

A Sermon for the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 27A
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Be prepared! That's Jesus' message for today. Something you've probably been told many times throughout your life. If you are of a certain age, as I am, you were told in your youth to always carry a dime for a phone call. And then a quarter. And then thirty cents. And no really, younger folks, there actually used to be public telephones all over town that anyone could use by putting dimes in them.

And that's an amusing illustration of the difference between the experiences of different generations, but I actually have a serious point to make about it. You see, the need to be prepared doesn't ever go away, but the things you need to do to be prepared are constantly changing. We don't need to make sure we have a flask of oil with us along with our lamps when we are invited to a wedding. But woe to the one who forgets the phone charger. Because who would even know they had been to a wedding if their smart phone wasn't full of photographic evidence?

And batteries are probably a helpful comparison to the oil in the parable. We may not exactly understand why the girls who brought the oil couldn't share with the ones who didn't, but we could certainly understand if the ones who had batteries for their flashlights wouldn't share with the ones who didn't, because with one battery each, no one would have any light.

But what does it mean for us to be prepared in a religious sense? What do we need to do to be ready for the coming of the reign of God, or the return of Jesus, or a call from God to serve, or whatever we may think the bridegroom and the wedding symbolize in the parable?

We're actually going to be spending a lot of time talking about the spiritual aspects of preparedness in the near future, because Advent is coming, starting the Sunday after Thanksgiving, and getting yourself prepared to welcome Jesus is one of the themes and disciplines of Advent.

So today, instead of talking about spiritual preparedness, I want to talk about being ready in a more practical way.

If we are going to talk about preparedness, readiness as a church family, I suppose the first thing we need to think about, before we figure out how to be ready, is what it is that we are supposed to be ready for. And that's not a hard question, really.

Jesus tells us over and over that, as his followers, we are to feed the hungry, clothe and shelter the poor, free the captives, and, most especially, to welcome the stranger. These things, along with loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves, are not only the hallmarks of the reign of God, they are the actions that will accomplish the reign of God.

So what do we need to do to be prepared for all of that welcoming and sheltering and feeding and freeing?

Of course, we need to start by moving the disposition of our hearts towards generosity and welcome if they are not already so disposed.

And may I say, as one who is still a relative newcomer and outsider to this community, that this is a community that is well along the way on that front – the people of St. James’ are as generous and welcoming as any church family I have ever been part of, and more so than most. Whenever a need, whether it is a need of the church, or of a member, or of a neighbor, is raised up around here, people step up immediately and offer their prayers, the work of their hands, and their money to help out.

And it is against the background of that remarkable generosity of spirit and purse in this community that I want to talk a little bit about the stewardship campaign that we are about to start.

Now most of you have been through stewardship season in this or another Episcopal church often enough that you know the drill, and I’m sure that you will do what is needed with a minimum of cajoling, so that nothing more needs to be said.

But there are people who are here who aren’t as experienced in the ways that Episcopal churches practice stewardship, so I hope you old hands will bear with me while I explain the basics.

First there is that word “stewardship.” We use that word to talk about how we act as stewards – guardians, caretakers, nurturers – of all of the gifts that God has given us. Well, that’s what we say, but in fact what we usually mean when we say stewardship is how much of our time, talents and treasure we are going to commit to God’s purposes and especially to the work of the church and the maintenance and building up of our facilities?

And the honest truth is that this place needs all of those things – the time, the talent, and the treasure of not just the members but of people outside our community as well in order to survive and to make a difference to our members and neighbors. This building, the salaries of the staff, the equipment, supplies, the services and the presence and the funding that we supply for our community’s needs and those of the world further away from us are all completely dependent on the generous hearts of all of us, as well, of course, on the gifts of treasure and talent that God has generously given us.

And in the Episcopal Church (and this may be different from other churches some of you have belonged to) once a year we ask our community to prayerfully look at the good gifts God has given each of us and not only decide what from those gifts we will give to the church for its mission in the coming year, but then to let the church know what we have decided.

This giving plan, and it's just a plan – subject to changes in circumstance for better or for worse – is very important because of what I began this sermon talking about – preparedness. Many of the choices that the vestry and I make about how we are going to use our resources to fulfill our calling from God need to be made at the beginning of the year when the budget is put together. And we can't make prayerful, responsible decisions without a reasonable idea of what you plan to give to the work of the church in the coming year.

Jesus tells us to be prepared. And we need to be prepared not just to keep the building standing and the lights and heat on and the parking lot cleared of snow and the worship and programs and outreach going for the year, we also need to be prepared to pass the blessings of this community and all its richness on to those who will gather here in the years to come,

And some years that kind of preparedness is harder than others. The planning and building of this marvelous place was full of uncertainties, and those years, I'm sure brought sleepless nights and knotted stomachs to the Vestry, Rector, Finance Committee, and everyone else who had a hand in guessing how much things would cost and how much support people would offer.

The search for a new Rector brings similar anxieties, though of a much smaller degree. We know that we will have extra expenses next year to send the Search Committee to interview candidates, and to bring candidates here to interview with

the vestry, and to move the new rector and her or his family here once they have been called, and to celebrate the beginning of a new ministry together. But, since we don't know who the candidates are or where they will be coming from, we can only make our best estimate of how to be prepared for those expenses,

But we hope that the congregation, that is to say you, will take that need and that uncertainty into consideration as you make your giving plan for the year.

Prayerfully and hopefully consider how much of your time, which of your best gifts and talents, and what percentage of your income you and your family are called to offer to the life and work of this community, and then say another prayer and decide if you are able to make an extra, one-time offering for the special expenses of calling a new rector.

And then let us know right away what you have been called to offer, not only so that we can begin planning for next year's budget, but so that we can make our stewardship campaign brief and joyful, rather than long and annoying.

That would also be a ministry, since constantly talking about money and the neediness of the church is not the most inviting way to welcome strangers into our family. And welcoming strangers is, after all, one of the main things Jesus wants us to be prepared to do.

Next week Blix and Lucy Winston, the Stewardship chairs, will have the pulpit for one more sermon about being prepared and being the beloved community of God

as expressed through our stewardship, and at that time we will distribute forms for reporting your giving plan to the financial recorder. But don't wait until then to begin thinking and praying about how to respond to God's generosity to you. Because that is something we are called to be prepared to do at all times and in all places.

Amen.