

Segue into Advent on Donated Righteousness

Colleagues,

We were visiting our daughter, son-in-law and grandkids in suburban Chicago this past weekend. They're members at Grace Lutheran, River Forest, Illinois, where we all showed up for the Sunday service. Besides being blessed with the liturgy and a super Christ-the-King homily from Pastor Bruce Modahl, there was frosting on the cake with a Sunday p.m. Eve-of-Advent cantata vespers And who was the guest homilist? Crossings president Steve Kuhl.

The cantata was Bach's Advent special "Wachet auf!" ["Wake, awake, for Night is flying"] and the scripture text for the homily was the same one Philip Nicolai used when he composed both tune and text of this chorale 400-plus years ago. Steve acquiesced to my request to pass on to you what he proclaimed to us for your own Eve-of-Advent nourishment. Here it is.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids **Matthew 25:1-13**

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.

The verses and tune for the Bach Cantata we are about to hear did not originate with Bach. Rather, he took what was, by his time, an already old and favorite hymn of the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church in Germany and created the arrangement that would become one of his most beloved pieces. The context for the original inspiration of the hymn is significant. It was written in 1597 by pastor and hymn-writer, Philip Nicolai, to bring comfort and hope to his congregation which was devastated by the loss of 1300 men, women and children to the plague. To find inspiration in this tragic moment, he turned to three Scripture texts, one of them being the text I just read from Matthew. What was he, the preacher, to say to his people in such a dark, midnight hour? It was right here in this text:

He was to stir them from their slumber, to reawaken them in faith ... that the Bridegroom who had once come to bear a cross for them... the Bridegroom who rose from the dead conquering the darkness of the grave ... the Bridegroom whom they have already met in the waters of baptism and with whom they are already feasting at the Eucharistic banquet ... THAT BRIDEGROOM has not forgotten them. He will come again! He may be delayed from our perspective, but he will come again to finish what he started...

a finish that is here described in metaphorical terms as nothing less than a grand marriage feast for Christ and the world, the beginning of something brand new, an eternal banquet in which life is envisioned as a celebration of endless joy.

But it's the waiting that is the challenge. It's a challenge, not simply the way waiting-for-time-to-pass is a challenge. Though perhaps that, too. But even more, it's a challenge because of WHERE we wait: in the mid-of-night, in the midst of darkness, at the point of exhaustion, in the haze of "drowsiness," as our text describes it. In such a state – and such a place – we are easily caught off-guard and overtaken by dangers, either unseen because of the cover of darkness or obscured by the haze of drowsiness.

For example, who was not caught "off guard" on 9/11/01 when the Twin Towers, those shining symbols of American economic strength, came crumbling down? Who was not caught off-guard on Christmas Day 2004 when the Asian tsunami overtook the beaches and coastlands of Southeast Asia? Who was not caught off-guard when hurricane Katrina proved to be more powerful than the best laid dikes of modern engineering? The list could go on and on. And it does not consist merely of global-sized surprises. Even within our own most intimate stories we are caught by surprise by all manner of things-from that speeding ticket we got because we were distracted from the task at hand to the shuffling of life's plans because of the arrival of unexpected health issues. The text states it clearly: neither the wise nor the foolish bridesmaids are immune from such unexpected hazards. Such is the darkness in which we sit... such is the drowsiness that creeps over us.

Still, it needs to be said that there is not necessarily any fault incurred for being so caught off-guard by historical

events. Jesus himself says as much when he says that we can expect "to know neither the day nor the hour." That line of wisdom applies as much to that future that we simply call "tomorrow" as it does to that future that we call "the last day." As the old adage goes, even "the best laid plans of mice and men" can result in unexpected outcomes. No one is expected to predict the future. So what distinguishes the wise from the foolish? Answer, "the oil." The wise have their oil; the foolish have none. And what is this oil? It is their righteousness. It is the source, the fuel, that allows them to shine in the darkness, even when events would threaten to overtake them.

Far worse than being caught "off-guard," then, is being caught "off-guard" without your righteousness. It is literally like being caught with your pants down. Think of it. You are driving down the road, perhaps unaware of much that is immediately ahead of you. Then all of a sudden you see a patrol car coming up behind you with lights aglow and sirens a-blaring. What do you do? You look down at your speedometer. And what are doing? You are checking out your righteousness. And once you look, there is one of two reactions: sheer panic or overwhelming relief. In the last analysis, what matters most is not whether you are caught off-guard by a patrol car, but whether you are caught in the right or in the wrong, whether you are caught with or without your righteousness. Indeed, one aspect of wisdom is knowing your righteousness, like your Visa Card, is the one thing you should never be found without.

