

Trinity Church on the Green  
23 Sunday After Pentecost  
November 12, 2017  
Sermon  
The Rev. Luk De Volder

Amos 5:18-24  
Psalm 70  
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  
Matthew 25:1-13

In today's Gospel we just heard that "Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise." In this time of daily #hashtag-metoo harassment complaints on the internet this scene sounds so not kosher. A bridegroom reviewing ten bridesmaids and judging their wisdom level? Honestly, I did not select this text for today. So wish me luck in dealing with this Gospel. Not to mention, I am standing here as a white male, a white tall man in the US – I had to learn what this entails. But here we are confronted with this wrestling match of a text from Jesus time in which cultural status-quo's and taboos seem to be preserved while also sending an appeal to declare a key step for exodus from oppression. Let's take a look and see how far we come.

This text sounds so difficult for us today, because no one can escape the wave of excruciating personal stories pouring in from across all industries and many countries around the world, denouncing against assault and harassment of women. Maureen Sherry just published her own story about what happened at Bear Stearns bank (an semi-autobiographical book, entitled "Opening Belle"), where she started the Glass Ceiling Club, at the end of the 1990, with reason nicknames as women whisper network. Initially the club was meant to discuss how to make the workplace more female friendly. Quickly the whisper network started functioning as a warning mechanism to alert female colleagues about male harassers. But at the same time, the network also experienced the dangers that women faced in addressing bosses who scoff at maternity leave, managers using ribald jokes, colleagues with outrageous behavior that went unchecked.

The whisper alerts remained underground because the danger of retaliation, being fired, being sidelined, being labeled as troublemakers, while the tormentors face few consequences. In 2008 Bear Stearns was sold to JPMorgan but Maureen Sherry continues her story to create awareness that two decades later fewer than 2 in 10 female harassment victims ever file a formal complaint. Maureen and so many women have so much work and battle ahead of them.

Striking has also been how rather limited church support there seems to be for #metoo movement. Most of us know this is no surprise, with many churches still promoting submission of women, perpetuating certain gender taboos, preserving dynamics of secrecy and oppression. Unfortunately, our Christian narrative hasn't always been clear on gender equality, despite the explicit statements such as "In Christ, there is no male or female" (Galatians 3:28). Gender division or inequality should not have any place amongst Christians.

The Gospel of today is a case in point that illustrates the wrestling that it takes to align cultural preferences with the core of the Good News. While bible scholars try to make the best of it, it remains the case that the female figures in this story are still rather tightly identified with the submissive position, keeping the traditional cultural metaphor of female passivity in place. But then the text takes a surprising turn, when the wise are praised for not share their oil. (For once Jesus is promoting not to share, a shock for the Sunday School curriculum). Meaning, the metaphor of the oil in our lamp points to the importance of self-care. And when it comes to self-care we are first responsible for

ourselves. We need to cover this need, no sharing can be of much help. Contrary to the traditional self-sacrificing stance that has been imposed on women for centuries, this Gospel encourages the same women to prioritize self-care. For that time, self-care was a very novel concept, especially as an attitude to promote among women. Even today this is rather new, certainly in many Christian circles.

It is a message that Christianity has struggled to proclaim. Love to God and to others, yes! But that as Christians we should help and promote everyone to secure self-care, healthy self-protection and promotion of our own dignity, especially women. That concept is still sinking in.

The truth is, Christianity has enough intellectual pointers and behavioral marching orders to claim radical change. Ephesians 5 is the most explicit text regarding male-female relationships. Similar wrestling with cultural colors the text, but the opening principle is revolutionary up until today: "Submit yourself to one another out of reverence of Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). Not just women but also men are called to submit to service, dedicating ourselves to each other so that we all can care for our own dignity and equality.

To apply this call to service we have to address that this "service" and "equality" talk easily risks to sound as platitude after so many centuries of failed practice. But with clear theory in hand we can now turn to the failed practice to address the change we need. We have to help our fellow Christians who struggle with this text. Because, even though this message has found its way into mainstream culture to strive for the care and full dignity, equality, and freedom of every person we encounter, we continue to see many Christians, men, ready to hang the ten commandments in city halls, who actively perpetuate socio-political structures of inequality, whether in the realm of race, gender, or in socio-economic environments, contradicting their own message.

In very concrete ways, as Christians we not only should commit ourselves to end any gender inequality, but also to proactively prevent gender wars and promote from early age on healthy understanding about who we are called to be. Women should have the right to hammer into the glass ceiling. But man should have the courage to remove it, wherever they find themselves building such divide and oppression. Christians, both women and men together, should contact HR departments.

Beyond any politics or progressive versus conservative fold-lines, the Gospel of today is calling every Christian to secure self-care, care for the soul and for the body, for the dignity and equality including gender inequality. Because we teach others how to treat us. We need to come to terms that, if we fail to create a context of care that helps each other in this core self-care of our being, then we sow the seeds of resentment and oppression, that in turn create gender wars, self-fulfilling schemes of relational failure. Whether we go for politics of care, advocacy for human capital, in our time it should be evident that, of course we need to rally for each other, to end race and gender oppression.

My point is also: we receive almost daily reports that computer scientists are coming closer and closer to human-like AI - artificial intelligence, with robots soon taking over most basic labor functions. Isn't it time that we also apply similar research to the human fabric of our daily lives, to design a context of living that secures as best as possible the advancement of the wealth and dignity that resides in each of us. The promotion of our human capital also contains a goldmine of economic potential.

Or in other terms, if we aspire to reverse the cultural decline we sense, then we need to face the call of our times, that our Western culture needs to face its own historical

baggage, its social and existential traumatic and inconsistent structures. And if we do so, our culture will regain its strength, we will create a revival.

Practically, Christ is calling each one of us to secure self-care, holistic awareness and

assertion of your value in this world, to proudly claim our dignity, with its gender or color. And all of us are called to pray and labor to give each other the space to do so. Let us keep our lamps trim and burning.