

The Forgotten lives: The Parable of Ten Women

Remembrance Sunday 2020 - Reflecting on Matthew 25: 1-13

As a child I remember the 'parable of the ten virgins' enacted as a musical play by the moms in our local Bethany Lutheran Church in India, where all the ten women were dressed in white, holding lanterns in their hands and journeying to meet the bridegroom. On the journey they were tired and lowering the flame of their lanterns, they all fell asleep. Suddenly at repeated loud shouts, they woke up one after the other, and started to adjust the flame for more light. Five of those women carried a bottle of oil and were filling their lanterns to increase the flame, and the other five did not have sufficient oil and were struggling to trim their lanterns. These five women with no extra oil requests their friends to lend some oil, at which the others replied that it wouldn't be sufficient to both and directs them to a dealer to buy for oil at that night. The groom arrives and takes the five women who had their lanterns burning with him and entered the wedding banquet. When the other five women came and knocked the door calling him Lord, Lord, the reply that came was he does not know them. The facial expressions of the five women who made it into the wedding banquet were gloomy that their five other friends couldn't make it inside. The woman narrator of the play concludes by announcing keep awake, be prepared to meet the returning groom, for he can come at any time of the day or night. The play was written, directed, sung and enacted by the moms of our Women's fellowship in our local Church. This enacted parable stayed in my memory all along, and now when I am reading Matthew 25: 1-13, it comes alive, making me nostalgic of my local congregation.

As we reflect this parable this week, allow me firstly to discuss the role of women in parables, which provides a political hermeneutical key in understanding this parable. Nicola Slee in her article "Parables and women's experience," observes the male dominance in the parables in New Testament, which is explained by the dominant presence of male characters and their roles in the parables. She notes that in the Gospel of Matthew alone there are a collection of 104 parables and sayings, out of which there are 85 characters mentioned, where 73 are men and 12 are women. Even among the 12 women, 10 are the bridesmaids, which makes all together only 3 instances where women are mentioned in the whole 104 parables. This therefore calls us to recognise the under-representation of women and their 'invisibility' in the Scriptures, challenging the readers to read this parable by 'hearing to speech' the voices of women from this text. The parable exposes the politics of recording a parable, for as men writers & narrators they hardly mentioned any women in the parables, and exposes the politics of male dominant language in it. In verse 2, he introduces five among the ten as 'foolish' and other five as 'wise.' The male writer begins with a prejudice against the first five by calling them 'foolish.' In our mom's church play, all the ten women entered the stage as friends with lanterns in their hands, all of them were dressed in white, the first five were trying to help the other five by showing them the way towards dealers in buying the oil, and they had gloomy faces towards the end when they did not make it to the banquet. This enactment explains that if it were women recording their own stories, representing their own experience and narrating it in their own language, the parable would have had a totally different take and meaning to it. This therefore calls us to confess the politics of patriarchy in the text, and invites us to a subversive reading of the narratives of the parables from the invisible, decolonised and under-represented communities. The politics of re-presentation

must be addressed in any hermeneutical engagement of Biblical texts, this parable of the ten women challenges us towards that.

Secondly, this is a parable of the ten unnamed women. Most translations have recorded the women in this parable as virgins, some others as bridesmaids, however, the politics of representation challenges us not to define any one's identity by their role or status or occupation. Caste system in India and elsewhere has been operated on the notions of purity and pollution, for people are divided into dominant castes and outcastes based on descent and occupation. To recognise people as people and not with any of their roles or status or occupation is an important marker for a just and equal society.

This parable then is a recognition to the fact that the divine in Jesus communicates the eschatological message of last judgement through these unnamed, under-represented and unduly presented women, whom the first century Christians till our twenty-first century Christians think are incapable of being the bearers of the Gospel. This parable of the ten unnamed women therefore is an affirmation in the strength of women as bearers, instruments, agencies, and resources of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In our mom's play, when it was written and performed by all women, one could feel the dancing of the Gospel coming alive, for the Spirit of God through our moms gripped us all to turn towards God, and made a lasting impact and impression in the lives of the audience there.

