United States history can tell you that the struggle for civil rights for Americans with African, or Mexican, or Asian, or Native ancestry was far from over in 1870. In the 95 years between the passage of the 15th Amendment and the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, white people used violence and lies to steal property and deprive black and brown people of their rights. But Fannie Lou Hamer and Rosa Parks and the other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement did not give up hope. They had a larger, more expansive version of the American dream.

This week was an important week for those who have a larger vision of the American dream. On Tuesday voters elected the first Native American woman governor, and the first Native American woman senator. Voters elected the first Latina governor, Gina Hinajosa, the new governor of Texas. In my former home state of New Hampshire, voters elected the first openly gay male senator, Chris Pappas. In Michigan voters elected the first Muslim to the United States Senate.

I admit that one of the elections on Tuesday night has had a bigger impact for me than all of the others. It was the election for the governor of Georgia. Every day since Wednesday, soon after I wake up, I say to myself: "We have a governor named Keisha!" I almost can't believe it.

It all goes back to some friends I knew in high school named Keisha. I graduated with three or four young women named Keisha. I'm pretty sure, when we were in high school, these young women named Keisha were probably not thinking that they would ever be elected as a governor, because they are black women. But after 250 years, the long struggle is over. <u>Finally</u>, we have a black woman who will be serving as the governor of one of our states. She is the governor of Georgia, and her name is Keisha Lance Bottoms.

Keisha, Chris, Gina, Deb, Peggy, and Abdul had a larger vision of the American dream. Their victories are victories for our nation as a whole, because the United States of America needs our most gifted leaders, individuals of all races and religions, women as well as men, to meet the needs of our people and face the challenges that lie ahead of us.

Abdul, Peggy, Deb, Gina, Chris and Keisha are not perfect people, but they worked with diligence and perseverance. The struggle was long, but they were wise. They told the truth. They tried to play by the rules. They listened to others. They took care of other people. They stayed focused on their dreams. They did not give up hope.

Be faithful to the God who created you with certain sacred, unalienable powers and rights. Don't give up hope. Don't give up on yourself or on the people in your community. Be faithful to the God who gave you the power to listen and take care of others. Be faithful to the God who gave you the power to act in trustworthy ways. Be faithful to the God who endowed you with the powers of wisdom and love.