

November 9, 2008 Year A
Based on Matthew 25:1-13
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WE hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

These words from the United States Declaration of Independence are etched into the minds and souls of people all across this country. Many of us grow up believing that these rights apply equally to everyone. It is a harsh reality to learn that the authors of this document did not actually write this with the thought of including everyone. They were addressing these words to Men like themselves – white, wealthy, aristocrats and landowners. They did not include, women, children, slaves and poor people in this mix. So this declaration was instituted to serve the interests of this minority group, rather than the needs of the entire population of this country.

There are far too many examples that would support this claim, but one stands out at this juncture – the ability to vote and elect a person to the highest office in the land. For 144 years after this document was drafted, only free white men were allowed to vote or hold public office. The fight to give women the right to vote was hard won, but harder still was the road to give people of color this same privilege. That battle took almost two hundred years after the founders of this country wrote that document and more than 100 years after the slaves in this country were officially set free.

The people who were not included in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence have endured much hardship, pain and suffering. They have worked tirelessly and waited a long time to be included into the statement that ALL People, not just a select group of white men, are created equal and therefore have a share in all the same rights and benefits that this country has to offer.

This past week we have witnessed history being made. The election of Barack Obama as the next U.S. President has finally put new meaning into that old Declaration phrase. No longer are voting privileges or leadership of this country given only to wealthy white men. People of color have waited a long, long time to be included in these aspects of American life. This is reflected in Obama's victory speech on Tuesday night. He said,

For that is the true genius of America - that America can change. Our union can be perfected. And what we have already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

At the diocesan convention on Friday, I attended a presentation that focused on how the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts has benefited from the legacy of slavery. This session came about as the direct result from a resolution at the 2006 General Convention of the Episcopal Church which declared that the institution of slavery in the United States

and anywhere else in the world was and is a sin. This resolution mandated that the Episcopal Church acknowledge and express regret for its complicity in the institution of slavery, the economic benefits received, and its support of segregation and discrimination after the abolition of slavery.

An African American woman in attendance at the session asked this question: “That’s all nice and good that white people are finally calling these injustices done to African Americans a sin, and that they are agreeing that white people benefited from slavery, but my people have known that all along, so what good does it do to talk about it now?”

A former member of this parish stood up to answer that question. He said that white people needed to understand, identify and acknowledge how we have corporately and individually benefited from the sin of slavery. White people have to get past the denial which says that I or my family didn’t have anything to do with slavery. We must come to terms with how each of us has received unearned privileges because of this practice and how we still enjoy the benefits of it today. Only then, he said, can we move forward to look at how we have inherited ill gotten advantages in such things as insurance, health care, home ownership, credit, financial security, education and employment. Once white Americans admit to this, then we can work to change the system and improve the lives of people in this country who still do not have access to these things.

In our Gospel today we heard the story of the ten bridesmaids who went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them are described as foolish and five of them are said to be wise. The foolish ones didn’t bring enough oil for their lamps so when the bridegroom finally arrived they ran out of oil. So they said to the wise women who brought extra oil – “Give us some of your oil for our lamps are going out. The wise ones replied: NO! There will not be enough for YOU and US – go out and buy your own oil.

The common interpretation of this passage goes something like this: We don’t want to be caught unprepared because we never know when Jesus will come, so we need to be constantly ready to meet him. We also might be tempted to think that the other five women were rude or wrong not to share with those who didn’t have enough.

I would like to offer an alternative explanation to this parable. Rather than seeing the five bridesmaids as foolish and unprepared – what if they were actually very privileged and they were just used to getting their way? They went out to go to the party and just assumed they were entitled to be there because of their class, status or position in society. Maybe they never thought that they actually had to do something to receive the goods or be invited in to the banquet. Maybe they always reaped and enjoyed the benefits that were obtained by the hard work of others. Perhaps they took so many things for granted because that had always been their experience. So, when they needed something – in this case oil, they just demanded it and expected that it would be given to them.

Listen again to their language: GIVE US some of your oil, for our lamps are going out! Is that a humble request? A question? An appeal for a personal favor? Or is this a COMMAND? Given with presumed authority, arrogance, expectation and entitlement?

Did these women see the other five who had extra oil as people who were beneath them? Were the five “wise” ones viewed as holders of resources that the others wanted to exploit for themselves? Were these five who had enough oil seen as unworthy to be in that position? Was the expectation that they would just give over their oil so the other five could take for themselves the benefits of those who worked, sacrificed and prepared for this event?

Listen to the response given to their demand: NO! We will NOT give you our oil because there is not enough for US and YOU. Go buy your own! Could it be that these wise women had struggled greatly to obtain their extra oil so they understood the worth of this commodity. Maybe they had to give up other things just to have enough oil to get by. Maybe they had been treated poorly by the others for a long time, and they were tired of being overlooked, marginalized, disrespected and taken for granted. They were finally invited to the table and they were going to the feast! They were now standing up and counting themselves as equals because they had waited so long and had worked so hard to reach this point.

And what about the bridegroom who comes and lets the wise bridesmaids in because they had worked so hard to make it there? Is he being cold or mean for not allowing in the other five who were late because they had to go for more oil? Was he right to not only exclude them, but to deny that he even knows them?

This seems like extremely severe treatment to inflict on people just because they forgot to bring extra oil and had to go buy more. But if we see the five privileged ones in light of their attitudes and behavior toward the others, it begins to look a little different. As Christians, aren't we constantly reminded to love our neighbors as ourselves, to treat people as if they were Christ, to care for all people and the creation and to seek justice? Haven't we heard that the least among us will be first and those that have the most will be last?

I think this story invites us to look at the long list of unearned privilege that many of us have inherited just on the basis of the situations we were born into and the color of our skin. Have we taken our positions in life for granted so much so that we forget about the struggles and needs that other people experience? What is our attitude toward those who are in a different racial or economic group from us? Do we expect that we deserve certain things just because of who we are? And on the flip side, do we assume that those who go without have to because of their race, status or perceived lack of motivation?

Granted, there is still much work to be done to incorporate all people into full participation of American life, which includes enjoying all the rights, privileges and benefits. But today we have a new hope. Our country has a new opportunity to get back on track– to realize and implement the equality of all people and to include everyone in these benefits.

To return to the words of Obama's victory speech:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.

It's the answer spoken by young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled - Americans who sent a new message to the world (one of hope and commitment to make our country and our planet a better place for ALL people).

It's the answer that led those who have been told for so long by so many to be cynical, and fearful, and doubtful of what we can achieve. They may now put their hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.

Let us embrace and celebrate this long awaited change. And may we do all in our power to support, encourage and assist this change!

Amen.