Thirdly, this parable is about keeping us awake and to wait on the hope in God, for none of us knew the day nor the hour for the return of the Son of Man (13v.) This parable is a wakeup call to each of us who have fallen into deep slumber of falsehood, seduced by false saviours of modernity. Today, secularism, market, globalisation, state etc. have been sedating communities to fall asleep offering false hopes, and deviating, even obstructing an encounter with the divine. This parable is inviting us to recognise that the divine in Christ has been visiting us daily at odd hours in different forms like in people with no food, no shelter, who are in prisons etc, which is explained towards the end of this chapter 25, and we have been busy going around to trim our lanterns and meeting the dealers of market, missing opportunities to meet and eat with the divine. This parable of ten women is challenging us to stay awake to recognise God who in Christ is coming to us in unexpected people, to meet and dine with them. In our mom's play, there was a shout from the background that said in a loud repeated voice that the bridegroom is returning. The sound was too loud that no one could miss hearing that shout. Five women got up at that shout, and other five took time to wake up. When they were trimming their lanterns, the other five then woke up and discussed about oil. Stay awake by waiting on God's hope, and the message that reverberates from this parable is to be prepared for the visitation of the divine in our localities.

Finally, this parable of ten women de-envelops a theology of unpredictability, for no one knows the day nor the hour of the return of the Son of Man. This parable contests all kinds of predictions on God, calling us to recognise that God does not act on the terms and conditions of human predictions, but God acts on God's own terms and times. Unpredictability has been a theological category, for the God of the Bible has always preferred to be a God associated in calling people, in sending people, in encountering people, in incarnating as human, in pouring out as Holy Spirit on communities who are on margins, all happening in the fullness of God's own time. God in Christ has been returning in the unpredictability of our times, for

the call is to keep awake and be prepared to meet God at God's time and God's place, which are totally different from human predictions and expectations. In our mom's play, after the shout from the background that the groom is coming, a woman dressed as bridegroom suddenly stands up from the audience to walk up to the stage to meet those women. No one noticed during the play, that the bridegroom was seated among us, for we were all so immersed in the play to actually recognise that the groom was one among us. None of us could predict in the play that the bridegroom comes from within the community of audience.

On this Remembrance Sunday, we are called to remember several unsung heroes and sheroes of wars, whose lives were lost, whose histories were lost and whose memories are also lost. It was said that approximately 1.3 million Indian soldiers served in World War I, not representing their country or their geography, but risking their lives and ultimately paying their lives. Over 74,000 Indian soldiers lost their lives, fighting on a distant foreign land for a foreign cause & countries. Those Indian soldiers included Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, people of faith and no faith and had to sacrifice their lives.

On this day, may we re-member those & several other people, whose names, lives & histories have been erased & forgotten and whose lives & their deaths were unrecognised, unnoticed and undocumented. It is time to dis-member their lives, histories & local narratives of resilience as war soldiers, sepoys, jawans & several others.

Particularly during this current pandemic in 2020, there are several people's lives that are forgotten. The lives of people seeking asylum, people who are living in refugee camps, people who are struggling to live in hunger caused by the loss of jobs, people who are vulnerable, and many more whose lives are forgotten. This text invites us to recognise that God is present among such forgotten people, and our call is to listen to their plights and strive towards justice and peace.

Allow me to conclude this reflection by quoting the sermon Martin Luther preached in 1522 on this same text Matthew 25: 1-13, where he said, "Therefore, let each one see to it that he has these two together: the oil, which is true faith and trust in Christ; and the lamps, the vessel, which is the outward service toward your neighbour. The whole Christian life consists in these two things: Believe God. Help your neighbour. The whole Gospel teaches this. Parents should tell it to their children at home and everywhere. Children too, should constantly foster this Word among themselves."

Rev. Dr. Raj Bharat Patta,
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