

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost – November 12, 2017/Year A
The Reverend Elizabeth Masterson

Proper 27A – 2017 (Baptism)

Here are some lyrics from a Christian camp song or vacation Bible school song very loosely based on the gospel lesson this morning: “Give me oil for my lamp keep me burning/give me oil for my lamp I pray/give me oil for my lamp keep me burning/keep me burning til the break of day.” I cannot remember when I first learned this song and it meant nothing really—well, I guess just another happy, clappy song to have fun singing with my peers and counselors.

Most songs of this genre have fairly shaky theology, and this one certainly misses the main point of Jesus' parable. But if you step outside the world of the parable for a moment and think about what the lyrics mean for us, there is an important message for our petitionary prayers.

Whatever the oil represents in the parable, it has to be something essential for our relationship with the Holy One, represented by the bridegroom. If we have it, our relationship with the divine is secure. If we don't have it, we have little or no chance for that relationship. And we need whatever the fire or light represents for our thriving—and so we pray to be given what is essential for a thriving relationship with the Holy One.

However, there's another part of the parable that may well bring us up short: the refusal of the bridesmaids with oil for their lamps to share what they have with the rather unprepared bridesmaids. In addition, they use the selfish excuse that if they share, there

won't be enough for all of them! Where is their compassion? But, we could look at the unprepared bridesmaids as getting what they deserve when they are excluded from the bridegroom's presence. Yet, I have another way of looking at this problem: what if the oil represents something that it is impossible to share in a physical sense?

What the oil represents something like—wisdom? After all, aren't the prepared bridesmaids with enough oil called "wise?"

Our first reading and our response to that reading this morning was from wisdom literature—a book called the Wisdom of Solomon, written in Greek by a Hellenized Jew probably around the beginning of the Common Era. Wisdom writings, such as Psalms, Proverbs or Ecclesiastes, from the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures are more familiar to us. The Wisdom character depicted in our reading today reminds us of the character, sometimes called Lady Wisdom, from the book of Proverbs. Lady Wisdom in Proverbs offers us a perspective on the creating and sustaining God, which is clearly feminine.

Michael Kolarcik, who teaches at Regis College, Toronto School of Theology, describes wisdom as "both a human task and a divine gift." We can see this in the words of the reading: first, we can see the human task: ". . . she [Wisdom] is easily discerned by those who love her and is found by those who seek her;" then, we can see the divine gift: "She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her . . . she graciously appears to them in their paths and meets them in every thought."

In seeking to possess wisdom in the Biblical sense of that word, we try to find God's yearning for us and for the world. Kolarcik talks about union with God as the result of our

search for wisdom. He claims, “. . . it is through wisdom that human beings come close to God.” He also describes a wise life as one lived with justice as its guiding principal. This sort of life will result in union with God. Then God will reveal God’s self in the midst of our seeking—sometimes in our quiet prayer, sometimes through the words or actions of another person.

So what does all this have to do with baptism?

I have come to understand the sacrament of baptism as a moment when we seek God and God reveals God’s self to us. We define a sacrament as the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. We are joined with God in Christ through the water poured over our heads and the oil of chrism placed on our foreheads. These are the outward signs. The inward and spiritual grace—given by God—blesses us with the strength needed to keep the vows we make or are made on our behalf.

Baptism and these vows are not magical. We must continue through our whole lives seeking to understand what they require of us. We must continue to seek wisdom about how we are to live out our vows in all the situations where we find ourselves. As we reaffirm our vows in a few minutes with the words, “I will with God’s help,” we show our confidence in God’s revelation to show us how we can keep these vows.

Lily Genevieve and Charlotte Irene are beginning their life-long journeys as seekers after the Wisdom of God today. They, of course, don’t realize it. Their parents, godparent, extended families and their faith communities will teach them about God and help them learn how to live out their baptismal vows. Lily and Charlotte will experience love from their parents and from so many others. They will begin to understand what

God's yearning is for each of them. They will have opportunities to praise God, to pray about what is on their hearts, and to find solace in troubled times. They will come to know what self-giving love means and what forgiveness looks like.

So today we pray for Lily and Charlotte to experience the Wisdom of God, the Grace of God and the Love of God every day of their lives—and may the oil in their lamps keep burning.

Note: Kolarcik, Michael, Commentary on the Wisdom of Solomon, Vol 5: The New Interpreter's Bible, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, p. 491-492.