And yet, even more important than the wisdom of knowing that you need righteousness is the wisdom of knowing where it comes from and how you get it. In that regard the foolish bridesmaids are twice foolish. When caught by surprise at the announcement of the coming end of the age-that their time of reckoning was up-the foolish bridesmaids did, in a sense, wise-up. They did come to the realization that they needed righteousness. But they also

knew that they didn't have it. And so, in an act of desperation they turn to their companions and ask them for some of their righteousness... revealing their foolishness all the more. The wise bridesmaids COULDN'T share with them their righteousness, even if they wanted to. That's not how things work. How foolish to think otherwise! To think such is tantamount to thinking that the wise bridesmaids could be your savior.

And so, wising-up to that fact, namely, that the WISE bridesmaids are not the source of righteousness, the foolish bridesmaids scramble off to see if they can buy enough righteousness for themselves. But again, they only show how foolish they are. There is no way in this lifetime that they could purchase the requisite righteousness that would qualify them to join the procession of the righteous, the wise, into the wedding feast. They may knock at the door and demand entrance, but all they will hear is "I don't know you." Meaning, I don't recognize your righteousness. And so the door will be shut and the foolish bridesmaids will be left out... all because they are twice foolish: they know neither the source from which the righteousness of the wise bridesmaids comes nor the way by which it is acquired.

But they should have known... and so should we. That's because this Bridegroom who is expected to come at the end of time, has already come in the midst of time as the man we know as Jesus. To be sure, there was not a lot of fanfare with this coming, but it did, nevertheless, come with a shout, a very public shout: a shout that was heard by shepherds from angels, by wise men from the Scriptures, by sinners in the wilderness from John the Baptist, by Jerusalem from a crucified messiah and by scared apostles from a resurrected Lord. Indeed, that shout, "Look! Here is the Bridegroom! Come out and meet him!" is still being shouted today. And it is a shout that is twice wise: REPENT (that is, give up the illusion of purchasing your own

righteousness) and BELIEVE THE GOOD NEWS (that Christ is our righteousness, free for the believing).

Christ's first coming, which is still at work among us, has one distinct purpose: to provide the unrighteous with the oil of righteousness, the righteousness of faith, Christ's own righteousness, the forgiveness of sins. Why do you think the Bridegroom in the story knows the WISE and NOT the FOOLISH bridesmaids? Answer-because he recognizes himself in them... his very own righteousness in them... a righteousness that consists in the forgiveness of sins ... a righteousness that is manifest in them as repentance and faith. This righteousness Jesus the Bridegroom established in a most surprising way: by dying a very public death, on a very public cross, for very public sinners-for you and me. And this righteousness he still continues to dispense, very publicly, through the cry of the church by the guidance of the Spirit. It is to the presence of this Christ that Philip Nicolai wanted to awaken his congregation and that Bach, in his Cantata, wished to awaken us.

"Look!" goes the shout. "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" Where do we meet him? In the waters of baptism... There we meet him in forgiveness and faith... There we are known by him as brothers and sisters, children of God. Where do we meet him? In the Eucharistic Banquet, the foretaste of the heavenly banquet. There we meet him, his very body and blood, in bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. Where do we meet him? In the preaching of his Word, his promise of mercy, his invitation to the banquet, his announcement of good news. Where do we meet him? In the person of those wise bridesmaids who have the oil of righteousness-that is, in YOU who are Christ's believing disciples. For if in a moment of tragedy, someone suddenly realizes that they lack sufficient righteousness and they foolishly ask you, "Please, give me some of your righteousness," you know exactly what to say:

I'm sorry, but I can't give you my righteousness. For my righteousness is not of my own making but a righteousness of repentance and faith. And I can neither repent for you nor believe for you. But I can introduce you to the Christ so that he can be your righteousness too: He is the one in whom you can trust, the one before whom you can repent, the one by whom you are forgiven, the one with whom you will be escorted into the heavenly banquet.

So. . . Keep watch, keep faith, let Christ be your oil . . . your righteousness. Amen.

Steven C. Kuhl