Sermon for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost: Matthew 25:1-13
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Before anything else, I just want to say, from the bottom of my heart, phew. And I mean that. Weirdly enough, this was one of the hardest sermons I've written in a long time. Not because of the content, not really, but because I didn't quite know where to start. See, I've gotten used to having really obvious illustrative material sitting out on the national coffee table for everyone to see. But this week, now that there's some hope that something's changing, this week it's a little harder to see where we should be looking.

The thing is, the fight for justice didn't end with long lines and public rebukes, by no means. Nothing's tangibly changed. ICE concentration camps're still cruel; billionaires' capital gains fluctuate up and down by amounts most of us can't imagine; racial division remains deep; immigrants, first-generation Americans, and people whose families've been here for hundreds of years still're looked at with suspicion; other faiths're still insisting they have the right to exist; Gaza's still gasping for air between Israeli attacks; everything's still too expensive; and Americans're still facing impossible choices between basics like rent or healthcare. But it sure feels different, doesn't it?

Of course, something is different. We've seen just how unpopular the last couple of years' policies've become. It would've been great if the hatemongering, the stripping of rights, the unabashed appeal to cruel schadenfreude -- it would've been great if that was enough to sway opinion. If unjust war or genocide or war crimes or the stripping of one's day in court or the trials of five-year-olds or the murders in broad daylight -- it would've been great if that was enough. It would've been great if white supremacist ideology, codified misogynism, or exclusionary rhetoric was enough. But it seems more and more like gas and grocery prices are what did it.

Now, I don't want to discount that reasoning or those results, and I definitely don't want to poo poo the relief folks feel. But I'm concerned about what our society finds motivating. I mean, I get it, people need certain things to survive, and when leadership makes access to those necessary things further out of reach, of course we're going to want tangible change that makes things like vegetables and a yearly physical more than dreams of life under a better state. And of course, we need to make sure we have our needs met so that we can help others in turn, kinda like those little airplane oxygen masks -- put on yours before you help someone else. Sure. But also, wasn't it enough to look around and see that not every seat had oxygen masks? That some seats up front had extra and some at the back had none? Wasn't it enough to see people tossed off the plane at 30,000 feet? Wasn't it enough to see a murder three rows away? It's amazing what atrocities so many were willing to accept as normal or even good on this flight while those of us who called out the aberrant abnormalities were called alarmist or insensitive or the cause of the problems or actual terrorists.

I'm frustrated. I'm frustrated because so much of our religion asks us to put ourselves second. Feed the poor, even if that leaves less for yourself. Clothe the naked, even if it's with the shirt off your back. Love your neighbor, even if you don't understand your neighbor. And love God, even if you don't understand God. But so many've gotten this Christian thing so twisted that we'd rather put the 10 Commandments up in a classroom than actually follow them. American Christianity's so deeply broken that selfishness has replaced selflessness thoroughly enough that the only way we can convince people to care for the ones Jesus told us to is if we benefit in the process. I want so badly to be able to celebrate with abandon that Americans might actually care about each other, but I'm worried. I'm worried that nothing's actually changed, that as long as I can get mine, I'll go back to looking away when my neighbor gets carted off. I'm worried that all this newfound optimism'll keep me from seeing the adversary prowling in the darkness. I'm worried that what won last week wasn't goodness but simple personal security.

And with this Gospel reading in particular, my worries aren't exactly extinguished. See, I used to imagine this parable playing out like the old bumper sticker that said, "Jesus is coming. Look busy." I used to imagine Jesus coming back right at the moment a homeless person popped into view on the sidewalk. What would I do? What will he see me getting up to? Will I cross the street to avoid the homeless person? Will I part with some pocket change like I'm paying a toll? Will I stop and look them in the eye, say hello, treat them like an actual person? That's what I figured he'd be interested in. But now I'm imagining something else. Will Jesus come back when I'm scrolling through videos, swiping awful events away so I don't have to see human suffering? Will he see me swiping on that same phone as cobalt mines collapse on child laborers? Will he see me turning away from justice because I'm too tired, or taking a day to recover from the emotional labor of confronting injustice, or keeping a spare room empty while a homeless woman shivers in the church next door? The stakes are different, now; or maybe they're the same stakes they've always been, but I never really understood them before. I'm worried Jesus'll pop back in and show me just how blurry relief can make a calling to seek out justice. Can we still see him as the shackles click shut around his ankles, as the baton cracks against his jaw, as the exposure box holds him tighter than I've ever been able to? I know it's no fun holding those images while the confetti's still falling, but we cannot forget what's really, biblically worth fighting for.

A quick sidebar: I don't really like this parable. Everyone's prepared, some less than others, and when those folks realize they hadn't prepared enough and go off to fix that mistake, they lose out. I don't love it, but I also don't think the point is really about who gets left out. It's more about getting ready and staying ready. No matter what, stay ready. The night is not over, and the world still needs our light, so stay ready. Celebrate, but stay ready. The work has not ended. We've turned our faces a new direction, nothing more. So store up the hope, the joy, the relief of now in order to fuel the coming fight against the squirming leviathan. I don't say this to be a downer, but I have a nasty suspicion that dawn has yet to melt the darkness still stretched over our land. And I have a second nasty suspicion that this long night can still get a little darker before the sun rises. Light your lamps and stay ready.

I heard it said once that we don't vote so we can stop fighting. We vote to decide who we fight with. This tsunami should mean the fight'll get easier, but the fight has not ended. The poor are still exploited. Immigrants are still targeted. Corruption still runs rampant. Wealth still provides influence. And the worst elements of our nature still win support from far too many and for far too much. God knows our lamps, our lights, our hearts, and our hands're still needed.

Isaiah and Ecclesiastes both say, "Eat, drink, and be merry," but hold that in check with Matthew. Eat, drink, and be merry, but stay ready. We know not what the days ahead will hold, but if I had to guess, no matter who's in power, the poor'll still be with us, the hungry'll still be hungry, the homeless'll still need shelter, mourners'll still need comfort, foreigners'll still need welcome, and trans people'll still need to use the bathroom. Do not abandon them because the temperatures've gone down. Light your lamps, spread your light, bend that arc a bit more towards justice, and while you're at it, bring a little extra oil to share. We know not who will need us or when they will arrive; but we know they will. And when they do, we will be ready because we stayed ready.