Two Ways to Tell a Story
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Matthew 25:1-13
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There are always at least two ways to tell a story.

In the summer of 2009 I worked as a full time hospital chaplain as part of my preparation to serve as a priest. I loved my work as a chaplain. My job was to listen to people, to pray with people and to encourage integration of the self in each person as they struggled to recover from surgery or disease or a terrible accident.

Around this time, as I prepared to serve as a priest, someone suggested to me that the vocation of a priest is to be ‘walking sacrament’. I was startled and skeptical of this idea. It is my understanding that the priest is not an especially holy person, who might somehow walk around bringing the presence of God into the world. My experience as a hospital chaplain only confirmed my skepticism.

I quickly learned that my job was not ‘to be the holy person in the hospital room’. My job was to see, listen to and encourage the holiness in the patients and family members I cared for. I learned this the best way, that is, on my own and gradually, day by day. But the idea crystallized in my heart the first day I visited an older woman in the GI unit. I will call her Margaret for the purposes of this story.

I knocked on Margaret’s door and walked into her room in the middle of the afternoon. The lights were off. but light from the window framed a frizzy haired woman who sat quietly in a chair. Her television was off. Margaret’s television was always off. Margaret was not sleeping. She was not reading. Margaret was thinking or perhaps she was praying.

Margaret and I talked together for 15 or 20 minutes. Then I said a prayer with Margaret and left the room. If one of the nurses or doctors had entered the room during our conversation I can imagine them thinking, “This is very good. Our chaplain is taking care of Margaret.” Just remember that there are at least two ways to tell a story.

In my telling of the story the main part of the story was not that the chaplain was taking care of Margaret. Here is the way I would tell the story.

I knocked on Margaret’s door and entered her room. Before I could say anything, Margaret looked at me and asked me a question and it was as if Christ was speaking to me. As I talked with Margaret I learned a truth I would learn over and over again. For most people who end up in the hospital for 3 days or 3 weeks or 3 months, the accident or the surgery or the disease is just the most recent tragedy in a long string of setbacks or tragedies. That is the way it is for most people.

Margaret told me about how she was forced to give up her home because she couldn’t afford the property taxes. She told me why she was worried about her children. She told about the long illness that had forced her to quit her job. She told me about the suffering she had endured in the weeks leading up to her hospitalization. But Margaret spoke to me with the strength and courage and love of Christ. This is what the incarnation is about. God enters into our lives as we actually live them.

In six weeks we will celebrate the mystery of the incarnation of divine love in the person of Jesus. The incarnation is about the way God loves us so much, God became a real person, to be with us, to work as we work, and to suffer as we suffer, to bring the power of divine love into our lives as we actually live them. When Jesus told his disciples that he would have to suffer and be rejected by the leaders of the church and die a terrible death, he was talking about the incarnation. Jesus was saying to them, “No, I have to suffer. It has to be for me the way it is for Margaret and for all of the other people.” It is often the case that when we see the face of Christ or hear God speaking to us, we are in a situation that is connected to human suffering.

After I visited Margaret everything I was learning as a chaplain crystallized in my heart. I began to understand that the job of a chaplain is not to be the holy person in the room. The job of a chaplain to be the person who enters the hospital room and looks for, listens to, and encourages the holiness in each person.
This is what we are talking about in our baptismal service when the priest asks the congregation, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?” This is the main thing we are trying to do in this place. We are trying to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

The bridesmaids in Matthew’s gospel were also seeking Christ. When we think about the story of the bridesmaids we try to remember that there are always at least two ways to tell a story.

Until very recently the story of the wise and the foolish bridesmaids mostly seemed to serve as a strong warning to me. “You must always be prepared. You must stay awake and never let your guard down. If you fail, you will miss your one and only opportunity. You will miss your only opportunity to receive salvation, or to learn the truth, or to see the face of Christ.” For me, this seemed to be the obvious reading of the story.

Try reading the story this way. Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. This is a story about you. You are like the wise maidens. You might look over your shoulder in surprise and say, “Me? You must be talking about someone else!” No, I am talking about you. I have met plenty of foolish maidens before and believe me, you are not one of them.

When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. Sometimes we think that we should not rest, that we must stay awake. But all of the maidens fell asleep. The wise ones fell asleep and the foolish ones fell asleep. We need to sleep. Resting is good.

But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ This is a most unexpected time. We need to be prepared because we will see the face of Christ at a time we do not expect.

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us. Now this is one of the most important parts of the story for you, because you are one of the wise ones. You are wise and you are a caring, loving person. You never want to say ‘no’ to anyone who is in need. But if you are wise you will learn to say ‘no’. You will learn what is possible and what is not possible for you, and you will tell the truth.

The wise ones said, “I do not have enough for you and for me. Your best bet will be to see if you can find a dealer who will sell you some at this time of night.” 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.

Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ There are at least two readings to every story. The Greek translation we have in our Gospel concludes with this warning: “Therefore, stay awake.” But there is another reading of this sentence. The Greek words of Matthew can also be read as: “Therefore, be prepared.”

There are at least two readings to every story. You can try to stay awake, to always be alert. That sounds like something the people at Facebook want me to do. My Facebook page seems to be telling me: “Never fall asleep! Always be awake. Never miss a message.”

But we are not looking for a message from Facebook. We are looking for the face of Christ. We are looking for the revelation of divine love.

If we want to see God at work in the world we have to learn from Jesus’ example. We have to spend time with those who are suffering and with those in need. If we want to see the face of Christ we have to learn from the wise maidens. We cannot prepare at the last minute. We have to dedicate ourselves to being prepared, just as you are doing today. Then we can rest.

There are always at least two ways to tell a story. Which way are you going to tell it? Which way are you going to live it?

Here is my story and I’m sticking with it. You are that wise young woman, or that wise old man. You have spent many years preparing for the love of God to be in the center of your life. You get yourself some rest. Sleep in quiet confidence, knowing that when the bridegroom comes, you are prepared.