

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR YOUR FAITH TODAY?

Sermon for Pentecost 22A-Mt 25:1-13

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Have you seen the billboard on I-70 West that says, “What have you done for your marriage today?” This message is from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, which has an interest in healthy marriages that we Episcopalians obviously share. Why do you suppose they have chosen to promote healthy marriage by asking this question in this particular way? Let’s analyze this a bit.

Marriage, like all living things, requires nurturing to thrive. In a long-term relationship, things can become routine. The love of the other, which in the first flush of romance could strike you stupid with wonder and gratitude, in marriage becomes something you depend on, and rightly so. But things you depend on easily become things you take for granted. And things that are taken for granted can, like the very roof over your head, can begin to decay without regular maintenance.

Those of us who are married or in long-term relationships know this well, and usually we remember the occasional gift, the candle-light dinner or the weekend getaway, that will express to the other our love and appreciation. Sometimes we forget. But we can’t forget indefinitely, can we, or the relationship is prone to suffer, or at least be less fulfilling than it could be. This goes for both partners in the relationship. The responsibility for relationship maintenance between adults, at least, depends on the investment of both partners.

Relationships with children are different. Children have to be taught responsibility. Until they are ready to do this, parents provide for them without expecting return, they forgive their children’s wrongs and their inattention. The responsibility for relationship maintenance rests totally on the adults when children are young. The most important sign of maturity is when the children begin to assume some of the responsibility, assisting with chores, producing gifts for others on their own at Christmas, considering others’ feelings. This, far more than physical stature or academic abilities, is the true sign of growing up.

By the time our children reach adulthood, we are relating to them more or less as equals. I say more or less because our relationship with our adult children is in at least one way different from our relationship with other adults. Our children can, as adults, fail to do their part to maintain the relationship, but except in rare cases, we will still love them. We will long for rapprochement, but respect their independence. And even if they do us outright harm, by turning against us, we still love them and yearn for reconciliation.

Obviously, however, everyone is happier if efforts are made to maintain the relationship on both sides. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is impossible for both parties to be happy about the relationship unless efforts are made on both sides to maintain it.

If you haven’t figure it out by now, I am not just talking about human relationships. I am also talking about our relationship with God.

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Our relationship with God, like a marriage, is a living thing that needs nurturing to thrive. For some of us, there was a first flush of awe and gratitude in our relationship with God, just as there was for us married people when we first fell in love. Over the years we came to depend on God's love, even take it for granted. This is not altogether a bad thing.

But like a marriage, our relationship with God can become routine. Our relationship with God suffers without effort on both sides. God's effort is constant, but ours is not.

Our relationship with God is like a marriage in that, because it lives for many years, it can become routine. But our relationship with God in other ways is not like a relationship with an equal, but more like a relationship between adult children and their parents.

While in our spiritual infancy, we are ministered to by God with no expectation of our reciprocating. As spiritual adults, we can either make an effort to maintain the relationship, or not. If we don't, God will still love us and yearn for us. But if we do, both God and we will be much, much happier. In fact, the only way for us to be really happy about our relationship with God is to make an investment in it.

The wise and foolish bridesmaids in the story today demonstrate the difference in these two approaches. The so-called wise bridesmaids brought a little extra to the relationship, and ended up both satisfied and happy. For the so-called foolish bridesmaids, going out to meet the bridegroom was routine. They took the usual amount of oil, because that's what they always do, and are surprised when business-as-usual fails to be fulfilling.

The story is a warning that approaching your relationship with God with no-more-than-usual is, sooner or later, likely to prove unfulfilling.

We are in what we call "Stewardship Season." The Annual Giving letters went out this week, and we will all be considering what we plan to give to Lawrencefield Church in the 2015 fiscal year. If you brought your card today, you are a hero. Thank you very, very much.

If you have not brought your card, I ask you to consider your next year's gift thoughtfully, prayerfully, intentionally. You may choose give next year what you gave this year, but please, don't let it be business-as-usual as it was for the foolish bridesmaids. Have a conversation with God. Invest in your relationship with God. Do the equivalent of "marriage maintenance." Faith maintenance, if you will.

Stewardship Season will come and go, and after it's gone, let's please do our part to maintain our relationship with God. This relationship will be happier, healthier, more fulfilling, if invested in from both sides. We need to ask ourselves, "What have I done for my faith today?"