



Discovering and Building a New World

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, November 9, 2008*

Matthew 25:1–13:

Jesus told them: “Then 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. 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. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 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; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 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.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

If you were to look at a map of the world as drawn by an artist in Europe in the mid-fifteenth century, you would see a picture of the world that differed very little from the maps drawn by Ptolemy in the second century; the European world-view remained relatively fixed for some twelve to thirteen centuries. That picture did not reach—thus, one literally could not see—below the equator; neither could one see farther east than Japan; and the continents we know of as America and Australia simply did not exist. Then everything changed: the world grew round and full.

The century spanning from 1500 to 1600 was without doubt a period of greater artistic and cultural flourishing than had ever occurred before. The renaissance ushered in new artistry and philosophy, the Protestant Reformation; an entirely new perspective of humankind’s relationship with God, the world and one another—all sparked by the European discovery of “the new world.” Piloted by Magellan, da Gama and Columbus, who crossed over the edges of the known world, this discovery was far more than a geographic, economic or political boon. It evoked an emotional leap of imagination that released a society from a narrow and tired world-view marked by plagues and feudalism and made possible for the first time ideas and relationships that had barely even been dreamed of beforehand.

Societies get stuck; they find themselves hemmed in by emotional barriers and cannot imagine the world being otherwise. From the impossibility of breaking the 4-minute mile to that of reaching the moon, such barriers contain and restrict until . . . until there is some leap: a leap of faith, a leap of imagination; the discovery of some unimagined path through the shrouded unknown.

The election of a black man to the highest office in this land—a land built upon the backs, the blood, the tears, the labor and slavery of black men and women during the course of more than five centuries since those European “discoverers” first arrived . . . is just such a leap.

I don’t think we knew if we had it in us. I don’t think we were sure it was really possible. Until . . . until we actually did it.

I am well aware that we did not all vote the same way on Tuesday; many have grave concerns about the direction a President Obama and Democratic congress will take us. I am offering no comment on the positions taken by Senators McCain or Obama. Yet I believe that, regardless of our vote, all of us recognize the singular momentousness of electing an African-American to the presidency of the United States of America.

For the past couple of months, members of this congregation, a couple of neighbors, and I—white and black—have gathered every other week in a series of conversations: “striving against racism.” When we met this past Wednesday, we attempted to articulate for ourselves the feelings we have, and are hearing and reading about all across the land; to name what it is that has changed. It’s a remarkable thing, because in one sense nothing has changed; it’s all still just us, with our anxieties and hopes, our economic crises and our daunting challenges of health care, education and international relations. As Senator Obama said of us all in his acceptance speech: “you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead.” And yet, the future of America is different today from what it was on Tuesday. What is it? What is different? What is possible today that was not possible last week? The change is felt; it’s located in our emotions, or our guts; I believe it has to do with the imagination of our hearts.

So, let’s dare to dream. Let’s dare to dream that the cries of people of African descent living in this land are finally— after centuries of oppression, protest and lamentation—finally having their sway. Let’s dare to dream that those of us who enjoy privilege unjustly bequeathed for no reason whatsoever other than the whiter hue of our skin will finally relinquish our hold on that privilege and power. In other words, let’s dare to dream that racism as we know it shall be dismantled. Tuesday did not occur in a vacuum; it would not have been possible without the sacrifices and strides for justice of countless others before. But this may have been the event we needed to get this nation up over the crest to catch sight of a new horizon, to discover a new world.

I know it’s a dream. I know this was just a single event. Maybe I’m a crooning fool. For I know, too, how deeply entrenched and pervasive are the ways of racism within us. Yet I also know that single events do have the capacity to completely change the landscape for the future.

One participant in our conversations on racism told us about several colleagues he has who acknowledged that they would not vote for Senator Obama because they were afraid. When we pressed him, “afraid of what?” He said, “afraid that they will have to give up some of the privilege they enjoy.” Those of us who are white would be deceiving ourselves to think we do not share that fear or, if we do not, then we likely have not really explored the privilege we have and weighed the cost of giving it up. We who are white have privileges we have not even begun to know we have. When relinquishing them costs us, we will resist.

We are taught and enabled to take our experience, our perspective as normative. We have learned and we perpetuate myths about equal access of opportunity in this land, about this being a meritocracy where anyone who works hard can make it. Oh, those things may be truer here than in any other nation, yet they are the exception, and have been unattainable for the vast majority of African-Americans. The tricky thing is, you and I who are white cannot simply give away our white privilege, even if we want to; it is held in place by far-reaching systems—history, emotion, expectation, laws, the marketplace, education, access to goods and services. Writes sociologist Harry Brod*:

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one’s privilege to be “outside” the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way which challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.

“The enormity of the task that lies ahead. . . .” If we as a nation, as a people, are to do something which we know in our hearts and our imaginations is now possible, if we are to take the steps of dismantling the centuries-old world-view, relationships and institutions . . . we are going to need to watch and be attentive at every moment. We who are white are going to need new eyes of vigilance for justice and injustice, so that when we see justice we can nourish it, and when we see injustice, we can correct it.

I believe this is not solely a political matter, nor is it solely a socioeconomic matter; this kind of vigilance is, most profoundly, a spiritual matter—a matter of the heart and soul.

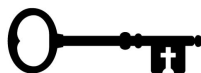
Racism in our hearts and racism in our society are sins against the dream of God, contrary to every aspect of the vision God lifts up for humankind. Dismantling racism in our lives is akin to manifesting the kingdom of God in our midst.

The story Jesus tells this day is a cautionary tale. Ten bridesmaids await the arrival of the groom; five are wise and well prepared with oil in their lamps, five are foolish and ill prepared with not enough oil. Upon the groom’s arrival, the wise five are ushered into the party while the foolish five rush out to the market in search of oil and are turned away when they return.

*As found in Rothenberg, Paula (Ed.), *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, Worth Publishers, 2005, p. 104.

The point of the story is given at the end: “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” We are not given a free pass to the banquet. We are held accountable. We will be held responsible for our choices. The groom was delayed; all of the bridesmaids had time to get ready; some did, some did not. As a tale of caution, this illustrates what is *not* desired. So, if we reverse it, what is desired? That we be prepared for the presence of God, coming at any moment in our lives. Although five have extra oil, they did not share it with those who have not enough. Why? Because readiness is not something that one person can give to another. Readiness comes from within; it may be learned, but it cannot be shared or given.

Some suggest this tale anticipates Jesus’ return at the end of time. I believe it speaks of the potential for you and I to be aware of the presence of God in the immediacy of this very moment. Every moment is of God; it’s just a question of whether or not we can see. Keep awake! Pray. Why pray? Because all of prayer is about readiness. To pray is to be attentive, to be awake. We do not know when the opportunity will come for us to correct injustice and refute racism, or to nurture justice and embrace our sister or brother. But the opportunity is before us in every moment, just like the presence of God; now pay attention, that you may act with boldness and truth, in love. Amen.



Open hearts. Open minds.