

“A Faith That Discomforts”

Matthew 25:1-13

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From the Pulpit

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Let us pray: O Holy One, we thank You for Your active and felt presence, here, in our midst this morning. We pray that you would inspire us and touch us and stretch us through Your Word for us this day. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen!

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It is so good to see all of you again this morning! I missed you last Sunday and, at the same time, I had a very special visit with my mom and my brothers last week, back in eastern Pennsylvania.

By the way, my mom, who is now 87 years old is doing very well and is as joyful as ever – plus she is getting very good care and support where she lives.

I have shared with many of you that my mom has Alzheimer’s Disease and, as time goes on, I will share more with you about this journey that our family is on together with my mom.

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However, this morning, our Gospel reading from Matthew has inspired me to tell you about some very recent worship experiences that I had last weekend while I was away.

Now, admittedly so, I am somewhat of a “church nerd” -- that is, I am really curious about other church and faith traditions and so, I do love worshiping in other contexts whenever I have the opportunity.

However, doing so often stretches me – and pushes me beyond my comfort zone ... just like it did last weekend!

A week ago, as you may recall, was All Saints Day, and my brother, George, invited me to worship with him on Saturday – in the late afternoon – at his church which is an historic Episcopal Cathedral in his community.

Now, it had been many years since I’ve worshiped in an Episcopal church, and I was a bit out of practice. It was, indeed, a very moving mass, and the rector’s All Saints Day message deeply resonated with me, but it wasn’t always clear to me when to sit or stand or kneel or move forward toward the altar rail – or the communion rail – and so, George just kept nudging me along as needed.

During the prayer time, the rector swung the thurible – or the incense holder – and the scent was especially strong and even overpowering (at least for me since I was sitting in the first row!), and yet, the rising smoke was a symbolic way of lifting up the names of the saints of our lives which we were also invited to speak aloud.

It was so touching!

Worshiping with George was deeply meaningful and a comfort to me in many ways and, at the same time, I certainly had my moments of discomfort as a newcomer in worship that day as well.

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The next morning – Sunday morning – one of my other brothers, John, invited me to worship with my sister-in-law and him in an elementary school gym where their newly forming Pentecostal church is currently meeting. It is

a congregation that serves the growing Spanish-speaking community in the area.

And for most of the worship service, we were up on our feet and clapping our hands along to the music of the praise band!

The congregation extended a very warm welcome to me, and the pastor, who is bilingual, was especially accommodating and inclusive, and she even translated her sermon – just for John and me – as she preached, paragraph by paragraph! (We were the only two present who didn't speak Spanish fluently.)

As discomfoting as it was not to understand much of what else was being spoken or prayed or sung in church that day, worshipping there, with John and Mary – and their congregation was indeed a gift – and despite my feelings of discomfort – I truly felt the love of Christ – and the comfort and warm embrace of such a gracious and welcoming congregation!

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Throughout the generations, it has been said that Jesus' parables were told to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. (Let me say that again: Jesus' teachings are meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.)

And our Gospel reading from Matthew this morning -- this parable that Jesus told about the ten young women and the bridegroom – is certainly discomfoting and even disturbing.

Now, it is important to note that this parable that discomfots is placed toward the end of the Gospel of Matthew in chapter 25. (You may recall that there are 28 chapters in Matthew.) And so, this parable which is part of what is referred to as the eschatological discourse -- also known as the discourse on "the last things" -- comes from that last section of Matthew where we find Jesus' teachings on grace as well as judgment and the end times.

And so, here, in this parable which speaks to “end times,” we learn that five of the ten young women were well-prepared when the bridegroom came; and they, then, in turn, were invited into the banquet.

However, the other five women were not prepared; in fact, they had fallen asleep and hadn’t even bought oil for their lamps. And therefore, they were not invited into the banquet – a that time.

And what was the bridegroom’s response to them? It was stern, and he said, “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. “ Keep awake! Keep awake!

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Yes, this parable about the ten women and the bridegroom certainly grabs our attention, and yes, it is discomfoting and disturbing and even disruptive to all of the assumptions that we hold about what following Jesus looks like -- and what faithful living means.

Through this story, Jesus discourages his followers then – and all of us today – from becoming too comfortable or presumptuous or habitual when it come to our spiritual practices and our individual walks of faith.

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Faith is not about believing “correct” thoughts. Faith is not found through our own efforts or our good deeds. Rather, faith is about trusting Jesus, which, in response, inspires us to live in a new way, a different way, in the way that Jesus models for us – not the status quo or business-as-usual kind of living – but rather, living in “the way” of Jesus, and in anticipation of God’s kin-dom here on Earth as it is in heaven.

Living in the way of Jesus also compels us to affirm the equality and dignity of all people, and trusting in God even when it seems that God is far away ... or that the bridegroom has been delayed (as this parable teaches us).

Yes, it is through our faith in God that we do find comfort.

And yes, it is often through the discomfoting moments -- and our most challenging and painful experiences -- that we also experience significant spiritual and personal growth through the grace of God -- which often then leads us to discover the true meaning and purpose of our lives.

I'd like to close this morning with a Franciscan blessing that is often referred to as the "Discomfort Prayer."

A Franciscan Prayer:

"May God Bless You with Discomfort"

May God bless you with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships –
so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression,
and exploitation of people –
so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer pain,
rejection, hunger, and war –
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
to believe that you can make a difference in the world –
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done:
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and to the poor.

Thanks be to God,

Amen!

